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by

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## ABSTRACT

Though relatively unknown to non-specialists, Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī is a fundamental member of the community of Muslims who founded Islamic Philosophy. In his tenth-century work, *On the Perfect State*, al-Fārābī tackles questions of eminent importance to society of Muslims still deciding who they were. These questions and their inevitable solutions were, for a time, a source of much turmoil for the young *Ummah*; and we argue that the Perfect State should be read as an effort to take part in, even to lead, the conversation that would decide how these questions were answered. A school of thought championed by Richard Walzer argues that the most important thing to know about al-Fārābī is that he repeated in Arabic many things already said better in Greek by the ancients. According to this school of thought, al-Fārābī's main intention was to transmit specifically Greek learning to posterity, not to participate in the world of Islam and Muslims. It is our contention that this view is mistaken and misleading. Through an examination of tenth-century Islamic history, a close reading of al-Fārābī's work in Arabic, and a thorough discussion of the mistakes made by the Walzerian school of thought, we will show that al-Fārābī used philosophy as a tool for solving problems particular to the Muslim community of his age.

This Dissertation is dedicated to the memory of

Dominic E. Nigro

May 13, 1988 – January 15, 2017

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## PART I: ISLAMIC THOUGHT PRIOR TO AL-FĀRĀBĪ

### Preface

In his most seminal work, *Mabādi' arā' ahl al-madīnah al-fāḍilah*,<sup>1</sup> Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī takes up the question of the superiority of either one or the other of philosophy or religion, and the usefulness of each in the quest for wisdom and salvation. Many scholars of al-Fārābī's work vehemently assert that his ideas are wholly derivative of Greek philosophy, and that he subordinates religion to philosophy and theoretical reason. They go to painstaking lengths to demonstrate the specific Greek texts from which each of al-Fārābī's ideas are allegedly derived, in order to prove that al-Fārābī is a philosopher of the Greek tradition, and not a religionist of the Muslim tradition.

I will not discount that the linguistic frameworks of many of al-Fārābī's concepts are drawn from Arabic lexicons of Greek philosophical terminology; as the second proper philosopher in the history of Islam, al-Fārābī is responsible for coining many of the Arabic terms for Greek philosophical concepts, which are still employed by Arabic-speaking philosophers to this day. In this respect much of al-Fārābī's work, on the face of it, may at first glance seem derivative. However, after a closer reading, it becomes clear that al-Fārābī's work does not merely reproduce Greek philosophy in Arabic. In *al-*

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<sup>1</sup> The full title of this work by al-Fārābī is *Mabādi' arā' ahl al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah*. My own rendering of this title into English is, *Principles of the Views of the People of the Virtuous City*. "Fāḍilah" is also sometimes rendered as "excellent" or "preferable", and "madīnah" is sometimes used as "state." Richard Walzer, in his 1985 translation of this text, renders the title, *On the Perfect State*. For the purposes of this dissertation, which is in large part a refutation of Walzer's reading of al-Fārābī's text, Walzer's own words, as in the introduction and commentary on this text, are cited as, *On the Perfect State*, or by the short title, *Perfect State*. When citing the original Arabic words of al-Fārābī in this text, I use the English transliteration of the Arabic short title, *al-Madīnah*. For Walzer's publication, see Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī, *On the Perfect State (Mabādi' arā' ahl al-madīnat al-fāḍilah)* trans. Richard Walzer (Chicago: Great Books of the Islamic World, Inc., 1998), which is a reprint of the same title, originally published in Oxford, by Oxford University Press, in 1985.

*Madīnah al-Fāḍilah*, this is evidenced by his strategic use of specifically Islamic language at critical points in the text. The significance of the appearance of this undeniably Islamic terminology in these critical moments colors the reading of the entire text, and therefore must not be understated. A proper understanding of al-Fārābī's use of these terms, and the context in which he employs them, is the key to interpreting *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah* as an original work produced by an Islamic philosopher and addressed to a Muslim readership, who would immediately have recognized the concepts referenced by these terms.

However, many scholars of al-Fārābī's work seem to have overlooked, or in some cases seem to have intentionally suppressed, the significance of these Islamic terms. As a result, they have missed, or denied, the import of al-Fārābī's message: For most Muslims, all truth and ultimate wisdom are revealed by Allah, via the mediation of the angel of revelation, to the Prophet, who then disseminates the message to the masses, who must heed the message or perish. For al-Fārābī, "Allah, Mighty and Exalted," is the one and only source of all wisdom and salvation. The prophet – who, it will be shown, is in many respects similar to the philosopher and the sage, although there are some important distinctions – is the only person who can receive revelation from Allah, and is the only person who is authorized to establish law based on the wisdom acquired through revelation.

It is the duty incumbent upon this individual, then, to translate and disseminate this message to the common people in a readily accessible way. In some cases, the prophet does this by means of appeal to systems of symbols and symbolic language,

which al-Fārābī calls “religion” (*millah*). Furthermore, as the common (non-prophetic) multitude is incapable of understanding revelation as it is given, religious symbolism is necessarily the only means by which the masses may receive the message of revelation and thus attain to salvation. Reason and philosophy are both significant for al-Fārābī, insofar as the philosopher may use reasoned arguments to demonstrate the principles inherent in what is revealed by Allah. In the end, however, as philosophy and reason are both dependent on revelation, the latter is superior to all.

Al-Fārābī’s writing in general, and *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah* in particular, should be considered as a commentary on the tenth-century debate raging among Muslims over the relationship between reason and revelation. The text seems to be intended to answer questions and quell arguments about the superiority of either Islam or philosophy, and to ease tensions between the rivalling factions of supporters of one in opposition to the other. By presenting Islamic ideas in the language of Greek philosophy, al-Fārābī seeks a harmonization of the two, by asserting both their interrelatedness and the dependence of both upon divine revelation from Allah, thus transcending the false religion-philosophy dichotomy, reconciling reason and revelation in an attempt to mollify sectarian and intercommunal hostilities.

This dissertation begins with a brief exposition of the roots of Islamic philosophy in the Qur’ān, followed by a short discussion of the process of the transmission of Greek philosophical texts to the Arabic-speaking world. Then, I consider the eighth-century Islamic theology of the group founded by Wāṣil b. `Aṭa, followed by a historical overview of the translation of Greek texts into Arabic. The next chapter discusses the

various, interrelated orthodox responses to the influence of Greek thought upon the discourse of Islamic theologians. *Falsafah* (Islamic philosophy, proper) begins with al-Kindī, the first *ḥakīm* (Islamic philosopher) and the predecessor to al-Fārābī. A brief overview of the thought of al-Kindī forms the final chapter of Part I, the purpose of which latter is to establish al-Fārābī within the historical and ideological context of the developments contributing to and influencing the climate of tenth-century Islamic thought, outside of which the import of the work of al-Fārābī cannot properly be understood.

The first chapter on al-Fārābī gives a short sketch of his early life and education, after which begins the discussion of *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah*, which proceeds in five chapters. The first concerns al-Fārābī's concept of the First Cause of the universe, and other existents. The second chapter examines the concepts of revelation, the prophet, and prophecy, as they appear in *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah*. The third chapter details al-Fārābī's position on the question of the superiority of either religion or philosophy, a question of utmost significance to the debates boiling over in tenth-century Islamic thought. The fourth chapter locates the precedent for al-Fārābī's position on philosophy and revelation within the Greek tradition, which al-Fārābī is said to have inherited. Finally, the discussion is wrapped up in the conclusion, which, through a brief overview of the Ignorant Cities and their inhabitants as opposed to those of the Excellent City, clarifies the significance and the implications of my reading of *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah*. In this dissertation, I analyze the Arabic text of *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah* both in light of its translation and commentary by Richard Walzer, as well as in light of the Qur'anic

concepts to which I detect reference in the text. Throughout the analysis, in addition to the Arabic text and its commentary by Walzer, I rely on several of al-Fārābī's other works, applying them as an interpretive lens seen through which the reading of *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah* intended by al-Fārābī becomes clear and readily apparent.

## 1. Al-Qur'ān: The Roots of Islamic Philosophy

Any study of Islamic philosophy should rightly begin with a brief look at the Qur'ān and the Prophet Muḥammad (570-632).<sup>2</sup> According to Islamic tradition, the Qur'ān was revealed to the Prophet in verses, beginning in 610 in a cave at Mt. Ḥirā' and spanning the next twenty-three years, until the death of the Prophet in 632.<sup>3</sup> The time before the revelation of the Qur'ān is known to Muslims as the *Jāhiliyyah*, or the period of “Ignorance.”<sup>4</sup> Suffice it to say, for now, that the *Jāhiliyyah* was a period of religious and ideological pluralism dominated by a henotheistic pagan polytheism, and social and moral depravity.<sup>5</sup> According to Islamic tradition, the Qur'ān was sent to Muḥammad as guidance to deliver the misguided from this ignorance, and to lead them along the straight path to salvation in the one true God.<sup>6</sup> The term *Jāhiliyyah*, with all of its connotations and implications, is employed not uncritically by al-Fārābī in *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah*, to refer to the communities of people who reject the divine wisdom revealed to the prophet by Allah. Again, I contend that al-Fārābī's use of unambiguously Islamic terms is one of the keys to reading *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah* as an Islamic text.

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<sup>2</sup> Stephen J. Shoemaker, *The Death of a Prophet: The End of Muhammad's Life and the Beginnings of Islam*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 3. See also Reza Aslan, *No god but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam* (New York: Random House, 2006), xxxi.

<sup>3</sup> Aslan, 35.

<sup>4</sup> *Qur'ān*, 5:50; 33:33; 48:26.

<sup>5</sup> Aslan, 13. See also Waines, 7-21. On *Jāhiliyyah*, see *Qur'ān* 53:19-23. The concept of *Jāhiliyyah* will reappear below, as it is an important element in some of al-Fārābī's work, particularly *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah*.

<sup>6</sup> Aslan, 17. See also, *Qur'ān* 1:1-7; 3:101; 48:28.

The doctrine propounded by the Qur'ān was not a wholly new doctrine, even in the time of Muḥammad.<sup>7</sup> That is, it is related to the Scriptures of earlier prophets.<sup>8</sup> It lays down the same way of faith as was enjoined on Noah, Abraham, and others.<sup>9</sup> It confirms in Arabic what was sent down before it, in the Book of Moses and the Gospel of Jesus,<sup>10</sup> and claims to correct what has been misconstrued by the communities who received them.<sup>11</sup> The Qur'ān states that according to the needs and exigencies of the times, Allah may confirm or abrogate his revelations, or substitute for them something similar or even better.<sup>12</sup> That is, though other messages were revealed prior to Islam,<sup>13</sup> the Qur'ān is the best of all revelations.<sup>14</sup> Bearing this in mind lends itself to an understanding of how al-Fārābī could interpret the Qur'ān as being in harmony with Greek thought; much of

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<sup>7</sup> M.M. Sharif, "Philosophical Teachings of the Qur'ān," in *A History of Muslim Philosophy Vol. 1*, ed. M.M. Sharif (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1963), 136-155, here, p. 136.

<sup>8</sup> *Qur'ān*, 46:9-10.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 42:13.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 5:49; 42:13; 46:12.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 48:29. Wael Hallaq tells us that in Makkah and Madīnah, the message of Prophet Muḥammad was articulated in terms of continuity with Judaism and Christianity: "Islam represented little more than a pure form of these two religions, the Original Faith that, in its Judaic and Christian forms, had been corrupted by later followers of these two religions." See Wael B. Hallaq, *The Origins and Evolution of Islamic Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 19.

<sup>12</sup> *Qur'ān*, 2:106; 13:39 16:101.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 39:23.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 39:55. According to Hallaq, "[h]istorically, there can be no doubt that Judaism and Christianity constituted the religious and historical background of Islam. Arab monotheism... arose on the basis of, and in conjunction with, these two religions. Theologically, Qur'anic Islam arrived, first, as a corrective and, second, as the final form of Judaism and Christianity, the form they should have taken, but did not." See Hallaq, 21-22.

Greek philosophy was regarded by Muslims as the fruit of earlier revelations, associated with figures such as the prophet Idrīs (sometimes identified with Hermes Trismegistus).<sup>15</sup>

Muslims consider Muḥammad to be the last in the line of prophets from Adam to ‘Imrān, Abraham,<sup>16</sup> and Jesus,<sup>17</sup> hence he is referred to by Muslims as the “Seal of the Prophets.”<sup>18</sup> Harkening to this notion, al-Fārābī is not silent on the subject of the superiority of some religions over others. Accordingly, the role played by al-Fārābī’s prophet in leading the community of the Virtuous City to felicity in this life, as well as in the afterlife, is indispensable; the wisdom which is vested in him by Allah is the only gateway to salvation. Wisdom which does not proceed from revelation is inferior, and only leads to ignorance and wretchedness.

The Qur’ān, it could be argued, is essentially religious and not philosophical, but it addresses many of the issues which religion and philosophy have in common. Both treat problems related to the significance of expressions such as God, the world, the individual soul, and the interrelatedness of all of these; morals or ethics, and hence politics; good and evil, free will, and life after death. It also illuminates such ideas as appearance and the nature of reality, existence and divine attributes, the origin and destiny of humanity, truth and error, space and time, permanence and change, eternity

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<sup>15</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Philosophy from its Origin to the Present: Philosophy in the Land of Prophecy* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2006), 109.

<sup>16</sup> *Qur’ān*, 3:31-34.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:45-49; 5:75.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 33:40.

and immortality.<sup>19</sup> Thus al-Fārābī's consideration of these ideas cannot be said to be completely of Greek origin. The contemplation of these, and other philosophical issues, have precedence in the Qur'ān.

A subject of particular salience in Islamic philosophy is the contemplation of the nature of Allah. According to the Qur'ān, Allah is the Ultimate Being or Reality.<sup>20</sup> Allah is the sole self-subsisting, all-pervading, eternal, and Absolute Reality.<sup>21</sup> He is the first and the last, the seen and the unseen.<sup>22</sup> He is transcendent: in His full glory he cannot be known or experienced by finite beings, who can only know what can be known through sensory experience, and that which is inherent in the nature of thought or is implied by it.<sup>23</sup> Allah is beyond all comprehension, and beyond the limits of time, space, and sense-content. As such, humans can know nothing of the exact nature of Allah, but to enable them to approach something akin to the comprehension of Allah, the Qur'ān uses similitudes from human experience.<sup>24</sup> It describes his attributes through similitudes of what is loftiest in the heavens and the earth,<sup>25</sup> and the loftiest in human experience or ideals.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Sharif, "Philosophical Teachings," 136.

<sup>20</sup> *Qur'ān*, 31:30.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:115; 20:111; 31:30; 32:2; 55:27; 112:2.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 57:3.

<sup>23</sup> Sharif, "Philosophical Teachings," 137.

<sup>24</sup> *Qur'ān*, 30:28; 47:3.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 30:27.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 30:28.

These many attributes of Allah are represented by his names.<sup>27</sup> While naming the attributes of Allah is useful for contemplating his nature, and while these attributes serve as the ultimate human ideals, they are symbols which can only point to reality. They are, however, not arbitrary symbols; the Qur'ān admonishes the believer to call on Allah by his names.<sup>28</sup> For this reason some may interpret them as, in some relative sense, faithful representations of aspects of the divine essence. These names include Life,<sup>29</sup> Eternity,<sup>30</sup> Unity,<sup>31</sup> Truth,<sup>32</sup> Beauty,<sup>33</sup> Love,<sup>34</sup> Goodness,<sup>35</sup> Light.<sup>36</sup> Thus, according to the Qur'ān Allah is a living, self-subsisting,<sup>37</sup> eternal, absolute and creative reality, which is one, All-Powerful, All-Knowing, All-Beautiful, Most Loving, and All-Good. Al-Fārābī makes frequent, not uncritical use of these names of Allah in his writing, which I will argue is among the characteristics of his work which distinguish him as a distinctly Muslim

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 59:24.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 7:180.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 2:255; 40:65.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 57:3.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 2:163; 5:75; 6:19; 16:22, 51; 23:91; 37:1-5; 38:65-68; 57:3; 112:1-4.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 2:284; 3:5-29; 4:26; 6:3, 18, 115; 10:61; 13:8-10; 16:23; 20:114; 21:4; 31:34; 34:2; 64:4; 67:14; 95:8.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 7:180; 17:110; 20:8.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 3:150, 174; 4:26-28, 45; 5:77; 6:12, 17, 54, 63-64, 88, 133, 162; 7:151, 153; 9:117-118; 10:21, 32, 57; 12:64, 92; 14:32-34; 15:49; 16:119; 17:20-21; 19:96; 21:83; 23:109, 118; 29:60-62; 35:2-3; 39:53; 40:51; 52:28; 55:27; 85:14; 87:3; 92:12; 93:6-8; 96:3.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 16:53; 31:26; 59:23.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 24:35.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 2:255; 20:111.

philosopher, writing for an Islamic readership which would have recognized these names and attributes as undeniable allusions to the Islamic notion of Allah found in the Qur'ān.

The Qur'ān frequently refers to itself as the Book of Wisdom (*al-Kitāb al-Ḥakīm*),<sup>38</sup> parts of which relate to its basic principles and explain them in detail, while others relate to matters explained allegorically through metaphor, simile, parables, and symbolic language.<sup>39</sup> The use of symbols and symbolic language as vehicles for imparting the wisdom (*ḥikmah*) of divine revelation is a subject which al-Fārābī addresses at some length in *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah*. This subject will be discussed in the chapter on al-Fārābī's position on religion. I will show that, contrary to the assertions of Walzer and other scholars of al-Fārābī's work, al-Fārābī's occasional understanding of religion as systems of symbols does not detract from the legitimacy of religion's truth claims, nor does it result in the subordination of religion to philosophy. Quite the reverse, rather, as most people in al-Fārābī's Virtuous City are not – cannot be – philosophers, the symbols employed by religion are in most cases the only means by which the common masses may approach knowledge of divine wisdom, and thereby attain to both temporal felicity and the eternal salvation of the soul. Additionally, as the use of symbolism and symbolic language in religion is attested in the Qur'ān, al-Fārābī's notion of religions as systems of symbols is thus not unprecedented in the field of Islam; it is not an un-Islamic *bid'ah* (innovation), and it does not make al-Fārābī's message any less Islamic.

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 10:1.

<sup>39</sup> Sharif, "Philosophical Teachings," 137.

The Qur'ān states that none can grasp the message of revelation except men of understanding and those firmly grounded in knowledge.<sup>40</sup> Lack of true wisdom leads people to revile the true God,<sup>41</sup> invent lies and false stories against him, and worship other gods besides him.<sup>42</sup> The only hope for salvation lies in heeding the revelation which is replete with the knowledge of Allah.<sup>43</sup> Whomever has been given this knowledge has indeed been given abundant good.<sup>44</sup> Those who dispute wrongly about Allah are those devoid of knowledge, without guidance, without a book of enlightenment.<sup>45</sup> Only those will be promoted to suitable ranks who are possessed of knowledge,<sup>46</sup> and only those who possess such knowledge tread on the path of righteousness.<sup>47</sup> The message is clear: ultimate wisdom (*ḥikmah*) leading to salvation is obtained only through revelation from Allah to the Prophet, who interprets its meaning for believers.<sup>48</sup> Al-Fārābī's message in *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah* is the same. The inhabitants of the Virtuous City, the only people in all of humanity who will attain to felicity in this life and in the next, are those who heed the words of the prophet (*nabī*) or sage (*ḥakīm*) who receives divine revelation from

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 3:7; 6:105; 34:6.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 6:108.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 22:71.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 11:14.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 2:269.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 22:8; 31:20.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 58:11.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 35:28.

<sup>48</sup> The Prophet Muḥammad was not only the bearer of the Qur'ān, but he was also its first interpreter; the message of the Qur'ān was embodied in the Prophet in his daily affairs – his words and his actions, as preserved in the *Sunnah*. See Waines, 11.

the First, which, as al-Fārābī explains, is simply a technical, philosophical name for none other than the God of Islam as revealed in the Qur'ān, Allah.

## 2. Transmission of Greek Philosophy to the Arabic-Speaking World

The first Semitic language into which the Greek philosophical texts were translated was Syriac.<sup>49</sup> As early as the 4<sup>th</sup> century, Greek was studied at centers of learning at Antioch, Ḥarrān, Edessa, and Qinnēsūrīn in Syria; at Nisibis and Ra's al-'Ayn in Iraq; and its study was also widespread in Persia. The study of Greek had been cultivated primarily as a means of giving the Syriac-speaking scholars of those institutions access to Greek theological texts emanating primarily from Alexandria,<sup>50</sup> and also from Athens.<sup>51</sup>

Very often, along with the translation of theological texts went the translation of works on logic. These works were translated in service of the need to probe more deeply into the meaning of theological concepts and the dialectical processes involved in the Christological debates of the time; an understanding of logic facilitated higher levels of sophistication in the debates. But soon Aristotle's works were commented upon in themselves, apart from theological texts. A key figure in the transmission of Aristotle's logic, along with its Neoplatonic interpretation, is Sergius of Ra's al-'Ayn (d. 536), who was educated in Alexandria.<sup>52</sup> Proceeding on the model he established, the study of Aristotelian logic had been confined in Nestorian and Jacobite seminaries in Syria and Iraq to the first four treatises of that logic; namely, the *Isogoge* of Porphyry, and the

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<sup>49</sup> D'Ancona, 18; Majid Fakhry, *A History of Islamic Philosophy 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 2.

<sup>50</sup> Fakhry, *History*, 2.

<sup>51</sup> D'Ancona, 18.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

*Categoriae*,<sup>53</sup> *De Interpretatione*,<sup>54</sup> and *Analytica Priora*<sup>55</sup> of Aristotle. This was so, owing to the belief that the advanced study of demonstrative logic posed a serious threat to religious faith.<sup>56</sup> Other sixth century Syriac commentators on Aristotle, such as Proba and Paul the Persian, endorsed the model worked out by Sergius, creating a Syriac tradition of Aristotelian logic which was to play an important role in the rise and development of *falsafah*.<sup>57</sup> Al-Fārābī appears to have been the first to break with that tradition and to proceed beyond the first parts of the *Organon*<sup>58</sup> to the study of *Analytica Posteriora*.<sup>59,60</sup>

As a result of the closing of the Platonic school by Justinian in 529, Simplicius, Damascius, and five other Neoplatonic philosophers left Athens and went to Persia, to the

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<sup>53</sup> *Κατηγορίαι*, *Categories*.

<sup>54</sup> *Περὶ Ἑρμηνείας*, *On Interpretation*.

<sup>55</sup> *Ἀναλυτικὰ Πρότερα*, *Prior Analytics*.

<sup>56</sup> Fakhry, *History*, 2; Fakhry, *Al-Fārābī: Founder of Islamic Neoplatonism: His Life, Works and Influence* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2002), 8. Interestingly, this sentiment would be shared by the Muslims who inherited the study of logic from these scholars.

<sup>57</sup> *Falsafah* is the Arabic word for philosophy; it is a cognate of the Greek *φιλοσοφία*. *Falsafah* differs from *kalām* only insofar as the former was seen as a direct continuation of the Greek tradition of philosophy, while the latter, although it would later come to be influenced by philosophy, was seen as an autochthonous Islamic movement, related to Qurʾān commentary (*tafsīr*), *Ḥadīth* science (*ʿilm al-Ḥadīth*), and Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*). It can be defined, simply, as the application of logic and dialectical method in the elaboration and defense of Islamic theology. *Kalām* can be said to have begun as early as the mid 8<sup>th</sup> century, in the time of the early ʿAbbāsīd dynasty; *falsafah* did not begin until the 9<sup>th</sup> century with al-Kindī, who is considered to have been the first *faylasūf* (Islamic philosopher). The last *faylasūf* is considered to have been Ibn Rushd, after whom *falsafah* ceased to exist as an independent and rigorously defined discipline, at least among the Sunnis. See Nasr, 38-45, 49-51, 97. Further details on *kalām* and *falsafah* to follow.

<sup>58</sup> *ὄργανον*.

<sup>59</sup> *Ἀναλυτικὰ ὕστερα*, *Posterior Analytics*.

<sup>60</sup> Fakhry, *Al-Fārābī*, 8.

court of the Sassanian emperor Chosroes I Anūshirwān (d. 579) in Ctesiphon, where they remained until 532.<sup>61</sup> The court of Chosroes continued to welcome philosophers and teachers who fled the Byzantine persecution in Athens, and over the next two hundred years the Jundishapūr Academy in Iraq became a major center for Greek learning. The academy was still flourishing when Baghdad was founded in 762 by the `Abbāsīd caliph al-Manṣūr, and since it was near Baghdad, the Persians were in close political contact with the `Abbāsīd Caliphate. Consequently, it was from this school that many important intellectual developments spread throughout the Islamic empire.<sup>62</sup>

In 642, Alexandria fell to the Arab general `Amr b. al-`Āṣ.<sup>63</sup> Greek culture had flourished in Egypt, Syria, and Iraq since the time of Alexander the Great, and the capture of Alexandria brought it under Arab rule. But the Arabs' seizure of military and political power did not, on the whole, interfere with the academic pursuits of scholars of Greek in the Near East. In the same century, a school at Qinneshrīn in northern Syria, appended to the Monophysite monastery founded by John bar Aphtonia (d. 538), became another center for Greek learning. It produced such notable scholars as the bishop Severus Sebokht (d. 667), his disciple Jacob of Edessa (d. 708), Athanasius of Balad (d. 696), and Athanasius' disciple George, Bishop of the Arabs (d. 724).<sup>64</sup> At this institution, new

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<sup>61</sup> D'Ancona, 18.

<sup>62</sup> Fakhry, *History*, 4.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>64</sup> Fakhry, *History*, 2-3.

translations of Aristotle's works, introduced by Porphyry's *Isagoge*, appear as the core of demonstrative science.

Even under 'Abbāsīd rule in the eighth and ninth centuries, the Christians of Syria were the "unexcelled masters" of Aristotelian logic. The caliph al-Mahdī (r. 775-785), for example, commissioned the Nestorian Timoteus I (d. 823) to deliver a new translation of Aristotle's *Topics*.<sup>65,66</sup> In ninth-century Baghdad, and even later, Syriac-speaking Christians carried on a tradition of logical learning in close relationship with the *falāsifah* of the Islamic world.<sup>67</sup> Thus the practitioners of *falsafah*, and even practitioners of post-ninth-century *kalām*, are indebted in no small part to the Christian scholars from whom they inherited the corpus of knowledge which was to bear heavy influence on the development of Islamic philosophy.

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<sup>65</sup> *Τοπικά*.

<sup>66</sup> Dimitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early Society (2<sup>nd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup>/8<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> centuries)* (London: Routledge, 1998), 61-69.

<sup>67</sup> D'Ancona, 20.

### 3. The Early Mu`tazilah: Seeds of Kalām

The name, *al-Mu`tazilah*, means the Withdrawers or the Secessionists. The traditional story of the origin of this name has it that a student of Imam al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 728)<sup>68</sup> asked a question about the status of a Muslim who had committed a grave sin, i.e. whether the perpetrator of the sin should be considered a Muslim or an unbeliever. In the views of the group known as *Ahl al-Wa`id*,<sup>69</sup> the perpetrator of a grave sin, by his actions, placed himself outside of the fold of Islam and was declared an unbeliever with no hope of salvation.<sup>70</sup> In the opinion of the *Murji`ah* (“those who postpone”) also known as *Ahl al-Wa`d*,<sup>71,72</sup> there was no necessary correlation between faith and acts, and external actions or utterances did not necessarily reflect a Muslim’s inner beliefs. Thus, for the *Murji`ah*, judgement was postponed until such time as the believer stood before Allah, who alone could judge whether or not a Muslim had lost his faith (*īmān*).<sup>73</sup> In their view, no Muslim who professed Islam could be declared an unbeliever (*kāfir*), grave sins

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<sup>68</sup> Abdessamad Belhaj, "Ulū al-Amr," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Islam and Politics*, ed. Emad El-Din Shahin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), Oxford Reference Online. Accessed 23 March, 2017.

<sup>69</sup> In Arabic, *wa`id* means threat. *Ahl al-Wa`id* is thus, the People of the Threat.

<sup>70</sup> Valiuddin, 199.

<sup>71</sup> Amr Osman, "Murji`ites" in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Islam and Politics*, ed. Emad El-Din Shahin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), Oxford Reference Online. Accessed 23 March, 2017.

<sup>72</sup> Contrast *wa`d* (promise) with *wa`id* (threat). These words are related, as both come from the same root. Understanding them as two sides of the same coin is helpful in understanding the two opposite respective positions of *Ahl al-Wa`d* and *Ahl al-Wa`id*. Their responses to the question on the status of the perpetrator of grave sins represent the two polar extremes on the issue. The concept of “the Promise and the Threat” is elaborated a great deal in *Mu`tazilah* theology, concerning their claims about moral value which ties in with their views on desert and posthumous destinies. See Sophia Vasalou, *Moral Agents and Their Deserts: The Character of Mu'tazilite Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 23, 38, 52, 161-167, *passim*.

<sup>73</sup> Another position of the *Murji`ah* was that the Muslim’s belief in Allah is in itself sufficient for salvation, and that sin is inconsequential as it does not affect belief; the salvation of the perpetrator of even grave sin is safe, as long as he believes in Allah. See Valiuddin, p. 199.

notwithstanding. The student of al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī asked the Imam which, in his opinion, was the correct position, and which creed of the two should be adopted.

This story has it that as the Imam was about to answer the question, another student, Wāṣil b. `Aṭa (d. 748), interjected his own reply to the question: “The perpetrator of grave sins is neither a complete unbeliever nor a perfect believer; he is placed midway between unbelief and faith – an intermediate state (*manzilah bayn al-manzilatain* [sic])”<sup>74</sup>. Having proffered this answer, he withdrew from the teaching circle and began to explain this concept to others. In response, the Imam said, “*I` tazala `anna*,” meaning, “he has withdrawn from us.” According to this story, from that very day, Wāṣil b. `Aṭa and his followers were dubbed *al-Mu` tazilah* (the Withdrawers, or, Secessionists). There are several such etiologies concerning the origin of this name. However, in brief, *i` tazala* means to withdraw or secede, and the *Mu` tazilah* are Muslims who are opposed in some of their beliefs to the unanimous consent of the early Islamic orthodoxy, the *Ahl al-Sunnah* (the Traditionalists). That is, they have withdrawn from the beliefs about which a majority of the orthodox community has consented.

*Al-Mu` tazilah* is the name foisted upon Wāṣil’s party by the *Ahl al-Sunnah*. However, referring to themselves, the *Mu` tazilah* prefer the name *Ahl al-Tawḥīd wa-l-`Adl*, or the People of Unity and Justice.<sup>75</sup> By justice, they imply that it is incumbent upon Allah to reward the good deeds of the *mu` minūn* (faithful Muslims) and punish the misdeeds of the *fāsiqūn* (transgressors). By unity, they imply the denial of the divine

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 200.

<sup>75</sup> Valiuddin, 200.

attributes. For example, they admit that Allah is all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-seeing. But they do not allow that these attributes are separate or different from the divine essence. For if they were not identical with the divine essence of Allah, a “plurality of eternals” would necessarily ensue, which would contradict the unity of Allah.<sup>76</sup> In the *Mu`tazilah* view, such a contradiction is a clear case of *kufr* (disbelief).

From the basic tenets of Unity and Justice follow several other tenets. One of these, which the *Mu`tazilah* adopted from *Qadari* thinking, was the necessity of indeterminism.<sup>77</sup> In this line of thought, if Allah were the creator of the acts of man, then man would not be responsible for his actions and would thus not be liable to punishment for his sins. If Allah determined all of man’s actions – including sin – and then punished him for those actions, Allah would not be just. Therefore, the *Mu`tazilah* hold that man alone is the creator of his volitional acts.

Along with the assertion of man’s agency, the *Mu`tazilah* asserted the concept of *mubāsharah* (direct cause) and *tawlīd* (effect or result).<sup>78</sup> As man is the creator of his actions, he alone is responsible for the ensuing results of his actions, and Allah has no part in the matter as the creator of either the cause or the effect. However, as Allah is just, he should reward man according to the merits of his actions. For example, man has

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> The Arabic verb *Qadara*, in Qur’anic usage, refers to the power of Allah to predestine all events. The noun *qadar* denotes the eternal decree of Allah. Ironically, the *Qadariyyah* were a group of theologians in the late 7<sup>th</sup> and early 8<sup>th</sup> centuries who believed the opposite: that evil cannot be created by Allah but is determined by the human being, and, accordingly, if humans have free will then the foreknowledge of Allah is at variance with man’s free will. See Maher Jarrar, “Qadaris,” in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Islamic Political Thought*, ed. Gerhard Bowering (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), pp. 440-441. *Gale Virtual Reference Library*. Accessed 12 March, 2017.

<sup>78</sup> Valiuddin, 200-201.

agency to accept Islam (cause) and submit to the will of Allah (effect), which Allah should reward; or man may reject Islam (cause) and be a *kāfir* (effect), which should be requited by Allah with punishment.

From the tenet of the unity of Allah also followed another belief which is characteristic of the *Mu`tazilah*. This is the belief in the createdness of the Qur`ān, which was contrary to the belief of the *ahl al-Sunnah* that the Qur`ān is uncreated and coeternal with Allah. According to the *Mu`tazilah*, as the Qur`ān obviously exists in this temporal world, it is necessarily separate from Allah. Since it is separate from Allah, to assert its being coeternal with Allah would be tantamount to a denial of Allah's unity, or shirk, which is the sin of sins in Islam.<sup>79</sup> The question of the Qur`ān's createdness will reappear below, in the discussion of the *Miḥnah* of the caliph al-Ma'mūn.

According to the *Mu`tazilah*, things are not good or evil due to Allah having decreed them to be so. Rather, good and evil are innate in the essence of things, and Allah makes his decrees based on this innate essence. Furthermore, this moral knowledge can be arrived at by the exercise of human reason alone, *unaided by revelation*. Al-Shahrastānī (d. 1153)<sup>80</sup> was not part of the early *Mu`tazilah* community, but his words concisely sum up the characterization of *Mu`tazilah* rationalist sentiment, from the point of view of the orthodoxy:

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<sup>79</sup> See *Qur`ān* 4:48: "Allah forgiveth not that partners should be set up with him; but he forgiveth anything else, to whom he pleaseth; to set up partners with Allah is to devise a sin most heinous indeed." For more on *shirk*, see R. Kevin Jaques, "Shirk," in *Encyclopedia of Islam and the Muslim World Vol. 2*, ed. Richard C. Martin (New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2004), pp. 630-631. *Gale Virtual Reference Library*. Accessed 12 March, 2017.

<sup>80</sup> Peri Bearman, "Majlis," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Islam and Politics*, ed. Emad El-Din Shahin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), Oxford Reference Online. Accessed 23 March, 2017.

The adherents of justice say: All objects of knowledge fall under the supervision of reason and receive their obligatory power from rational insight. Consequently, obligatory gratitude for divine bounty [which is preceded by reason] precedes the orders given by (divine) Law....<sup>81</sup>

The *Mu`tazilah* were considered by the orthodox Muslims to be thoroughgoing rationalists who judged all Islamic beliefs by theoretical reason. The earliest of these pioneers of Islamic rationalism paved the way for *kalām* and the *Mutakallimūn*. These thinkers of the second and third generation of *Mu`tazilah* thought would augment the early rationalist theology of Wāṣil b. `Aṭa with logic and demonstrative reason, dialectic, and other concepts adopted from the study of Greek philosophy, beginning in the early `Abbāsīd Caliphate.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Valiuddin, 202; cf. Al-Shahrastānī, *Kitāb al-Milal w-al-Nihal*, as cited in A.J. Wensinck, *The Muslim Creed* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932), 62. It should be noted that al-Shahrastānī, while taking an orthodox position in his *Kitāb al-Milal w-al-Nihal*, is suspected of being at the same time sympathetic to *Ismā`īlī Shī`ah* Islam. This particular branch of Islam will be discussed in a subsequent chapter of this dissertation.

<sup>82</sup> Fakhry, *History*, xviii.

#### 4. Translation of Greek Texts into Arabic: Early `Abbāsīd Caliphate

Shortly after the death of Wāṣil b. `Aṭa in 748, the `Abbāsīd Caliphate was established in 750.<sup>83</sup> The first `Abbāsīd caliph, who reigned from 750-754, was Abū'l-`Abbās `Abdullāh al-Saffāh. He died of smallpox in 754 and was succeeded by his brother, Abū Ja`far al-Mansūr, who reigned from 754-775, and under whose reign Baghdad was founded.<sup>84</sup> The substitution of Arabic for Persian and Greek as the official language of the state had already begun as early as the end of the seventh century, following the Arab conquest of the Near East, and this shift marks the first attempt of the Arab rulers to assert their literary supremacy. However, the process of translating scientific and philosophical works did not begin in earnest until the `Abbāsīd period, and in particular until the reign of al-Manṣūr.<sup>85</sup> Al-Manṣūr took a keen interest in scientific and philosophical works, and lent his support and patronage to the activity of translators, but owing to a scarcity of either competent scholars or Greek material to translate, precious little headway was made until the beginning of the ninth century. It was then that al-Manṣūr's great-grandson, the seventh `Abbāsīd caliph al-Ma'mūn (786-833), made a determined and systematic effort to acquire and translate the treasured monuments of Greek science and philosophy.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> The `Abbāsīd Caliphate was the third of the Islamic caliphates to succeed the Prophet Muḥammad. The dynasty descended from Muḥammad's youngest uncle, al-`Abbās b. `Abd al-Muṭalib (d. 653), from whom the dynasty takes its name. See Dale H. Hoiberg (ed.), "Abbasid Dynasty," in *Encyclopedia Britannica. I: A-Ak – Bayes, 15th ed.* (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 2010), 10.

<sup>84</sup> Paul Lagasse and Columbia University, "Mansur, al-, d. 775, 2d Abbasid caliph," in *The Columbia Encyclopedia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016). Accessed 15 March, 2017.

<sup>85</sup> Fakhry, *History*, 6.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

Al-Ma'mūn's reign, at the beginning of the ninth century (r. 813-833),<sup>87</sup> marks a turning point in the development of philosophical and theological thought in Islam. Of all of al-Ma'mūn's caliphal activities, two developments stand out as events which had lasting influence on the development of *kalām* and Islamic philosophy. The first began in 827, when the caliph issued the proclamation of the createdness of the Qur'ān, in support of the *Mu'tazilah*, mentioned above.<sup>88</sup> Al-Ma'mūn martialled the executive and judicial powers of the state, in a determined effort to enforce what had become a politicized *Mu'tazilah* rationalist creed upon the reluctant Muslims, masses and theologians alike, beginning six years later in 833.<sup>89</sup> During this period of religious persecution, known to Muslims as the *Mihnah*,<sup>90</sup> Al-Ma'mūn demanded that all judges and legal scholars in the empire submit to questioning to determine the soundness of their positions, and those who dissented imprisoned or executed. The inquisition lasted fifteen years, continuing until the reign of the tenth 'Abbāsīd caliph, al-Mutawakkil (r. 847-861), who reversed it in 848.<sup>91</sup>

Wael Hallaq points out that the *Mihnah* brought to a climax the struggle between two opposing movements: the Traditionalists (including the Traditionists), whose cause

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<sup>87</sup> Peter Adamson, "Kindī, Abū Yūsuf Ya'qūb ibn Ishāq al-." in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Islam and Politics*, ed. Emad El-Din Shahin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), Oxford Reference Online. Accessed 23 March, 2017.

<sup>88</sup> See preceding chapter.

<sup>89</sup> W. Melville Patton, *Aḥmed ibn Ḥanbal and the Mihna* (Leiden: Brill, 1897), 1.

<sup>90</sup> Racha el Omari and Najam Haider, "Mu'tazilah," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Islam and Politics*, ed. Emad El-Din Shahin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), Oxford Reference Online.

<sup>91</sup> See Hallaq, 124.

Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 855) was seen to champion; and the rationalists, headed in this movement by the caliphs and the *Mu` tazilah*. In the end, Ibn Ḥanbal and the Traditionalists won the struggle, due in part to the weakening of pronounced rationalist sentiment among the Muslims, and in part to the withdrawal of political support from a stance which was becoming increasingly unpopular. The majority of the Muslim intellectual and religious elite, however, did not subscribe exclusively to one position or the other; they considered the traditionalism of Ibn Ḥanbal as too austere, and the rationalism of the *Mu` tazilah* as too libertarian. The middle ground between the two movements constituted the position of the majority, and it was from this moderate centrist position that Sunnism would emerge.<sup>92</sup> It is crucial for the present study to establish, and understand, al-Fārābī within the context of Sunnism as the product of a successful attempt at achieving a middle ground between two extreme positions – allowing a role for reason, while maintaining the primacy of revelation. I contend that al-Fārābī’s work aims at a similar goal: to establish a position which, at the same time, exists as a middle ground between the rival supporters of reason and revelation, respectively, allowing a role for both, but overall maintaining the superiority of the latter.

It was likely al-Ma’mūn’s interest in *Mu` tazilah* rationalism which influenced and intensified his pursuit of Greek science and philosophy. Three years after issuing the proclamation of the createdness of the Qur’ān, the caliph founded the famed and prestigious *Bayt al-Ḥikmah*, House of Wisdom, an official library and institute for translation and research. In order to stock the library with important scientific and

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 125.

philosophical works, al-Ma'mūn sent envoys to Byzantium to seek out and purchase for him books of "ancient learning," which were then translated by a panel of scholars and researchers.<sup>93</sup> Ibrahim Kalin points out that senior 'Abbāsīd bureaucrats, military officers, leading merchants, and even court concubines, supported scholars and commissioned translations of prized texts into Arabic, as a way to win prestige, garner wealth, and secure social advancement.<sup>94</sup> This fostered a creative and competitive environment among the scholars and their patrons, encouraging the production of high-quality intellectual work.<sup>95</sup> The translators who were employed at *Bayt al-Ḥikmah* include such notables as Ḥunayn b. Ishāq (d. 873), his son Ishāq (d. 911), his nephew Ḥubaysh, and his disciple 'Īsā b. Yahyā, all of whom were backed and supported by, in addition to the caliphs, Banū Mūsā, a wealthy patrician family well known as leading patrons of philosophy and science.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> The works translated at *Bayt al-Ḥikmah* include both original works and commentaries by a veritable "who's who" of Greek learning. Among them are the works of Plato, Aristotle, Proclus, Plotinus, Simplicius, Galen, Porphyry, John Philoponus, Olympiodorus, Alexander, pseudo-Alexander, Nicolaus, Boethius, Syrianus, Pythagoras, Iamblichus, pseudo-Dionysius, Themistius, Ammonius, Stephanus, Damascius, and a list of others. Cf. D'Ancona, pp.1-28; Fakhry, *History*, pp. 10-25.

<sup>94</sup> The expansion of the Muslim empire blurred the lines of many of the political barriers that had long separated some of the world's richest traditions, and improvements in communications eased the flow of information and ideas. 'Abbāsīd subject populations included, among others, Nestorians, Syrian Jacobites, and other Eastern Christians, as well as Jews and pagans. Hellenistic Greek learning could intermingle with the ideas of Sabaeans, Zoroastrians, Hindus, and Arabs, and, according to Kalin, the Christian sects persecuted under Byzantine rule were free to practice and write openly. See Ibrahim Kalin, "Bayt al-Ḥikmah," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Science, and Technology in Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). Accessed 15 March, 2017.

<sup>95</sup> Interestingly, a minority of scholars, such as Dimitri Gutas and Mohamed Rekaya, argue that the role played by *Bayt al-Ḥikmah* in the institutional translation of Greek works into Arabic has possibly been exaggerated. See Dimitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture, passim*; and Mohamed Rekaya, "Al-Mā'mūn," in *Encyclopedia of Islam Vol. 6*, ed. C. E. Bosworth (Leiden: Brill, 1986), 331-339.

<sup>96</sup> Fakhry, *History*, 17.

Other great translators at *Bayt al-Hikmah* included the Jacobite Abū Bishr Mattā b. Yūnus al-Qunnā'ī (d. 940)<sup>97</sup>, and the Jacobite Yaḥyā b. `Adī (d. 974),<sup>98</sup> who would become the chief representative of Christian Aristotelianism in Baghdad. These two translators are interesting for the present study, as both came into close contact with al-Fārābī, who followed his instructor Ibn Ḥaylān to Baghdad sometime between 900 and 908.<sup>99</sup> After studying under Mattā, al-Fārābī then served as the instructor of Ibn `Adī. The list of translations credited to Mattā include Alexander's commentaries on *Metaphysica L*, *De Caelo*, and *De Generatione et Corruptione*, as well as commentaries on Aristotle's four logical works.<sup>100</sup> His commentaries, achieving great fame, served as the basis of logical studies during this period, earning Mattā the title of chief logician in his time.<sup>101</sup> In addition to the translations of Aristotle's works which earned Yaḥyā b. `Adī the reputation as the chief representative of Christian Aristotelianism in Baghdad,<sup>102</sup> he also

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Yanis Eshots estimates al-Fārābī's moving to Baghdad in 908, while Osman Bakar has al-Fārābī's migration from Merv to Baghdad, with Ibn Ḥaylān, taking place around 900. For Eshots' discussion, see Yanis Eshots "al-Farabi, Abu Nasr (ca. 878-950)," *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Islamic Political Thought*, ed. Gerhard Bowering (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 170-171, here, p. 170. For Bakar, see *Classification of Knowledge*, 18.

<sup>100</sup> *Categories, Hermeneutica, Analytica Priora, and Analytica Posteriora*; also a *Commentary on Porphyry's Isagoge*, an *Introduction to Analytica*, and a *Treatise on Conditional Syllogisms*. Fakhry, *History*, 16.

<sup>101</sup> `Alī al-Qifī, *Tārīkh al-Hukamā'* (Leipzig: Dieterich, 1903), 278, 323.

<sup>102</sup> The list includes Aristotle's *Poetica, Sophistica, Topica*, and possibly *Metaphysica*. He is also credited with a translation of Plato's *Laws*, a commentary on *Topica* and parts of *Physica* and *Metaphysica*, and the whole of *De Generatione*. He also produced a number of original works, such as a *Treatise on the Nature of Logic*, and numerous works on the Aristotelian categories and on the division of the six genera of Aristotle. Other original works by Ibn `Adī include the *Refutation of Atomism*, the *Impossibility of the Existence of the Infinite, Either in Number or in Magnitude*, and treatises on the *Whole and the Parts*, and the *Nature of the Possible*. See Fakhry, *History*, 16.

produced works dealing with theological questions, which were broached in theological discussions with Muslims. These include a *Refutation of the Arguments of Those Who Maintain that Acts Are Created by God and Acquired by Man*, apparently leveled at the *Ash`arī* view of human action;<sup>103</sup> a treatise on the *Unity of God*, possibly in support of the *Mu`tazilah* (the People of *Unity* and Justice); as well as a refutation of the *Ash`ariyyah* view that bodies consist of atoms and accidents.<sup>104</sup>

Here, we begin to see the dialogue between Islam and Greek philosophy taking shape, within the context of the theological and philosophical traditions which were inherited, reshaped, and advanced by al-Fārābī. To understand his writings as commentaries on the issues current in his milieu, it is necessary to see the works of al-Fārābī in the light of historical developments, and against the backdrop of the varied schools of thought current in his time. It is not possible to adequately discuss the entire range of these schools within the scope of this project, so the discussion will be confined to those most relevant for the present study.

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<sup>103</sup> *Ash`arism*, the school of *kalām* founded by al-Ash`arī, will be briefly discussed in the following chapter, below.

<sup>104</sup> Al-Qifī, 362.

## 5. Developments in Kalām

According to Abdul Hye, orthodox *kalām* first flourished during the tenth and eleventh centuries, but it had its beginnings in the late ninth century. Developing as a reaction against the increasing popularity and influence of the *Mu`tazilah* movement supported by the early `Abbāsīd Caliphate, it sought to purge Islam of non-Islamic influences which it saw as having surreptitiously crept into it. It also opposed the extreme orthodox class, by advocating the use of the dialectical argument for the defense of the authority of divine revelation as applied to theological subjects, which the orthodox condemned.<sup>105</sup>

By the late ninth century, the development of an orthodox *kalām* was inevitable. The early *Mu`tazilah* movement began as an attempt to put Islam on a rational foundation, by giving a reasoned interpretation to certain Islamic doctrines and dogmas. But after Greek philosophy was made available in Arabic in the early `Abbāsīd period, and the subsequent influence of the former on *Mu`tazilah* thought, the movement sought to rationalize all Islamic doctrines and beliefs, thus subordinating revelation to reason, making “reason the sole basis of truth and reality”<sup>106</sup>.

This provoked a strong reaction from the orthodox community, such as the followers of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 855),<sup>107</sup> Mālīk b. Anas (d. 795),<sup>108</sup> Dāwūd b. `Alī (d.

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<sup>105</sup> M. Abdul Hye, “Ash`arism,” in *A History of Muslim Philosophy Vol. 1*, ed. M. M. Sharif (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1963), pp. 220-243, here, p. 220.

<sup>106</sup> Abdul Hye, 221.

<sup>107</sup> Hallaq, 124.

<sup>108</sup> Waines, 41.

884),<sup>109</sup> and the jurists (*fuqahā'*), who adhered to a Traditional interpretation of the Qur'ān and Sunnah, which allowed for no application of logic and dialectic to the sacred. Any speculation about sacred things was considered *bid'ah* (innovation), and was strictly forbidden. Every dogma was to be accepted and believed in, *bilā kayfa*, without asking why or how. Such blind faith was unpalatable for many Muslims, and there arose from the orthodoxy a party who realized the necessity for putting Islam on solid ground by advancing “reasons” for their traditional beliefs, and of defending those beliefs from attack – internal and external – thereby purging the faith of non-Islamic elements which they believed were encroaching upon Islam. They founded orthodox *kalām* by using the philosophical method in order to meet and contend with the dialectical reasoning of the *Mu'tazilah* on their own ground, while maintaining the primacy of revelation, relying solely on it for their foundational materials.

Although this school of thought was condemned by the likes of Ibn Ḥanbal and his followers, and the followers of Imam Mālik, it was met with the approval of other influential jurists and leading thinkers. Imam al-Shāfi'ī (d. 820),<sup>110</sup> for instance, held that some Muslims trained in *kalām* might do well to defend and purify the faith, but that this should not be done in public.<sup>111</sup> Gradually, however, the movement gathered strength and gained notable influence, in `Iraq with Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash`arī (d. 935);<sup>112</sup> in Egypt,

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<sup>109</sup> Omar A. Farrukh, “Zāhirism,” in *A History of Muslim Philosophy Vol. 1*, ed. M.M. Sharif (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1963), pp.274-289, here, p.276.

<sup>110</sup> Waines, 67.

<sup>111</sup> Abdul Hye, 222.

<sup>112</sup> Waines, 120.

with al-Ṭahāwī (d. 933);<sup>113</sup> and in Samarqand, with Abū Manṣūr al-Māturīdī (d. 944).<sup>114</sup> It should be noted that all three of these thinkers were contemporaries of al-Fārābī, with special consideration for the case of al-Ash`arī, as the latter was active in Iraq where much of al-Fārābī's intellectual training took place.

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<sup>113</sup> A.K.M. Ayyub Ali, "Ṭahāwism," in *A History of Muslim Philosophy Vol. 1*, ed. M.M. Sharif (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1963), pp. 244-274, here, p. 244.

<sup>114</sup> Abdul Hye, 222.

## *Al-Ash`arī*

Al-`Ash`arī maintained an intermediary position along a continuum between two extremes, diametrically opposed schools of thought prevailing at the time, and he frequently engaged in heated debate with both opposing parties. At the one extreme were the *Mu`tazilah*, who made reason the sole criterion of truth and reality, in preference to revelation. At the other extreme were the orthodox groups<sup>115</sup> who were opposed to the use of reason or *kalām* in any discussion on matters of faith. Al-Ash`arī sought the middle-of-the-road position, asserting the necessity of both revelation and reason for the survival of the faith. He held that the literalist views of much of the orthodoxy, regarding the attributes of Allah, led to pure anthropomorphism, which, for al-Ash`arī, was untenable. On the other hand, al-Ash`arī felt that the *Mu`tazilah* view, which held that the avowal of any attributes of Allah led to a “plurality of eternals”<sup>116</sup> – and thus shirk, the paramount sin in Islam – led to a denial of revelation. The attributes of Allah are clearly attested in the Qur`ān, thus, to deny those attributes, as frequently done by the *Mu`tazilah*, constituted a denial of revelation in al-Ash`arī’s view.

The position of the al-Ash`arī aimed at a reconciliation between the two extreme views. He held that Allah does indeed possess the attributes ascribed to him in revelation, but that these should not be understood in their literal sense. On the subject of free will, al-Ash`arī again struck a middle ground. The orthodox position, that human actions are predetermined and created only by Allah, was seen by al-Ash`arī as pure fatalism. The

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<sup>115</sup> Such as the *Zāhiriyyūn* (literalists), the *Muḥaddithūn* (Traditionists), and the *Fuqahā`* (jurists).

<sup>116</sup> Valiuddin, 200.

*Mu` tazilah* view, that man has full agency to create his actions and has total freedom of choice, was seen by al-Ash`arī as a liberal denial of Allah’s absolute power. The position of al-Ash`arī was that Allah alone is the creator (*khāliq*) of the actions of man, and man is the acquirer (*muktasib*) of actions.<sup>117</sup> Al-Ash`arī reached these conclusions by recourse to the dialectical method, and thus gave some leeway to reason, but on the whole, he maintained the primacy of revelation over reason. He maintained the eternality of the Qur`ān,<sup>118</sup> and that revelation alone can determine whether an action is good or bad.<sup>119</sup> Finally, the *Ash`ariyyūn*, based on the thinking of al-Ash`arī, devised a unique metaphysics which affirmed the prophet-hood of Muḥammad, and necessitated the existence of Allah, who is alone the sole creator and ultimate cause of the universe, re-creating it at every moment.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Abdul Hye, 229.

<sup>118</sup> As mentioned in the chapter on the translation of Greek texts into Arabic, the *Mu` tazilah* strictly maintained the createdness of the Qur`ān. The *Ash`ariyyūn* distinguished between the outward and concrete expression of the Qur`ān in language, which is temporal and therefore created, and the real, self-subsisting meaning of the Qur`ān which “inheres eternally in the essence of God.” Therefore, they refuted the claims of the *Hanbaliyyūn*, who asserted that even the cover and the binding of the Qur`ān are eternal; and they refuted the *Mu` tazilah*, who asserted the complete temporality and createdness of the Qur`ān. See Abdul Hye, 233.

<sup>119</sup> The *Mu` tazilah* held that good or bad are inherent in actions, and that knowledge of the innate goodness or badness of any action can be arrived at by the exercise of human reason, unaided by revelation. Al-Ash`arī held that good and bad, in their everyday, mundane sense, can indeed be known by reason. But with regard to which actions are rewardable or punishable by Allah, there is no question of these being known by reason, unaided by revelation. See Abdul Hye, 232.

<sup>120</sup> For the *Ash`ariyyūn*, proof of the prophethood of Muḥammad was established by the affirmation of miracles, a view which had to be defended by denying the laws of nature. To deny the laws of nature, causality in nature was denied, and Allah alone was affirmed as the cause of everything. Further expounding and supporting this view, the *Ash`ariyyūn* posited that the substances perceived by humans consist of atoms, which come into existence out of vacuity, only existing for a moment, after which they cease to exist. Every moment, the atoms of everything which exists in the universe are created anew. The atoms must have a cause, without which they could not exist, and this cause must be a *cause sui*; otherwise, there would be “infinite regress of the causal nexus.” This cause is the free will of Allah, which creates and annihilates the atoms and their qualities, thus causing all motion and change in the world. There is no such thing as a secondary cause, and the appearance of a secondary cause is only illusory. The most famous

Because the Ash`arī system, on the whole, held that revelation is the fundamental source of all ultimate truth and reality, one result of its development was that it helped to check the proliferation of heterodox doctrines which, in the time of al-Ash`arī and subsequent to his death, were beginning to erode the solidarity of the budding *Sharī`ah* (Islamic Law). It also led to the popular criticism of Greek philosophy (as opposed to *kalām*) and prepared the ground for the thought of men like Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazzālī (d. 1111),<sup>121</sup> a bellicose opponent of Muslim philosophers, whom he viewed as having been corrupted by Greek learning.<sup>122</sup>

The most important thing to remember about al-Ash`arī, for the purposes of this study, is that al-Ash`arī was the founder of a movement in Islamic thinking which sought to reconcile conflicting ideas about the relationship between reason and revelation. The aim of these influential thinkers was to satisfy reason, while also affirming and complying with the tenets expounded in Islamic Scripture. It is important to see al-Fārābī, a contemporary of al-Ash`arī, within the historical context of these developments, establishing him as an active participant in this harmonizing movement.

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example of this principle is the assertion of the *Ash`ariyyūn* that fire does not burn; when a thing comes into contact with fire, Allah creates a burned thing. The causal relationship implied by the coincidence of the appearance of the burned thing subsequent to its contact with fire is only an illusion – and Allah is the creator of this illusion, as well. See Waines, 120-124; and Abdul Hye, 240-241.

<sup>121</sup> Waines, 125.

<sup>122</sup> Al-Ghazzālī “sought to demolish the views of the philosophers, accusing them of deviating from Islam....” See Nasr, 113.

## *Al-Ṭaḥāwī*

Abū Ja`far al-Ṭaḥāwī, born at Ṭaḥā in upper Egypt, was primarily concerned with the *Ḥadīth*<sup>123</sup> and *fiqh*.<sup>124</sup> His contribution to *Ḥadīth* literature was the introduction of a new system of collecting legal traditions, the development of a new method of interpreting and harmonizing the conflicting traditions, and the adoption of a new criterion for criticizing them.<sup>125</sup> He did not introduce any new doctrine or system of theology, but rather summarized the views of Imam Abū Ḥanīfah (d. 820)<sup>126</sup> on important theological questions, in his own language. Part of the import of the *Ṭaḥāwī* Creed is that it makes abundantly clear the position of Abū Ḥanīfah, one of the goals of which was to strike a chord of harmony between the *Mu`tazilah* and the Muslim orthodoxy with regard to important theological issues, such as divine will and human freedom, and the essence and attributes of Allah.

The system of Abū Ḥanīfah was immensely influential, and it played a crucial role in the development of Islamic theology and law, so much so that both the *Mu`tazilah* and the orthodoxy tried to claim him as one of their own.<sup>127</sup> Even the followers of Abū

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<sup>123</sup> *Ḥadīth* (pl. *‘aḥādīth*) are the recorded words, actions, and habits of the Prophet Muḥammad, from the Arabic root meaning “narration,” “account,” or “report.” *‘Aḥādīth* form the foundation of the *Sunnah*, the Traditions of the Prophet, which is second only to the Qur`ān as a source of the *Sharī`ah*, or Islamic Law.

<sup>124</sup> *Fiqh* is Islamic Jurisprudence.

<sup>125</sup> Prior to al-Ṭaḥāwī, the primary gauge for judging the soundness of *‘aḥādīth* was the *isnād* (the chain of narration) of the *Ḥadīth*, with less importance placed on the *matn* (the text of the narration). Al-Ṭaḥāwī’s method of scrutinizing *‘aḥādīth*, on the other hand, took into account the *matn* as well as the *isnād*. He was also concerned with harmonizing conflicting interpretations of *‘aḥādīth*. See Mustafa as-Sibâ`ee, *The Sunnah and its role in Islamic Legislation* (Riyadh: International Islamic Publishing House, 2008), pp. 71-191, *passim*.

<sup>126</sup> Waines, 67.

<sup>127</sup> Ayyub Ali, “Ṭaḥāwism,” 257.

Ḥanīfah were divided on the interpretation of his theological views. In fact, as Ayyub Ali asserts, during the early `Abbāsīd Caliphate, Ḥanafī judges openly supported the position of the *Mu`tazilah* on controversial issues, and cooperated with the rulers in suppressing the opinions of the extreme orthodox.<sup>128</sup> The value of the commentaries of al-Ṭaḥāwī on Abū Ḥanīfah lay in their capacity to express the positions of the latter clearly, removing doubts and confusion about his views, essentially reclaiming the Imam for the orthodoxy.

This last point is interesting for the current study, inasmuch as the immediate aims of this study are concerned with complicating and reevaluating the widely-held standard interpretation of the views of al-Fārābī. If the interpretation of his views as held by the likes of Richard Walzer and his ilk were to be accepted, then al-Fārābī's standpoint would fall more in line with heterodox schools of Islamic thought than the orthodox, if indeed they could be considered Islamic at all. The picture of the thinker which Walzer paints, as will be shown in the chapters to follow, is one of a worshiper of pure logical reason, as completely opposed to an avowed worshiper of Allah or even a nominal Muslim.

The goal of the present project is, taking a page from the playbook of al-Ṭaḥāwī, who sought to reclaim Abū Ḥanīfah for the Muslim orthodoxy by clarifying his position, to similarly remove doubts and confusion about the message of al-Fārābī by clarifying his position. Like al-Ash`arī and Abū Ḥanīfah, al-Fārābī sought harmony between Islam and philosophy, by advocating an Islamic worldview which allowed a significant role for reason. But it is my contention that, on the whole al-Fārābī, like al-Ash`arī and Abū

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 258.

Ḥanīfah again, maintained the primacy of revelation as the sole source of ultimate wisdom and knowledge which leads to salvation. This study will demonstrate his assertion that because both philosophy and Islam proceed from and depend upon revelation, Islam and philosophy are compatible. In this way al-Fārābī posited a solution to solve the crisis of antagonism between rival schools of thought, which, in the ninth century, rocked the foundations of traditional Islamic thought.

### ***Abū Manṣūr al-Māturīdī***

Abū Manṣūr al-Māturīdī, a follower of Abū Ḥanīfah among those mentioned above, was a founder of a third school of orthodox *kalām*, *Māturīdism*. Like al-Ṭaḥāwī, al-Māturīdī, interpreted and expounded on Abū Ḥanīfah's views, using them as a foundation on which to build up his own doctrinal system. If al-Ṭaḥāwī's theology can be considered dogmatic, al-Māturīdī's theology was considerably more of a speculative theology. Al-Māturīdī's system resembles in many ways that of al-Ash`arī, a key difference being the greater emphasis placed on the role of reason in that of the former. Al-Māturīdī's thought thus occupied a ground somewhere between the thought of al-Ash`arī and the *Mu`tazilah*. Like both al-Ash`arī and al-Ṭaḥāwī, however, al-Māturīdī sought to reconcile and settle the differences between the rationalists and the orthodoxy, by taking a middle ground.<sup>129</sup> It is also interesting to note that al-Māturīdī's influence was felt in Samarqand, and spread to other regions dominated by the Sāmānid rulers; al-Fārābī was born in Sāmānid Turkestan, and grew up there under the reign of Naṣr I b. Aḥmad (d. 892).<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> See Nasr, 126-127; A.K.M. Ayyub Ali, "Māturīdism," in *A History of Muslim Philosophy Vol. 1*, ed. M.M. Sharif (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1963), pp. 259-274.

<sup>130</sup> See Bakar, *Classification of Knowledge*, 10-13.

## *Shi`ism and Shī`ah Kalām*

Two other schools of thought deserve brief mention here before continuing, the *Ismā`īliyyah* and the *Ithnā`Ashariyyah*. Both are schools within the sect of Islam known as the *Shī`ah*.<sup>131</sup> In the ninth and tenth century, the time of al-Fārābī, the differences between these two factions were still fluid, but there is evidence of their being somewhat individuated, even by that time.<sup>132</sup> According to Najam Haider, the precursor to both factions was the group known as the *Imāmiyyah*, from whom both factions inherited traditions and beliefs concerning the Imamate.<sup>133,134</sup> The name of the *Ismā`īliyyah*, also commonly known as the Seven-ers, is derived from their recognition of the seventh Imam

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<sup>131</sup> A brief explanation of the origins of the *Shī`ah* is as follows. After the death of the Prophet Muḥammad in Madīnah in 632, there arose a dispute as to the identity of his successor. The majority of the Companions of the Prophet supported Abū Bakr (d. 634), the father-in-law of Muḥammad, who led the *ummah* (Muslim community) for two years as the first caliph, and was succeeded in the caliphate by three other Companions (‘Umar, ‘Uthman, and ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib). These four successors to Muḥammad were revered by subsequent generations of Sunni Muslims as the *Khulafā’ al-Rāshīdūn*, the Rightly Guided Caliphs. A minority of the Companions rejected Abū Bakr, arguing that ‘Alī (d. 661), the first cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet, had the strongest claim to succession. This group, dedicated to the *Ahl al-Bayt*, the People of the House, maintained that leadership of the Muslim community rested exclusively with the descendants of the Prophet. The views of the group who supported the four *Rāshīdūn* caliphs are today associated with the Sunni Muslims, whereas those of the supporters of ‘Alī are associated with *Shī`ah* Muslims. For more details, see Najam Haider, *Shī`ī Islām: An Introduction* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 1-4.

<sup>132</sup> For instance, Paul Walker claims, based on an examination of early *Ismā`īlī* literature, that manifestations of the *Ismā`īliyyah* movement appeared as early as 874. He also suggests that the *Ismā`īliyyah*, in opposition to other forms of Shi`ism, began supporting their own line of imams after the death of Ja`far al-Šādiq in 765. Paul E. Walker, *Early Philosophical Shiism: The Ismaili Neoplatonism of Abū Ya`qūb al-Sijistānī* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 6, 9-10.

<sup>133</sup> Haider, *Shī`ī Islām*, 13.

<sup>134</sup> In contrast with Sunnism, Shi`ism holds that there must exist at all times a divinely ordained, prophetically inspired, supreme human authority who, as heir to the Prophet Muḥammad himself, carries on the principle of his rule in all those matters in which his authority was supreme. The *Shī`ah* maintain that the world has never been, and never will be, without an ultimate religious authority whose charge it is to lead and rule mankind in the name of God. In this temporal era, this person is the Imam and he is, of necessity, a direct lineal descendant of the Prophet Muḥammad through his singly designated (*naṣṣ*) executor and heir, ‘Alī. See Walker, pp. 3-4, 26.

descending from the line of al-Ḥasan and al-Ḥusayn, namely Muḥammad b. Ismā`īl, whom they believe is in *ghaybah* (occultation).<sup>135</sup> The name of the *Ithnā`Ashariyyah*, the Twelvers, is in like fashion derived from their recognition of the occultation of the twelfth *Shī`ah* Imam, Muḥammad al-Mahdī.<sup>136</sup>

For the *Ismā`īliyyah* the Imam was the key to salvation, by virtue of his being the sole gateway to the interpretation of both the *ẓāhir* (exoteric) and the *bāṭin* (esoteric) meanings of revelation, knowledge of which he is endowed with by Allah.<sup>137</sup> The *Ismā`īlī* Imam is also the only legitimate source of political authority, and as such he is burdened with the establishment of a just state. For the Twelvers, on the other hand, while their view of the of the Imam is similar insofar as his function is to provide a definitive interpretation of revelation, his knowledge of scripture and Islamic Law are acquired through erudition and persistent study.<sup>138</sup>

The *Shī`ah*, like most communities of Muslims, were active participants in the world of *kalām*, and were in dialogue with other *Mutakallimūn*. During the eighth and

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<sup>135</sup> *Ghaybah*, in Arabic, means “absence” or “concealment.” In *Shī`ah* doctrine, the term is loosely applied to anyone whom Allah has withdrawn from the world and caused to become invisible to the eyes of ordinary people, whose life is miraculously prolonged by Allah through many generations. The *Shī`ah* hold that their imam still lives and will someday return to temporal society to restore and maintain order, and guide the (*Shī`ī*) Muslims on the right path. See Wendy Doniger, “Ghayba,” in *Encyclopedia of World Religions (1)* (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc., 2006), 376. ProQuest ebrary. Accessed 20 March 2017. See also A. A. Sachedina, *Islamic Messianism: The Idea of the Mahdi in Twelver Shi`ism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1981), *passim*.

<sup>136</sup> The minor occultation occurred in 874, with the death of the eleventh Imam, Ḥasan al-`Askarī. The major occultation took place in 940. See Walker, 6.

<sup>137</sup> During the reign of al-Ma`mūn (813-833), p. 275, Sharif, Dāwūd b. `Alī founded his movement, the *Zāhiriyyah* (the literalists) as a Sunni response in harsh criticism of the *Bāṭinīyah* movement of the *Shī`ah*. Ibn `Alī regarded the esoterism of the *Ismā`īliyyah* as a deviation from the only valid interpretation of the Qur`ān and *Sunnah*, which, in his opinion and that of his followers, was the literal interpretation. See Farrukh, 275-276. Al-Māturīdī also wrote works in refutation of the *Ismā`īliyyah*. See Walker, 44.

<sup>138</sup> Haider, *Shī`ī Islām*, 44.

ninth centuries, the *Mu` tazilah* criticized the *Shi` ah* for their views on the successor to the Prophet, the nature of Allah, and the nature of the Imam. Criticism notwithstanding, the influence of the *Mu` tazilah* on *Shi` ah* theology was fairly pronounced, however that influence failed to reach the *Shi` ah* doctrine of the Imam.<sup>139</sup> In *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah* al-Fārābī's position on the role of the Imam, from a certain tenuous perspective, shares certain characteristics with both *Ismā`īlī* and Twelver notions of the Imam. For this reason, it is interesting that several preeminent *Shi` ah* thinkers, such as Abū Ya`qūb al-Sijistānī (d. 971),<sup>140</sup> were contemporaries of al-Fārābī and they also produced works during the latter's active period. I posit that the similarities in their respective doctrines may be read, in some respects, as dialogue between the thinkers.<sup>141</sup>

### ***Final Words on Kalām***

It should be noted that although, on the one hand, *kalām* seems to have been born out of a clash of schismatic thinking, and it has often been seen to fuel both sides of internecine conflict between rival factions in Islam, on the other hand, *kalām* has also served as an invaluable tool for the unification of Muslims in defense of their faith against outsiders. With the inevitable confrontation of Islam with paganism, Christianity, and Judaism, a good deal of the work of the earliest theologians consisted in the rebuttal

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<sup>139</sup> The *Mu` tazilah* did not restrict the legitimate succession of leadership of the community, the Imamate, to a specific genetically propagated lineage. As Sunni Muslims, the *Mu` tazilah* considered the office elective, with some of the *Mu` tazilah* arguing that an Imam was not even necessary at some times. Walker, *Philosophical Shiism*, 13-15.

<sup>140</sup> Walker notes that it was likely al-Fārābī who influenced al-Sijistānī and not the other way around. However, there shall be occasion in the chapters to follow for an examination of various similarities between the philosophies of the two thinkers. See Walker, 35.

<sup>141</sup> It is my contention that *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah* should be read as an attempt to harmonize disparate positions on controversial issues in the tenth-century Islamic dialogue between rival factions of Muslims.

of the arguments leveled at Islam by thinkers of other faiths. In this regard, *kalām* arose as a means of buttressing Islamic beliefs with logical arguments and defending them against attack.<sup>142</sup>

Indeed, one of the primary functions of *kalām*, throughout Islamic history, has been “to find rational means to protect the citadel of faith (*al-īmān*)”<sup>143</sup>. In fact, Osman Bakar notes that this characterization of *kalām* was shared by al-Fārābī himself. Citing al-Fārābī’s work, *‘Iḥṣā’ al-`ulūm (Enumeration of the Sciences)*, he tells us that in al-Fārābī’s view, the *kalām* of al-Fārābī’s time was a religious science which “arose in a religious tradition at some point in its history out of a need to formulate a systematic defense of the tenets of that religion against attacks from various sources such as the followers of other religions”<sup>144</sup>. The phenomenon of *kalām* – which can be briefly defined as a discipline which adopted the use of Greek logic and dialectic to elaborate and defend Islamic theological doctrine and dogmas – demonstrates that harmony between Islam and Greek thought is possible, even if only subsequent to a thorough Islamization of the latter. Because the Greek concepts which influenced the development of *kalām* were thus Islamized, *kalām* is regarded by its proponents as an autochthonously Islamic phenomenon.<sup>145</sup> *Falsafah* proper, on the other hand, which begins with al-Kindī,

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<sup>142</sup> Fakhry, *History*, xviii.

<sup>143</sup> Nasr, 97.

<sup>144</sup> Bakar, *Classification of Knowledge*, 146.

<sup>145</sup> It should be noted, however, that, as mentioned above, extreme orthodox Muslims, such as the *Zāhiriyyah*, regarded *any* application of reason or logic to the interpretation of the Qur’ān and *Ḥadīth* literature as an encroachment of foreign agents upon the sanctity of Islam and the community of Muslims.

is regarded, especially by its opponents, such as al-Ghazzālī, as a heterochthonous development of purely Greek provenience.

***Other Thinkers: Early Sufism (al-Taṣawwuf)***

Sufism is another school of theologico-philosophical thought in Islam, which also seems to bear some influence on the philosophy of al-Fārābī, and thus warrants a brief mention before moving on to *falsafah*. Hamiduddin describes Sufism as an ascetic way of life, in which the seeker (*murīd* or *sālik*) is led by a spiritual guide (*murshid* or *shaykh*) on a path (*ṭarīqah*) toward experiential knowledge of, and mystical union with, the divine. According to al-Qushayrī, the most important thing for a Sufi is that his belief in Allah should contain no element of doubt, and it should be firmly rooted in self-evident facts.<sup>146</sup> The Sufi lays emphasis on factual evidence; he believes that man's knowledge of Allah is not purely conceptual but is also experiential. His relationship with Allah should be so thoroughly comprehensive and intimate that he feels as though all of his actions are not his own, but that Allah is in reality the only actor. He relinquishes and loses his mortal self in Allah, while yet experiencing Allah in his every action. He desires surrender to the experience of the realization of the divine will, at every moment in his life.<sup>147</sup> This is the Sufi concept of annihilation (*fanā'*) and subsistence (*baqā'*), which is the notion that through devotion to Allah, the seeker reaches a stage where the brilliance of the divine light annihilates all human limitations holding him back from seeing his true self and his

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<sup>146</sup> Abu al-Qāsim al-Qushairī, *al-Risālat al-Qushairīyyah* (Misr: Dār alKutub al-'Arabīyyah al-Kubra, 1330 AH), 180, as cited in M. Hamiduddin, "Early Sufis: Doctrine," in *A History of Muslim Philosophy Vol. 1*, ed. M. M. Sharif (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1963), pp. 310-334, here, p. 317.

<sup>147</sup> Al-Qushairī, *op. cit.*, 127.

Lord. This obliteration of impediments and illusions allows him to see that he is nothing, has always been nothing, and that Allah alone has true Reality (*al-Ḥaqīqah*).<sup>148</sup> After the annihilation of idols and false selfhood, what remains and subsists is Allah, alone, in all of his glory and mercy.<sup>149,150</sup>

Reality, from the Sufi point of view, is an aspect exclusive to Allah, such that man can never fully comprehend it; understanding *al-Ḥaqīqah* requires a special capacity, with which the prophets alone are endowed. For this reason, Hamiduddin explains, the Sufi values extreme conformity with the *Sharī‘ah*, which seeks to emulate and implement the life-model of the Prophet Muḥammad, as one who had insight into the nature of Reality.<sup>151</sup> However, the Sufi, whose aim it is to pattern his entire life after the archetypal model of the Prophet, regards the *Sharī‘ah* of the average mortal as insufficient for his purposes. He seeks the guidance of a preceptor, who is an initiated member of a

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<sup>148</sup> The Sufi notion of *al-Ḥaqīqah* is necessarily caught up with another Sufi concept, *ma‘rifah* (gnosis). To understand the Sufi concept of gnosis it is necessary to contrast this term with yet another term, *‘ilm* (knowledge). The difference between knowledge and gnosis, from the Sufi point of view, is that the former never takes the Muslim past empty verbal form; while the latter ends up in direct experience of concrete facts, processes, and things. Knowledge, accordingly, seldom influences one’s real conduct, while gnosis can hardly remain without influencing it. Finally, then, to experience *al-Ḥaqīqah* can only be gnosis, *ma‘rifah*. Dhūl-Nūn al-Miṣrī, a contemporary of al-Fārābī’s from Egypt, classified gnosis as the highest knowledge, the knowledge of the attributes of Allah. Al-Fārābī also holds that the best knowledge is the knowledge of Allah. On gnosis see Hamiduddin, “Early Sufis,” 331; on Dhūl-Nūn al-Miṣrī, see Hamiduddin, “Early Sufis (Continued),” 341.

<sup>149</sup> William C. Chittick, *Sufism: A Beginner’s Guide* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2000), 43-45, 56.

<sup>150</sup> This is another manifestation of the Islamic doctrine of *Tawḥīd*, the Unity of Allah. For an in-depth discussion of this concept, see Tamara Sonn, “Tawḥīd,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*, ed. John L. Esposito (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), Oxford Reference Online. Accessed 24 March, 2017.

<sup>151</sup> Hamiduddin, “Early Sufis,” 317-318.

succession of charismatic preceptors which originated with the Prophet Muḥammad himself.

It is the Sufi belief that the Prophet chose, during his lifetime, a worthy few of his Companions whom he regarded as competent of carrying the taxing load of intimate insight into the true nature of Reality, and that he communicated a measure of his mystical endowment to them.<sup>152</sup> Without this charismatic attunement it is impossible to approach insight into the being of Allah, as such experience is beyond the capacity of an average mortal. As the Sufi *shaykh* is in living, active contact with *al-Ḥaqīqah*, the *shaykh* alone possesses the requisite knowledge and experience to guide the young Sufi initiate on his path to illumination and gnosis (*ma`rifah*).<sup>153</sup> This dependence on the *shaykh*, in his capacity as the link to Reality, may be seen as an extension of the Prophet's agency, without which the Sufi *murīd* would be awash in a sea of uncertainty, guideless.

This is where Sufism becomes pertinent to the discussion of al-Fārābī. As will be thoroughly discussed in the chapters to follow, the relationship between al-Fārābī's prophet and the inhabitants of the Virtuous City is one of complete, unqualified *dependence*. Without the living, temporal presence of the prophet, whose function it is to maintain contact with Allah on behalf of the non-prophetically endowed masses, there can be no revelation or gnosis and thus no law (*Sharī`ah*), by which to guide the perilously ignorant souls to correct belief and correct practice, and both earthly and

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 323.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

eternal felicity. Philosophy and theoretical reason are expedient tools in the kitbag of the prophet but, on the whole, they are dependent on revelation. Chittick observes that this is very much in line with the Sufi tradition, from the standpoint of which

there is nothing more damaging to the well-being of the self than the notion that ... we do not need help, or only a little bit of help, or only the help of the imagined 'experts' to put our affairs in order. In the Sufi reading, this notion of not needing prophetic help is the fatal defect of the world.<sup>154</sup>

Accordingly, all attempts to rationalize the world, unaided by revelation, are doomed to failure.

The plot thickens, for the Sufis and for al-Fārābī, when the latter seems to take up the cause of the former in their criticism of those who hold that the *Sharī`ah* is only operative so long as a man has not established contact with *al-Ḥaqīqah*; in their view, whenever he does establish this contact, the *Sharī`ah* is rendered inoperative, becoming useless and futile.<sup>155</sup> This may be a criticism of *Shī`ah* sects, perhaps in particular the *Ismā`īliyyah*, who await the return of the Messiah in the person of Muḥammad b. Ismā`īl, whose appearance, it is believed, will usher in a spiritual paradise and bring an end to the physical constraints of man's worldly condition, eradicating Islamic legal injunctions and ritual law – *the Sharī`ah*.<sup>156</sup> As will be demonstrated in the chapters to follow, al-Fārābī held that the *Sharī`ah* is incumbent upon all humans, philosophers and prophets alike.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> Chittick, 61-62.

<sup>155</sup> Makhdūm `Ali Hujwīr, *Kashf al-Maḥjūb* (Samarqand: Silyanov Press: 1330 AH), 12, as cited in Hamiduddin, "Early Sufis," 318.

<sup>156</sup> Walker, *Philosophical Shiism*, 10.

<sup>157</sup> Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam: Philosophy and Orthodoxy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 63; cf. Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī, *sharḥ risāla zainūn al-Kabīr* (Hyderabad, 1349 AH), 9.

## 6. Falsafah and The First of The Falāsifah: 9<sup>th</sup> Century<sup>158</sup>

Like the orthodox Islamic opponents of *falsafah*, Roger Arnaldez asserts that the origins of *falsafah* are “purely Greek,” the activity of the *falāsifah* beginning with translations of Greek philosophical texts, either directly or through a Syriac intermediary, into Arabic.<sup>159</sup> He further describes Islamic philosophy (in distinction from *kalām*, for the purposes of the present study) as a synthesis of Neoplatonic metaphysics, “Plotinus enriched by Galen and Proclus,” with natural science and Islamic mysticism.<sup>160</sup> What is implied by this characterization of *falsafah* is that, on the whole, there is very little actual Islam, or Islamic influence, in Islamic philosophy. Indeed, note that in Arnaldez’s description the word “Islamic” appears as but the last additive on a list of the requisite “ingredients” for mixing up a batch of *falsafah*. Far from being simply the reproduction of Greek philosophy in Arabic, however, *falsafah* integrates certain elements of Greek philosophical thought into the Islamic perspective, thus creating new philosophical schools, “an independent philosophical universe of discourse”<sup>161</sup>.

By the end of the ninth century, the *Mu`tazilah* school was the dominant force in *kalām*, while *falsafah* was passing through its nascent period of genesis and early development with al-Kindī and his students. This was a period of distinct but parallel developments and close association between *falsafah* and *kalām*, in an atmosphere of

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<sup>158</sup> R. Arnaldez, "Falsafa." *The Encyclopaedia of Islam, New ed., Vol. 2* (Leiden: Brill, 1991), pp. 769-775. *Gale Virtual Reference Library*. Accessed 20 February, 2017.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, 771.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>161</sup> Nasr, 109.

mutual respect for *kalām* on the part of al-Kindī, while on the side of *kalām*, branches such as the school of Baṣrah were sowing seeds of enmity between themselves and the *falāsifah*.<sup>162</sup> The relationship remained, however, one of reciprocal influence; *kalām* forced *falsafah* to deal with specifically religious issues, while *falsafah* influenced ever more the formulation and argumentation of *kalām* itself.

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 49-50.

## 7. Al-Kindī (801-873)<sup>163</sup>

Al-Kindī was born in Iraq at the beginning of the ninth century. Al-Kūfah and al-Baṣrah were two rivalling centers of Islamic culture; al-Kūfah was more inclined to rational studies, and it is within this intellectual environment that al-Kindī passed his early years.<sup>164</sup> He received an Islamic education, learning the Qur’ān by heart (he was a *ḥāfiẓ*), Arabic grammar, literature, and arithmetic; he then studied *fiqh* and the still-developing *kalām*. As an adult, however, he was more interested in philosophy than *kalām*, and it would be to the former which he would consecrate the remainder of his life, especially after moving to Baghdad.

A complete knowledge of Greek science and philosophy entailed a requisite proficiency in the Greek and Syriac languages into which latter many Greek works had already been translated, as discussed above. It does seem that al-Kindī learned Greek, but according to El-Ehwany we know with certainty that he mastered Syriac, from which he translated several works.<sup>165</sup> As such a masterful linguist, one of the major achievements of al-Kindī was the molding of the Arabic language as a vehicle for the expression of philosophy; he was a pioneer in the creation of Arabic philosophic vocabulary. Nasr tells us that he was the first devout Muslim who knew Greco-Alexandrian philosophy well, and he sought to create a philosophical system in which this philosophy was integrated into the Islamic worldview with its emphasis on the unity of God and the reality of

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<sup>163</sup> El-Ehwany, 421.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

revelation.<sup>166</sup> While it is true that al-Kindī adapted ideas from Neoplatonic Aristotelianism, it is also true that he cast those ideas within an Islamic framework. By reconciling Greek heritage with Islam, he laid down the foundational groundwork for what would soon become a new school of philosophy.<sup>167</sup> For this reason, he is known as the first *faylasūf* and the father of Islamic philosophy, *falsafah*.<sup>168</sup>

Peter Adamson observes that al-Kindī was predisposed to see all of ancient thought as a single, coherent system. He was convinced of the power and truth of Aristotle’s philosophy, as well as the truth of Neoplatonism, and did not see the two as incompatible with one another.<sup>169</sup> This likely comes as a result of his being exposed to Aristotle together with the vast corpus of commentaries written on Aristotle, by both Aristotelians such as Alexander of Aphrodisias, and also Neoplatonists such as Porphyry and John Philoponus. By way of this apparently unorthodox interpretation of Aristotle, al-Kindī was able to create continuity between otherwise disparate traditions of Greek and Islamic thought.

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<sup>166</sup> Nasr, 137.

<sup>167</sup> El-Ehwany, 423.

<sup>168</sup> Nasr, 137.

<sup>169</sup> Peter Adamson, “Al-Kindī and the Reception of Greek Philosophy,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy* eds. Peter Adamson and Richard C. Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 32-51, here, p. 37.

For example, in a move unwittingly similar to Ammonius,<sup>170</sup> al-Kindī asserted that the God of Aristotle was an efficient cause as well as a final cause.<sup>171</sup> This is a vital contribution to the history of Arabic and Islamic philosophy by al-Kindī, as it conciliates the theology of Aristotle, which sees God as pure immaterial intellect and unmoved mover, with two rival theologies. First, there is the Neoplatonic view in which the One, or God, “emanates” the universe from himself in an outpouring or overflowing of generosity and power, mediated by the Intellect. Second, there is the Islamic view, in which God (Allah) is the Creator of the universe, as in other revealed religions. Any way this notion of God as “creating” is interpreted, it seems to involve efficient and not merely final causality.

Al-Kindī affirms all three of these views on God, the Aristotelian, Neoplatonic, and creationist (Islamic) views,<sup>172</sup> and scholars are divided as to whether al-Kindī subordinated religion to philosophy, or *vice versa*. He does make a sharp distinction between the two, characterizing religion as proceeding from revelation to prophets, who alone have the capacity to receive divine illumination, whereas philosophy, in al-Kindī’s view, is purely human. This much is clear and is not disputed. But scholarship is divided on whether al-Kindī holds the truth of revelatory prophecy and philosophy as equivalent, or whether he asserts the superiority of one or the other.

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<sup>170</sup> Ammonius wrote an entire work urging that the God of Aristotle is an efficient as well as a final cause. See Simplicius, *Commentary on the “Physics,”* in *Commentaria in Aristotelum Graeca* IX-X, ed. Hermann Diels (Berlin: Reimer, 1882, 1895), 1363. As cited in Adamson, “Al-Kindī,” 50.

<sup>171</sup> An efficient cause acts to produce its effect, while a final cause exercises causality only by being the object of striving or desire. See *ibid.*

<sup>172</sup> Adamson, “Al-Kindī,” 38.

Fouad El-Ehwany, for example, asserts that in al-Kindī's view, religion based on revelatory prophecy (specifically, Islam) is superior, as revelation bestows upon the prophet a level and a quality of knowledge which is impossible for humans to achieve by any other means. Revelation imparts the only sure and certain truth, while philosophy, being a humanly self-limiting endeavor, cannot approach certain truth.<sup>173</sup> Peter Adamson, on the other hand, asserts that al-Kindī resists the idea that a prophet has access to truths or knowledge which is inaccessible to the rest of us. In a treatise on the works of Aristotle, Adamson explains, al-Kindī describes that the advantage of prophecy lies in the effortless and immediate way in which the prophet receives knowledge, as contrasted to the philosopher who reaches the *same truths* only by great effort.<sup>174</sup> Both of these scholars cite al-Kindī's treatises on the works of Aristotle to support their positions, and both draw opposing conclusions from the same readings. For readers of these scholars without the ability to analyze the treatises themselves, in the original Arabic, it is difficult to locate oneself on either side of the issue. In the end, and on which most scholars agree, the major import of al-Kindī's legacy is that he was the first Islamic philosopher to effect an accord between Islam and philosophy.

The scholarship on the works of al-Kindī's successor, al-Fārābī, can likewise be divided into opposing camps. The first, composed of those who place emphasis on al-Fārābī's Islamic message, and his affirmation of Allah as the creator and sustainer of the

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<sup>173</sup> El-Ehwany, 426-427.

<sup>174</sup> Adamson, "Kindī, Abū Yūsuf Ya'qūb ibn Ishāq al-.", (encyclopedia article, cited above). A similar interpretation can be found in Gerhard Endress, "The Defense of Reason: The Plea for Philosophy in the Religious Community," in *Zeitschrift für Geschichte der arabisch-islamische Wissenschaften* 6 (1990), pp. 1-49, here, p. 8.

universe and the source of all power, guiding wisdom, and salvation, is undeniably the smaller of the camps. The second, and by far the more prolific of the two, consists of those who minimize al-Fārābī's Islam, portraying him as a worshipper of purely human reason, a philosopher, as opposed to a Muslim and a worshipper of Allah. Fortunately for the present study, I have examined the entire extant body of al-Fārābī's writing, in Arabic, along with many commentaries on his works, written by scholars who most often support either one or the other of these two dominant positions on al-Fārābī. The second part of this dissertation is dedicated to an analysis of the school of thought dedicated to expunging Islam from al-Fārābī's identity, founded in large part by Richard Walzer.

Having thus outlined the historical and ideological context within which al-Fārābī's work should be established, we may now begin to understand the relationship between al-Fārābī's thought and the various interrelated developments in tenth-century Islamic thought as a whole. Only when established within this context can the import of *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah* be understood as the attempt of a devoted Muslim to solve intercommunal hostilities, by reconciling conflicting ideologies through the harmonization of Islam and philosophy, revelation and reason.

## PART II: AL-FĀRĀBĪ

### 8. Al-Fārābī: General Overview

Though we cannot be one hundred per cent sure, the philosopher Abū Naṣr Muḥammad b. Muḥammad b. Ūzalāgh b. Tarkhān al-Fārābī (870-950)<sup>175</sup> is generally agreed to have been of Turkish or Turkoman origin, and a native of Fārāb in Transoxiana. Al-Fārābī probably first studied logic under Yuḥanna b. Ḥaylān, a Christian teacher of philosophy in Khurasan, following him to Baghdad in 908.<sup>176</sup> In Baghdad, al-Fārābī came into close contact with Abū Bishr Mattā (d. 940), the Jacobite translator of Greek philosophical works, mentioned above. After studying under Mattā, al-Fārābī instructed the Jacobite Yaḥyā b. `Adī (d. 974), the chief representative of Christian Aristotelianism in Baghdad. Some scholars hold that the most salient event of al-Fārābī's life occurred in 942, when he accepted the invitation to live at the court of Sayf al-Dawlah Abū al-Ḥasan b. Ḥamdān (d. 967), the *Shī`ah* Ḥamdānid ruler of Aleppo.<sup>177</sup> A great patron of the arts and letters, Sayf al-Dawlah surrounded himself with prominent intellectual figures, most notably the poets al-Mutanabbī al-Kindī and Abū Firās al-Ḥamdānī, the preacher Ibn Nubāta, and the grammarian Ibn Jinnī. Al-Fārābī was counted among them for his distinction in science and philosophy, as well as in music.<sup>178</sup> Al-Fārābī remained at the

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<sup>175</sup> Majid Fakhry, *Al-Fārābī: Founder of Islamic Neoplatonism: His Life, Works and Influence* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2002), 6.

<sup>176</sup> Yanis Eshots, "al-Farabi, Abu Nasr (ca. 878-950)," *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Islamic Political Thought*, ed. Gerhard Bowering (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 170-171, here, p. 170.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, 170; Fakhry, *al-Fārābī*, 7.

<sup>178</sup> Al-Fārābī was a skilled musician and musical theoretician. He wrote several works on music, including a *Large Musical Treatise* (*Kitāb al-Musīqah al-Kabīr*), a treatise on *Melody* (*Fi-l-`Iqā`*), *Transition to Melody* (*al-Nuqlab ilā`l-`Iqā`*), and a small musical tract. See Fakhry, *Al-Fārābī*, 7.

court of Sayf al-Dawlah until, after a short visit to Egypt in 949, he returned to Damascus where he died in 950.<sup>179</sup>

Arab biographers love to shower al-Fārābī with the highest praise, unanimously referring to him as the “Second Teacher,” Aristotle having been the first.<sup>180</sup> Along with Ibn Sīnā (d. 1037), al-Fārābī was among the most influential representatives of Islamic Aristotelianism, being one of the first philosophers to transmit Aristotelian logic to the Islamic world.<sup>181</sup> He wrote commentaries on, or paraphrases of, all parts of Aristotle’s entire logical corpus, the *Organon*, in addition to the *Rhetoric* and the *Poetics*, which formed part of the *Organon* in the Arabic and Syriac traditions, as well as the *Isagoge* of Porphyry.<sup>182</sup> Occupying a pivotal role in the transmission of Greek philosophical thought to the Muslim world, al-Fārābī’s synthetic philosophy became the point of departure for the major branches of Islamic philosophy, including political philosophy. Central to his political thought, which is a major component of his philosophical system, lies his doctrine of the excellent city ruled by the prophet-philosopher (a concept which has been compared to the philosopher-king of Plato’s *Republic*).<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

<sup>180</sup> Eshots, “al-Farabi,” 170; Fakhry, *Al-Fārābī*, 1.

<sup>181</sup> Simon Blackburn, “al-Farabi, Abu Nasr,” in *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). Accessed 20 February, 2017.

<sup>182</sup> See Majid Fakhry, *Islamic Philosophy, Theology, and Mysticism: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1997), 38-47.

<sup>183</sup> Simon Blackburn, “al-Farabi, Abu Nasr,” in *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). Accessed 20 February, 2017.

Among his many brilliant original works are (and this is by no means an exhaustive list) a treatise on the *Enumeration of the Sciences* (*Iḥṣā' al-'Ulūm*), a treatise known as the *Book of Letters* (*Kitāb Risālat al-Ḥurūf*), a treatise on the *Attainment of Happiness* (*Kitāb Taḥṣīl al-Sa`ādah*), an equally masterful treatise harmonizing the *Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*, and three works on logic, namely, the *Terms Used in Logic* (*al-Alfāz al-Musta`malah fī-l-Manṭiq*), the *Five Sections on Logic* (*al-Fuṣūl al-Khamsah*), and the introductory *Epistle on Logic* (*Risālah fī-l-Manṭiq*).<sup>184</sup> His works on politics include the *Civil Polity* (*al-Siyāsah al-Madaniyyah*), *Aphorisms of the Statesman* (*Fuṣūl al-Madanī*), and the *Virtuous Regime* (*al-Sīrah al-Fāḍilah*). The best known of his works is undoubtedly the *Virtuous City* (*Mabādi' arā' ahl al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah*), which is the subject of this second part of the dissertation.

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<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

## 9. Al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah: Introduction

Richard Walzer's translation of, and commentary on, *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah* appropriately includes an introduction to the work, parts of which are to be agreed with while others are misleading. For instance, a point on which I agree with Walzer is that *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah* is Greek-inspired; a point on which we disagree is the extent to which that inspiration can be said to drive the content of the text, and its intended meaning. There can be no question that the external framework (i.e., the linguistic expression) of the thought embodied in *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah* is of thoroughly Greek influence, including that of Plato and Aristotle, as well as that of Plotinus and Proclus. However, the work is neither a translation of a Greek treatise, nor an adaptation of such a work for a new occasion. It is also not a purely academic scholarly commentary on a Greek philosophical work. The intention of al-Fārābī in writing *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah*, according to Walzer, is to naturalize the Greek material he is introducing into the Muslim world to which he belongs, and to give a new answer to the intellectual, as well as the religious and political, questions of his century. However, the "religious and political" answer which al-Fārābī puts forth is not, according to Walzer, of specifically Arabic or Islamic ancestry. Rather, "it is wholly derivative and... Greek throughout, with regard to the ideas put forward as well as to the arguments used and the solutions reached..."<sup>185</sup> Walzer thus asserts that the ideas expressed in *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah* are exclusively of Greek ancestry, being a new version of the inherited Greek tradition, which admits of no Islamic influence at all. This is where Walzer and I must irrevocably part ways. To read

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<sup>185</sup> Richard Walzer, *Perfect State*, 5.

*al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah* only on the face of it, noticing only that the philosophical terms al-Fārābī employs are mostly Arabic translations of Greek concepts, and exploring no further, is to deny its Islamic nature and thus to sacrifice its deeper levels of profound meaning.

As evidence of al-Fārābī's Greek inspiration, Walzer demonstrates that the structure of *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah* is laid out in an order corresponding to the order in which Greek philosophical texts are conventionally arranged. However, the reader familiar with works of Greek philosophy will be surprised to notice that while the text follows the conventional structure and order of the works of al-Fārābī's Greek predecessors, it is inclusive of subject matter not typically covered in a single Greek philosophical treatise. That is, al-Fārābī confines himself neither to theoretical philosophy, i.e., to metaphysics and natural science – which fill the first ten chapters of *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah* – nor to man considered in isolation – i.e., chapters 11-14. More than one third of the work (chapters 15-19) is devoted to an “academic” description of the structure of human society as it ought to be, including an implicit severe condemnation of its shortcomings in al-Fārābī's own time. This is noteworthy in that a comparable interest in political philosophy had been established in classical Greece with Plato and Aristotle, but it had become obsolete in the branch of Neoplatonism dominated by the creeds of Plotinus and Proclus, from whom, it will be remembered, al-Fārābī draws major formative influence, according to Walzer.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> Ibid., 7.

This deviance from the usual pattern, as well as the subject matter, of the works of al-Fārābī's Greek predecessors is an important first indication that al-Fārābī's own work is not a mere continuation of the Greek tradition. The uncommon emphasis on politics in the Neoplatonism of al-Fārābī is significant and it is important to understand al-Fārābī's concept of the political ruler – the prophet-philosopher, which Walzer calls a remarkable revival of Plato's philosopher-king<sup>187</sup> – within the context of the tenth-century Islamic commonwealth ruled by the Caliph, both the religious and secular successor of the Prophet Muḥammad. Walzer observes that politics and theology have been intimately connected in Islam since its very beginning, noting that "Islam was never content with promising and assuring the ultimate salvation of the individual in isolation from the body politic,"<sup>188</sup> and yet fails to recognize the correlation between politics and prophecy in the philosophy of al-Fārābī as (even a possible) indication of Islamic influence. This obstinate refusal to acknowledge obvious relationships makes Walzer's motives clear, which altogether appear to be a thorough denial of the Islamic character of al-Fārābī's message.

In *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah*, al-Fārābī consciously avoids using specifically Islamic language in favor of almost exclusively Arabic philosophical language, which had grown out of the translations from Greek and Syriac which were so widespread in his time, as discussed above. He makes consistent use of the abstract style with which the Christian translators of the 8<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> centuries had recently enriched Arabic prose. This means that

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<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid., 13.

the terms he adopts are unusual, often being the equivalent of Greek and/or Syriac terms, and therefore not obviously associated with familiar Arabic words common in al-Fārābī's time. His occasional, deliberate use of purely Islamic religious terms without any philosophical connotations are a rare exception to this rule; as such, it would be a grave mistake to read them as unintended slips.

Walzer admits that the use of these terms always has a special significance when they appear in *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah*,<sup>189</sup> but he denies that al-Fārābī's purpose in using them is to propound an Islamic message. According to Walzer, when these terms appear in the text, rather than the Islamization of philosophical concepts – which seems to be the more obvious explanation, and which will be demonstrated to be the ultimate aim of *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah* – the goal is to criticize Islamic thought, and to subordinate Islam to reason. In his endeavor to de-Islamize al-Fārābī's message, Walzer discounts the significance of al-Fārābī's use of these terms, and resorts, at times, to mistranslating or even omitting certain of these terms in his translation. As Walzer has mastered the Arabic language, his omission or mistranslation of these terms and phrases cannot be attributed to error; while it is impossible to infer Walzer's motives for this practice, the result is a suppression of the truly Islamic character and import of the text. This is incredibly unfortunate for readers with no knowledge of Arabic as they must take the scholar at his word, having no ability to verify the accuracy of his translation. I will demonstrate these few, yet surprisingly significant, omissions and mistranslations in the chapters to follow.

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<sup>189</sup> Ibid., 12.

Walzer implies that while al-Fārābī is ostensibly “Muslim,” the overall project of *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah* is to criticize Islam and Muslims. Indeed, Walzer tells his readers that *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah* is to be considered as “the product of an Islamic philosopher of the tenth century, as a book in its own right which al-Fārābī wrote for a special purpose of his own and addressed to the Arabic-reading Muslim public of his own day,”<sup>190</sup> and which must,

be understood... in two ways: against the background both of the long history of Greek Platonism as well as of the newly established revealed religion of Islam, especially the Muslim dialectical theology [*kalām*] of his day and contemporary (and earlier) Muslim debates about the supreme ruler.<sup>191</sup>

However, Walzer then goes on to assert that al-Fārābī regards *kalām* as a mere “stepping stone”<sup>192</sup> on the route away from religious Islam to the thoroughly superior and a-religious discipline of Greek philosophy. According to Walzer, al-Fārābī is altogether no enemy of Islam, as long as his religion remains subordinate to philosophy: “its appeal is restricted to one group of people whereas philosophical truth is universally valid. Muslim religious terms are defined by philosophical concepts and on the base of a philosophical interpretation of the world”<sup>193</sup>.

Walzer advances the claim that *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah* should be read as a commentary on the ideas of the various schools of Islamic thought extant in al-Fārābī’s time, a commentary which champions the superiority of philosophy over Islam. While I

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<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid., 12.

agree that al-Fārābī is taking a position on many of the theological issues being debated in the tenth century, I disagree with Walzer's assessment of al-Fārābī's position. For instance, Walzer claims that al-Fārābī uses philosophy to deny the *Ash`ariyyah* doctrine of Allah's distinct and eternal attributes.<sup>194</sup> To the contrary, I contend that al-Fārābī adamantly avows the eternity of Allah's attributes, employing elaborate philosophical language to express support for this position held by the *Ash`ariyyah* and other Muslims. Walzer claims that al-Fārābī's position is at variance with both of the respective Traditionalist and *Mu`tazilah* doctrines of the creation of the world by a deliberate act of Allah, in favor of a philosophical notion of creation, of Neoplatonic origins.<sup>195</sup> To the contrary, once again, I contend that al-Fārābī's Neoplatonically-shaped elaboration of a creation doctrine *is* philosophical, but not to the detriment of its Islamicity. Rather, al-Fārābī is here again expressing inherently Islamic concepts via the vehicle of complex philosophical language.

Attributing some aspect of al-Fārābī's philosophy to Islamic influence, in a move which seems out of character at this point, Walzer draws a parallel between al-Fārābī's concept of the prophet-philosopher-ruler, who is the receiver of revelation, and the *Imāmī Shī`ah* concept of the Imam, who also receives revelation.<sup>196</sup> The seeming incongruity of Walzer's reference to Islamic influence in *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah* is almost immediately dispelled, however, as he goes on to explain that al-Fārābī's position thoroughly

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<sup>194</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid., 15.

subordinates the *Imāmī* Imam's *wahy* (revelation) or *ru'yah* (vision, prophetic vision) to philosophical reason.<sup>197</sup> Walzer's assertion is that al-Fārābī is unambiguously in support of the *Imāmiyyah*, with certain reservations. That is, al-Fārābī has definite leanings toward the *Imāmiyyah*, but supports the latter only insofar they accept the inferiority of the Imam to the philosopher.<sup>198</sup> Furthermore, Walzer asserts that al-Fārābī's aligning himself with the *Imāmiyyah* is to be considered an indictment of the Imam concept of the *Ismā'īliyyah*, which al-Fārābī condemns as a false prophet.<sup>199</sup>

My agreement or disagreement with this assessment of al-Fārābī's position is more complex, less black and white. On the one hand, associating al-Fārābī with the *Imāmiyyah* would technically be to count him among the Muslims. But, on the other hand, the *Imāmiyyah* were among the *Shī'ah*, and to count al-Fārābī among the *Shī'ah* would make of him a sectarian, and it is my contention that al-Fārābī's message in *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah* is a unifying message rather than a sectarian one. I am, however, inclined to agree with Walzer's assertion of al-Fārābī's condemnation of the *Ismā'īliyyah*. The latter were regarded as heterodox, or even heretical, by the majority of Muslims in al-Fārābī's time. My contention regarding this point, which will be mentioned again in the chapter on *Revelation, Prophet, and Prophecy in al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah*, is that al-Fārābī's position criticizes *Ismā'īliyyah* views on revelation and the role of the Imam, not because he sees reason as superior to revelation, but insofar as he understands the

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<sup>197</sup> Ibid., 11, 15.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., 15-16.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid., 16.

*Ismā`īliyyah* Imam, as a pretender to revelation from Allah, to usurp the role of the Prophet Muḥammad.

According to Walzer's assessment of *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah*, it should be read in two different ways at the same time.<sup>200</sup> On the one hand, it should be read as one part of the larger whole of the Greek philosophical tradition, and as a continuation of it. On the other hand, it should be read within the context of the historical and theological developments within the sphere of tenth-century Islamic thought. That is, it should be read as a Greek philosophical treatise, written in Arabic, as a criticism of the inferiority of Islam before the superiority of reason, embodied in philosophy. Walzer asserts that al-Fārābī equates, and replaces, Islamic terms and concepts with universally acceptable abstract and philosophical terms, and that al-Fārābī is keen to alert the reader to the difference between the Islamically religious (parochial) and the philosophical (universal, superior).<sup>201</sup>

My contention is that the opposite is the case; *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah* should properly be regarded as an appropriation and redirection of then-contemporary philosophy and philosophical concepts, for use by Muslims. Rather than asserting the irreconcilable differences between Islam and philosophy, creating and drawing attention to the vast, schismatic rift between them, al-Fārābī's project in *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah* successfully closes the perceived gap between Islam and philosophy, demonstrating the inherent harmony between the two traditions by uniting them under the common banner

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<sup>200</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>201</sup> Walzer, *Perfect State*, 14.

of Divine Revelation, upon which, he holds, both are ultimately dependent. The following four chapters examine the major themes of *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah*, analyzing Walzer's reading and contrasting it with my own reading, which I support with examples from *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah* as well as from several of al-Fārābī's other works. The chapters correspond to the order of the appearance of their subjects in the text, and proceed as follows: the First Cause, and other existents; revelation, the prophet, and prophecy; al-Fārābī's position on the relationship between religion and philosophy; and locating the precedent for al-Fārābī's position on philosophy *as* revelation within the Greek tradition. Chapter Fifteen makes a brief analysis of al-Fārābī's model of the city as religious community. In Chapter Sixteen we demonstrate the impact that Walzer and his framework have had in the field of al-Fārābī scholarship, highlighting some of its most far-reaching consequences. Chapter Seventeen explores the intellectual formation of Muhsin Mahdi, arguably the foremost historian in the field, asking whether Mahdi's framework is the most viable for our re-reading of al-Fārābī. Finally, we conclude with Chapter Eighteen, in which we propose a framework for re-reading the Second Master, which we argue approaches the most viable framework we have to date.

## 10. The First Cause (and Other Existents)

### *The First Is First*

The first section of *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah* begins, appropriately, with a description and discussion of the First Cause of the universe, its nature, its attributes, its place in cosmology, what is unique to it and to it alone, those of its characteristics whereby it should duly be called the First. The first sense in which the First is “first,” is the sense of chronology or temporality (or, in its case, a lack of temporality). It is the First Existent among existents, all of which derive their being from the First.<sup>202</sup> It has existed eternally, and thus it has no beginning and no end; never was there a time when it did not exist, and never will it cease to exist. It can in no way exist potentially, there being no possibility that it should not exist, and it cannot be adulterated by non-existence at all; it is absolute existence. It is everlasting in its substance and its essence, without needing any other thing which would provide its permanence in order for it to be eternal; its substance suffices for its permanence and its everlasting existence. Its existence has no purpose and no aim, which, if it had, would have existed prior to its own existence.<sup>203</sup> Thus, it is uncaused; there is no cause other than itself, through which, or out of which, or for the sake of which, it has come to exist.<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>202</sup> Al-Fārābī, *al-Madīnah*, 56.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, 56-58.

### ***Qur'anic Parallels***

The Qur'ān says of Allah that “He is the First and the Last...,”<sup>205</sup> and that he is “the Eternal, the Absolute. He begetteth not, nor is He begotten.”<sup>206</sup> Thus Allah is uncaused, unadulterated, Absolute Existence. He is everlasting and eternal, having existed prior to the entirety of existence, and never will he cease to exist. The parallel between al-Fārābī's First and the Qur'anic description of Allah is unmistakable, undeniable. As a Muslim living among Muslims, and writing in the tenth century at a time when debates about the nature and attributes of Allah were coming to a head, any reference by such a writer to an eternally existing, absolute, and uncaused supreme being which is the cause and source of all existence must not, cannot, be considered apart from the Islamic scriptural tradition which it evokes using the same language as appears in Islamic Scripture. *Al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah* was not composed in a vacuum, in which only Greek philosophy existed. The Greek tradition must indeed be considered as a source of influence and inspiration for this treatise, as al-Fārābī unquestionably models its framework on Greek philosophical concepts, not least of which being the linguistic framework. However, the distinctive and unambiguous references to Islamic concepts cannot responsibly be overlooked, and they must also be considered here.

### ***The First Is The Most***

The next sense in which the First is “first,” is the sense of its being the “most.” It is the most perfect, free of all deficiencies. It must necessarily be predicated of all other

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<sup>205</sup> *Qur'ān* 57:3.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*, 112:2-3.

existents that they are in some way deficient; not so the First, which is the most perfect being in all of existence.<sup>207</sup> It is the most excellent, and no existence can be more excellent than its existence.<sup>208</sup> It is the highest; its existence is of the highest and most elevated rank, there being no higher rank which exists and which the First does not have, or which any other existent could possibly have. Nothing can ever possibly achieve, or even approach, a rank as high as that of the First.<sup>209</sup> It is the wisest,<sup>210</sup> the most knowing,<sup>211</sup> the most beautiful,<sup>212</sup> and the truest,<sup>213</sup> among other attributes.

### ***Qur'anic Parallels***

The sense in which the First is the Most unambiguously recalls the descriptions of Allah in the Qur'ān. In over 200 instances in the Qur'ān, it is said of Allah that he is “the Most.” For example, he is the Greatest (*al-`Azīm*,<sup>214</sup> and *al-Kabīr*,<sup>215</sup> and *al-Akbar*<sup>216</sup>), the

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<sup>207</sup> Al-Fārābī, *al-Madīnah*, 56.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid., 82-87.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>214</sup> *Qur'ān* 2:255; 42:4; 56:96; 69:52.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid., 13:9; 31:30; 40:12.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid., 29:45; 74:35; 88:24.

Highest (*al-`Aliyy*,<sup>217</sup> and *al-A`lā*<sup>218</sup>), the Most Gracious (*al-Raḥmān*<sup>219</sup>), the Most Merciful (*al-Raḥīm*<sup>220</sup>), his names are the Most Beautiful (*al-Ḥusnā*<sup>221</sup>), he is the Most Generous (*al-Akram*<sup>222</sup>), and the Most Knowing (*al-A`lam*<sup>223</sup>). In describing the First as the “most,” al-Fārābī is not unconscious of these Qur’anic passages; he would have been well aware of the similarities between his portrayal of the First and the characteristics of Allah as described in the Qur’ān. It is safe to take for granted that he actually had the Qur’anic attributes of Allah in mind when he wrote this section of *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah*. He may indeed have had Greek ideas in mind, as well; this has, in fact, been demonstrated to have undoubtedly been the case. But to acknowledge only the Greek inspiration for the text, and to deny that the Islamic notions referenced therein have any real formative influence on the work, is but a weak analysis and results in a superficial and impoverished interpretation of its meaning.

### ***The First Is Unique***

The First is unique; there is nothing which exists, or which may potentially exist, which can have the same existence as that of the First, or share in that which is the essence of the First:

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<sup>217</sup> Ibid., 2:255; 4:34; 42:4.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid., 79:24; 87:1; 92:20

<sup>219</sup> Ibid., 1:1, 3; 2:163.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid., 1:1, 3; 2:128, 143, 163; 32:6.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid., 7:180; 17:110; 20:8.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid., 96:3.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid., 28:85.

For between the First and whatever were to have the same existence as the First, there could be no difference and no distinction at all. Thus there would not be two things but one essence only, because, if there were a difference between the two, that in which they differed would not be the same as that which they shared, and thus that point of difference between the two would be a part of that which sustains the existence of both, and that which they have in common the other part. Thus each of them would be divisible in thought, and each of the two parts of the First would be a cause for the subsistence of its essence; and it would not be the First but there would be another existent prior to it and a cause for its existence – and that is impossible.<sup>224</sup>

If some other thing like unto the First were to exist, the existence of the First would not be perfect, in the sense in which “perfect” means that thing apart from which no other existent of its species can exist.<sup>225</sup> The First is also unique in that it cannot have a contrary.<sup>226</sup> For if it the First could have a contrary, it would be possible for the First to not exist, and the First would then owe its existence to the absence of its contrary, and that is impossible as the First is entirely uncaused. Furthermore, whereas every other existent is divisible into constitutive parts, the First is not divisible in any way. It is indivisible, in that it is one (*wāḥid*) and it is oneness (*wiḥdah*), with regard to its substance and its essence.<sup>227</sup> As the first has no matter, and is completely incorporeal, its

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<sup>224</sup> Al-Fārābī, *al-Madīnah*, trans. Walzer, 58-61.

<sup>225</sup> For example, what is perfect in beauty is that apart from which no other beauty of its species can exist; and what is perfect in substance is that apart from which no substance of its species can exist. Al-Fārābī, *al-Madīnah*, 60-62.

<sup>226</sup> A thing and its contrary are necessarily different, and it is impossible for a thing to ever be identified with its contrary. However, not everything which differs from, or cannot be, a particular thing is its contrary. A contrary is that which, in addition to opposing some particular thing, will bring about the annihilation and destruction of that thing, by its mere existence in the same time and place as its contrary. See al-Fārābī, *al-Madīnah*, 62-66.

<sup>227</sup> Al-Fārābī, *al-Madīnah*, 66-69.

substance is actual intellect (*`aql bi-l fi`l*).<sup>228</sup> It becomes actual intellect by thinking its own essence, and requires no external agent to intelligize it or to cause it to become the object of its own intellection, whereby it becomes actually intelligized. Since it is Unique, uncaused, indivisible, entirely self-subsisting and in need of no associate or partner (which, in any case, could not possibly exist), the First is deserving, more than any other, of the name and the meaning of “the One” (*al-Wāḥid*).<sup>229</sup>

### ***Qur’anic Parallels***

Once again, al-Fārābī’s characterization of the First sounds unmistakably like a description of Allah. The first thing a Muslim learns and acknowledges about Allah, and which is the first part of the Islamic “testimony,” or Profession of Faith (the *shahādah*), is the doctrine of the Unity (*al-Tawḥīd*) of Allah. Al-Fārābī’s application of the Arabic word, “one” (*wāḥid*), to his description of the First is explicitly a conscious reference to Allah, who, in the Qur’ān, is frequently described and referred to as the only One

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<sup>228</sup> According to al-Fārābī, what prevents a thing from being intellect, and from actually thinking or intelligizing is the material form in which a thing exists, its matter. When a thing exists apart from matter, as long as it exists (that is, as long as it does not cease to exist), its substance will be actual intellect, which is the status of the First. Since the First has no matter, it is intelligible through its substance, insofar as its substance is intellect. For intellect to be actualized, it must be intelligized (thought) by some entity other than itself. It also requires an object of intellection, an essence, which must be intelligized by the intellect. Man is potentially intelligible, becoming actually intelligized only after the Intellect has thought him, thus man is the object of intellection and not the subject or intelligizer. He thinks, but his substance is not intellect. The First is, at one and the same time, the mechanism, the subject, and the object: the intellect, the intelligizer, and the intelligized. See *ibid.*, 70-73.

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*, 66-69.

(*Wāḥid*) God.<sup>230</sup> He is the One and Only Perfect,<sup>231</sup> Eternally Self-Subsisting,<sup>232</sup> and Everlasting God.<sup>233</sup> To associate partners with Allah is arguably the gravest sin in the religion of Islam, and it will be remembered that Islam arrived as a curative and a corrective for, among other things, the pluralistic paganism which prevailed in the Hejaz during the time of the Prophet Muḥammad. Verses condemning the association of partners with Allah (*shirk*), and detailing the fate of those who commit this sin (*al-mushrikūn*), appear over 54 times in the Qur'ān.<sup>234</sup> Al-Fārābī's emphasis on the uniqueness and eternity of the First, as well as the impossibility of associating partners with the First, are all clear and overt references to Allah and to Islamic monotheism. The fact that the First may also in many respects resemble Greek concepts, even specifically Neoplatonic ones (which will be briefly discussed at the end of this chapter), in no way detracts from the Islamic import these references. To the contrary, in fact, it goes a long way toward accomplishing al-Fārābī's project in *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah*, which is to demonstrate the inherent harmony between Islam and Greek philosophy. In showing that Islamic notions about Allah are parallel with Greek notions about God, whatever name they may apply to the concept, al-Fārābī gains legitimizing credit for Islam in the eyes of

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<sup>230</sup> *Qur'ān*, 4:171; 5:73; 6:19; 9:31; 14:52. Many more verses instruct the Muslim that Allah is the Only God, without using the word "one" (*wāḥid*): Q2:163, 173, 255; 3:2, 6, 18, 62; 5:55, 73; 6:46; 7:59, 158; 10:90; 11:50; 28:71, 2.

<sup>231</sup> *Qur'ān*, 66:8.

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.*, 20:111.

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid.*, 20:73; 28:60; 42:36.

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:96, 105, 220; 6:19, 151; 7:33, 190; 12:106; 13:36; 16:54; 24:55; 29:65; 31:13, 15; 52:43; 59:23; 60:12; 72:2, 20; and many more verses.

those who regard Greek philosophy as an intellectual tradition of a higher order of sophistication. Correspondingly, and by the same process, al-Fārābī Islamizes philosophy, legitimating it for Muslims. However, drawing the parallel between Allah and the First, or the One, is only the first step in al-Fārābī’s project of mutual legitimation; the full scope of the process will be dealt with in its multiple stages in the upcoming chapters.

### ***Other Aspects of The First***

Other aspects of the First include that it is knowing (*`ālim*). It needs no other agent, the knowledge of which would increase its excellence, and it is likewise in no need of an external agent which would know it, for it to be knowable. Its knowledge of itself and its own essence, which is nothing more than its substance, is sufficient for it to be knowing, knowable, and known.<sup>235</sup> The same applies to its being wise (*ḥakīm*).<sup>236</sup> Its wisdom (*ḥikmah*) consists in its thinking the most excellent thing, and in knowing the most excellent knowledge of that thing which may never cease to exist, the knowledge of which may likewise never cease to exist. It is its knowledge of itself.<sup>237</sup> It is real and true (*ḥaqq*), and it is reality and truth (*ḥaqīqah*).<sup>238</sup> The same can be said of its being living

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<sup>235</sup> Al-Fārābī, *al-Madīnah*, 72.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid., 72-75.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid., 74-75. Walzer translates *ḥaqq* as meaning both “real” and “true,” and *ḥaqīqah* as meaning both “reality” and “truth,” and it is correct that they have these meanings, respectively.

(*hayy*) and life (*ḥayāt*);<sup>239</sup> and of its greatness (*ʿaẓamah*), majesty (*jalāl*), and glory (*majd*); and its beauty (*jamāl*) and splendor (*ẓaynah*).<sup>240</sup>

### ***Qurʾanic Parallels***

These attributes of the First correspond, to a significant degree, with terms found in the Qurʾān which refer either to Allah himself, or to some attribute or action of Allah, or which are in some way related to Allah. For instance, Allah is Knowing (*ʿālim*).<sup>241</sup> He is the All-Wise (*Ḥakīm*),<sup>242</sup> and the giver of the best of all Wisdom (*Ḥikmah*).<sup>243</sup> Allah is Truth (*Ḥaqq*).<sup>244</sup> He is the giver of splendor.<sup>245</sup> Patience in seeking the wisdom and guidance of Allah is Beautiful.<sup>246</sup> He is the Ever-Living,<sup>247</sup> and He gives Life (*Ḥayāt*).<sup>248</sup>

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<sup>239</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>241</sup> *Qurʾān*, 2:29, 32, 115, 137; 3:63; 4:104; 5:76; 6:96; 8:53; 34:26; 64:11. Allah is referred to as *ʿĀlim* over 80 times.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid., 2:32, 1129, 209, 220, 228, 240, 260; 3:6, 18, 58, 62, 126; 4:11, 17, 24, 26, 56, 92, 104, 111, 130, 158, 165, 170; 5:38, 118; 6:18, 73, 83, 139; 8:10, 49, 63, 67, 71; 9:15, 28, 40, 60, 71, 97, 106, 110; 10:1; 11:1; 12:63; 12:27; 15:25; 33:1; 35:2; 36:2; 59:24; 61:1; 62:1, 3; 76:30. *Ḥakīm*, All-Wise, appears 97 times.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid., 2:129, 151, 231, 251, 269; 3:48, 81, 164; 4:54, 113; 5:110; 16:125; 17:39; 31:12; 33:34; 38:20; 43:63; 54:5; 62:2. *Ḥikmah*, wisdom, is a critically important concept for al-Fārābī, and especially so in *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah*. According to al-Fārābī the object of philosophy is ultimate wisdom, and to attain to such wisdom is the highest goal of the philosopher. However, since *ḥikmah* is only obtained via revelation from Allah, the philosopher and the prophet are one and the same, hence both “philosopher” and “prophet” are denoted by the term *Ḥakīm*. “Imam” and “sage” are also subsumed under, and implied by, this term. The significance of *ḥikmah* and *ḥakīm* in the philosophy of al-Fārābī will be discussed in detail in the chapter on revelation.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid., 2:42, 146, 213; 10:82; 18:29; 22:6; 22:54, 62; 23:116. *Al-Ḥaqq* is mentioned over 100 times.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid., 10:88.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid., 12:18, 83. And Allah’s are the most Beautiful names, see above.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid., 2:255; 3:2; 20:111; 25:58; 40:65.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid., 30:50; 41:39. *Ḥayāt* appears over 140 times.

He is the Greatest of the Great (*`Azīm*),<sup>249</sup> and His alone is all the Majesty (*jalāl*)<sup>250</sup> and the Glory (*majd*).<sup>251</sup> The frequency of al-Fārābī's use of these terms is relatively low in the grand scheme of the entirety of *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah*, but given their place in the foundational chapter, which establishes the tenor of the entire text, the weight of their significance in this regard is inestimable. Upon opening the book, it is impressed upon the reader that the single cause and fountainhead of all being and existence is the First, which in every respect corresponds to Islamic notions of Allah. Even the name, the First (*al-Awwal*), is a name for Allah.<sup>252</sup> Still further sealing the similarity between Greek philosophical concepts of God and Qur'anic descriptions of Allah are His descriptions as the Prime Mover and the Restorer (*al-Mubdi'* and *al-Mu'īd*, respectively).<sup>253</sup> The fact that the First resembles, at the same time, both Islamic notions of Allah and Greek notions of God, only points to the fact that the God of the Greeks<sup>254</sup> was incredibly similar to, if not the same as, Allah; in fact, this is one of the principal goals of *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah*. In accomplishing this extraordinary feat, al-Fārābī is one step closer to rehabilitating Greek philosophy in the eyes of those hidebound Muslims who reject it. Likewise, he is one step

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<sup>249</sup> Ibid., 2:105, 255; 4:114; 69:33, 52; 42:4; 56:74. *`Azīm* appears 120 times.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid., 55:27; 27:78.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid., 11:73; 50:1; 85:15, 21.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid., 57:3.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid., 34:49.

<sup>254</sup> That is, the notion God, as referred to in the Greek traditions al-Fārābī was working with. The Greeks had many different gods. But the philosophers of the Neoplatonic tradition had moved away from polytheistic, or henotheistic, notions of god(s) toward a theology of One God. For a discussion of Neoplatonic theology and philosophy, see the articles in Paulina Remes and Svetla Slaveva-Griffin (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Neoplatonism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014).

closer to naturalizing a philosophically interpreted approach to the Islamic intellectual tradition, for those who yearn for a more reasoned approach to God than was typically found in the Traditionalist Islamic intellectualism of the tenth century.

### ***The First Is Light***

In a metaphor recounting the incomprehensibility of the First, al-Fārābī compares apprehension of the First with the impossibility of comprehending a dazzling light (*ḍawʿ*) of such incredible luminosity and splendor that it overwhelms the senses, and which the human mind, for all of its deficiencies and inadequacies, is incapable of grasping.<sup>255</sup> According to al-Fārābī, the deficiencies of the human mind inhere in the matter in which its physicality consists, which subsists in the state of existence most remote from the substance of the First, as the latter is wholly incorporeal. The nearer one draws from separating from matter and corporeal existence, the nearer one comes to the First Substance and the more complete will be one's apprehension of the First.<sup>256</sup>

### ***Qur'anic Parallels***

Chapter 24 of the Qur'ān (*Sūrat al-Nūr*) compares Allah to a light in the darkness:

Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The parable of His Light is as if there were a niche and within it a lamp: the lamp enclosed in glass; the glass as it were a brilliant star; lit from a blessed tree, an olive, neither of the East nor of the West, whose oil is well-nigh luminous, though fire scarce touched it: Light upon Light! Allah doth guide whom He will to His Light....<sup>257</sup>

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<sup>255</sup> Al-Fārābī, *al-Madīnah*, 78-82.

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*, 80-83.

<sup>257</sup> *Qur'ān*, 24:35.

Within the context of the Light of Allah, the Qur'ān explicitly refers over 40 times to Light (*Nūr*), whether it be in the form of direct guidance from Allah, revelation in the form of the Qur'ān, or in the form of guidance in the person of the Prophet Muḥammad.<sup>258</sup> “Light,” as Qur'anic imagery, is a well-known Islamic concept, and any Muslim reading *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah* in the tenth century would quite naturally have made this connection, despite the difference in the specific term used by al-Fārābī to make the reference.<sup>259</sup> Furthermore, in comparing the First to an incomprehensible light, al-Fārābī seems to be taking a position on the hotly debated issue of whether or not it is possible to behold, or comprehend, Allah. In inter-Muslim debates during the tenth century, some of the *Mu`tazilah*, for instance, argued that man will never see Allah.<sup>260</sup> As just mentioned above, al-Fārābī's First Cause is likened unto an impossibly bright and dazzling light, the magnitude of which is impossible to adequately comprehend, due to the deficiencies of the human mind inhering in the physical matter of which it consists.

However, upon separation from physical existence, i.e., death and the subsequent incorporeal existence of the afterlife, the implication is that a more thorough comprehension of the First is possible. Thus, al-Fārābī seems to say that it is, in fact, possible for humans to see or comprehend Allah in the afterlife, which is a position contrary to that held by the tenth-century *Mu`tazilah*. Thus al-Fārābī is doing more than just referring or alluding to Qur'anic notions and descriptions of Allah, he is joining in

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<sup>258</sup> For example, Qur'ān 9:32; 24:35, 40; 61:8; 64:8.

<sup>259</sup> However, formations stemming from the same root as *ḍaw'* are found in the Qur'ān, six times, appearing variously in words such as “illuminated,” at 2:17; “flash,” at 2:20; “glow,” at 24:35; “a shining light,” at 10:5; “a light,” at 21:48; and “light,” at 28:71.

<sup>260</sup> See Valiuddin, *passim*.

the intellectual debate current in his time and submitting his own commentary on the issues. The position that comprehension of the divine is impeded by material existence, and that separation from the corporeal form facilitates the soul's approach to the attainment of divine knowledge, is a position which was shared by some of al-Fārābī's Greek predecessors, most notably Socrates.<sup>261</sup> Once again, the fact that al-Fārābī's concept resembles an older Greek one does not undermine its Islamic nature. It simply demonstrates that many of the Muslim thinkers of al-Fārābī's day shared concerns and viewpoints with some of ancient Greece's most prominent and prolific thinkers, proving that Islam and philosophy are not so far apart as the ideologues of the respective traditions would have it.

### ***The First Is the Origin of All Existence***

The First is that from which everything that exists comes into existence.<sup>262</sup> All of the existents in the universe which do not come into existence through the will of man are brought into their various respective states of existence by the First, some of which are observable by sense-perception (*mushāhid bi-l-ḥiss*), and some of which are knowable through demonstration (*ma`lūm bi-l-burhān*) only.<sup>263</sup> The genesis of all existents takes place through a process of emanation (*fayḍ*),<sup>264</sup> whereby one existent emanates (*yafīḍ*)

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<sup>261</sup> Yulia Ustinova, *Caves and the Ancient Greek Mind: Descending Underground in the Search for Ultimate Truth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 7.

<sup>262</sup> Al-Fārābī, *al-Madīnah*, trans. Walzer, 89.

<sup>263</sup> Ibid.

<sup>264</sup> Ibid. *Fayḍ* appears in the Qur'ān three times (as either *tafīḍu* or *afīḍū*) in the context of flowing (9:92), overflowing (5:83), or pouring (7:50). For a masterfully thorough and meticulous discussion of the Greek origins of the concept of creation by emanation (*fayḍ*) and its uses in Islamic philosophy, as it appears in the writings of al-Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā, and Ibn Rushd, see Herbert A. Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna, and*

from another, each being qualitatively and quantitatively distinct from the existent from which it emanates. They are distinct, yet they are connected with one another and arranged in such a way as to constitute one whole, and are established like one thing.<sup>265</sup> Some of them are connected by something in their substance, while others are connected by modes which accompany their substances – such as love, by which humans are connected.<sup>266</sup>

The origin of all emanation is the First, and it is not possible that anything could prevent the emanation of existence from it.<sup>267</sup> However, neither is its being the source of creation its purpose or its cause, nor is it in any way perfected or increased by its act of creation. Rather,

it exists for the sake of its essence: the fact that something proceeds from it is closely connected with its substance and its essence and follows (necessarily) from it. Therefore that existence of it through which existence emanates to something else than it, is in its substance and in that existence of it through which its essence has substance identical with that existence of it through which everything else comes into existence from it.<sup>268</sup>

Creation is not the purpose of the First, but is instead a product of its generosity. Thus the First is called generous (*jawwād*), and generosity is in its substance and its essence.<sup>269</sup>

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Averroes, *on Intellect: Their Cosmologies, Theories of the Active Intellect, and Theories of Human Intellect* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

<sup>265</sup> Al-Fārābī, *al-Madīnah*, 96.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>268</sup> Al-Fārābī, *al-Madīnah*, trans Walzer, 93.

<sup>269</sup> Al-Fārābī, *al-Madīnah*, 94.

The existents emanating from the First are many, and each receives rank apportioned to its relation to the First; starting with the most perfect, each subsequent emanation is increasingly deficient in perfection, the lower its existence in the hierarchy of existents. But, again, because the First is generous, nothing in creation is neglected.

The perfection of the First is reflected in the perfection of the most excellent existents, and the First is to be called by those names which denote perfection and excellence of existence in those which are held to be the most excellent existents. However, none of these names, in the case of their being applied to the First itself, denotes the perfection which is denoted by them in their application to existents of the material world of man.<sup>270</sup> Furthermore, though the kinds of perfection signified by these names are many, it is yet not the case that the First consists of a plurality of attributes into which it could be divided. While it is called by many names, such as “the just” (*al-`adl*), and “the generous” (*al-jawwād*), the First remains one substance, and one absolutely indivisible existence.<sup>271</sup>

### ***Qur’anic Parallels***

While creation in the Qur’ān is not described as a process of emanation, it is made abundantly clear that Allah is the source of all creation: he is the Originator,<sup>272</sup> the Lord and Sustainer (*al-Rabb*) of the Universe.<sup>273</sup> Various forms of the word “to create,”

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<sup>270</sup> Al-Fārābī, *al-Madīnah*, trans. Walzer, 97-99.

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>272</sup> “To Him is due the primal origin of the heavens and the earth: when He decreeth a matter, He saith to it: ‘Be,’ and it is.” *Qur’ān*, 2:117.

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.*, 13:16.

*khalaqa*, appear over 240 times. Allah alone is the Creator (*al-Khalāq*<sup>274</sup> and *al-Khāliq*<sup>275</sup> and *Fāṭir*<sup>276</sup>), who created every single thing in existence: the Heavens and the Earth,<sup>277</sup> the sun and the moon,<sup>278</sup> the stars and the sky,<sup>279</sup> the East and the West,<sup>280</sup> the seas,<sup>281</sup> the plants<sup>282</sup> and the animals,<sup>283</sup> the angels (*malā'ikah*)<sup>284</sup> and the devils (*shayāṭīn*),<sup>285</sup> the *Jinn*,<sup>286</sup> and man.<sup>287</sup> He created all of creation out of his generosity,<sup>288</sup> and his favor (*ni`mah*)<sup>289</sup> for mankind. Though he bestows his favors upon man, Allah is in no need of

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<sup>274</sup> Ibid., 15:86; 36:81.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid., 6:102; 13:16; 15:28; 23:14; 35:3; 37:125; 38:71; 39:62; 40:62; 52:35; 56:59.

<sup>276</sup> Ibid., 6:14; 12:101; 14:10; 35:1; 39:46; 42:11.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid., 55:7.

<sup>278</sup> Ibid., 55:5.

<sup>279</sup> Ibid.

<sup>280</sup> Ibid., 55:17.

<sup>281</sup> Ibid., 55:24.

<sup>282</sup> Ibid., 55:6, 11-12.

<sup>283</sup> Ibid., 55:10, 29.

<sup>284</sup> Ibid., 2:30, 31, 34, 98, 102; 3:18, 39, 42, 124; 6:111; 8:12; 15:8, etc.

<sup>285</sup> Ibid., 2:102; 6:112, 121; 7:27; 17:27, etc.

<sup>286</sup> Ibid., 55:15.

<sup>287</sup> Ibid., 2:30; 7:11; 15:28; 17:61; 38:71; 55:3; 76:1-3; 82:6-8.

<sup>288</sup> Ibid., 2:262; 96:1-8.

<sup>289</sup> Ibid., 2:40, 47, 122, 150, 211; 3:171; 4:69; 5:3, 6, 7, 11, 20, 110; 8:53; 11:10; 12:6; 16:72; 26:22; 27:19; 33:9. Favor, as the word "*ni`mah*," appears 50 times in the Qur`ān.

any of his creation,<sup>290</sup> which he created *ex nihilo* (*faṭara*); before creation there was nothing, yet Allah has subsisted eternally.<sup>291</sup>

Allah is called by many names, each signifying some attribute of his perfection: e.g., the All Merciful (*al-Raḥmān*), the Wise (*al-Ḥakīm*), the Patient (*al-Ṣabūr*). These names are also applied to virtues which are cultivated and perfected in humans: mercy, wisdom, patience. None of these names, however, in the case of their being applied to human virtues, denotes the same awesome perfection as in the case of their being applied to Allah. Human virtues are mere similitudes of the perfections which are signified by the names of Allah, and Allah is above all similitudes.<sup>292</sup> And though there are many names by which Muslims call Allah, it cannot be said of Allah that he exists in multiplicity or plurality: he is eternally One.<sup>293</sup> Thus the description of the First in *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah* – including the emphasis that, though the First has many names, it yet remains one absolutely indivisible essence – is, again, quite similar to that of Allah in the Qur’ān.

In support of his argument that, by “the First,” al-Fārābī does not refer to Allah, Walzer asserts that al-Fārābī’s doctrine of creation is at variance with the Islamic doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, inasmuch as the First is eternally creating the world.<sup>294</sup> But al-Fārābī never states that the world is eternal, having always existed along with the First. If the

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<sup>290</sup> Ibid., 27:40.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid., 112:2.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid., 16:74; 37:180; 42:111.

<sup>293</sup> Ibid., 2:133; 5:73; 14:52; 29:46; 37:4; 38:65; 39:4, etc. See references to *Wāḥid* above.

<sup>294</sup> Walzer, *Perfect State*, 14.

eternality of the emanative creation of the world and the existents necessitated an eternal world, meaning that the eternality of the First extended to all of creation, then people, for example, would never die. Nothing would ever come into temporal existence, have its being in time, and then pass out of material existence. But al-Fārābī puts it clearly that living things do, in fact, exist for a while in time before dying and passing on.<sup>295</sup>

Additionally, it will be remembered that the *Ash`ariyyah*, who were counted among the most orthodox Muslims, taught that Allah is continually recreating the world at every moment;<sup>296</sup> so al-Fārābī's doctrine that creation is continually emanating from the First can be said to be in line with orthodox Islamic teachings about creation.

Following on this point, Walzer also asserts that al-Fārābī's doctrine of creation as a necessary condition of the essence of the First, is at variance with the Islamic doctrine of creation as the result of a deliberate volitional act of Allah.<sup>297</sup> However, it is said in the Qur'ān that Allah is the Creator (*al-Khāliq*)<sup>298</sup> and Sustainer of the Universe (*al-Rabb*),<sup>299</sup> and, as these are eternal attributes of Allah, it can never be the case that Allah is not the Sustainer of the Universe. Allah's volitional act of creation subsists and inheres in his essence, which includes his *being* the Creator and Sustainer; he *is* the choice to create. His is also the choice not to create, which would result in the universe

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<sup>295</sup> For al-Fārābī's very detailed discussion of the impermanence of human corporeal existence, see Chapter 9 of *al-Madīnah*, pp. 144-163.

<sup>296</sup> See above, section on the *Ash`ariyyah*.

<sup>297</sup> Walzer, *Perfect State*, 14.

<sup>298</sup> See references to *al-Khāliq*, above.

<sup>299</sup> See above.

ceasing to exist. But in this case, it could still not be said of Allah that he is no longer the Creator of the Universe, which would imply a state of change or impermanence in Allah's nature. As, in the Qur'an, it is said that Allah exists outside of time,<sup>300</sup> Allah's choice to create the universe or not to create it do not occur in time, and hence it cannot be said of him that, if he were to choose not to create, he would have "ceased" to create. "Time" is a human concept, and the subjective perception of creation as existing in moments of time is an illusion. Additionally, as Allah's nature is not affected or defined by his creation, were creation to ever not exist, it could not then be said of Allah that the capacity for creation is not his essence; Allah's essence, which includes his capacity as the Creator, is eternal. Furthermore, Walzer's argument here seems to be based on a misunderstanding of the sentence, "It is also not at all possible that there should be something to prevent the emanation of the existence of something else from [the First] ..."<sup>301</sup>. This sentence does not assert that, as a necessary condition of its existence, the First must always and eternally emanate creation and that it has no choice in the matter. It merely states that there is no power greater than the First which could prevent its act of creation. Whether or not to create is the prerogative of the First and if it chooses to create, nothing can stop it. So, Walzer's claim, that al-Fārābī's notion of the First contradicts orthodox Islamic teachings about creation, is untenable. Equally failing is his assertion that al-Fārābī does not assume that God has any distinct or eternal attributes, which

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<sup>300</sup> *Qur'an*, 32:5; 70:4.

<sup>301</sup> Al-Fārābī, *al-Madīnah*, trans. Walzer, 95. Indeed, Walzer explicitly states his understanding of this passage: "It is described as the necessary outcome of the very existence of the First..." Walzer, *Perfect State*, 354.

would place al-Fārābī at variance with the *Ash`ariyyah*, who enthusiastically affirmed the eternity of Allah’s attributes.<sup>302</sup> It has been demonstrated in the previous paragraphs that al-Fārābī unquestionably affirms the distinction and eternity of the attributes of the First, by which, at this point, it can be taken for granted that al-Fārābī intends to refer to Allah.

### ***Other Existents: The Worlds Above and Below the Moon***

As explained above, the separate existents which derive their existence from the First are many, and the incorporeal existents emanate in a descending order of hierarchy.

From the First emanates the existence of the Second. This Second is, again, an utterly incorporeal substance, and is not in matter. It thinks of (intelligizes) its own essence and things the First. What it thinks of its own essence is no more than its essence. As a result of its thinking of the First, a third existent follows necessarily from it; and as a result of its substantification in its specific essence, the existence of the First Heaven follows necessarily.<sup>303</sup>

Continuing in this way, each of these separate (*mufāriq*) immaterial existents intelligizes the First, and emanates the next subsequent existent as a result. Each existent also intelligizes its own essence, but none of them is sufficient in itself to attain excellent existence by thinking solely of its own essence. Each acquires the perfection of its existence by intelligizing the essence of the First.<sup>304</sup> Due to its proximity to the First, the Second is the most perfect, with all others following in descending order of rank until the Eleventh, which is the least excellent of the ten separate existents. Interestingly, however,

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<sup>302</sup> Walzer, *Perfect State*, 14.

<sup>303</sup> Al-Fārābī, *al-Madīnah*, trans. Walzer, 101.

<sup>304</sup> Al-Fārābī, *al-Madīnah*, 117.

the less perfect existents experience a greater joy when intelligizing the First: the degree to which the pleasure it gets by thinking the First is greater than that which it gets by thinking its own essence is proportionate to the degree in which the perfection of the First is greater than its own perfection.<sup>305</sup> The more superior the excellence of the First is to any of them, the more superior the joy it feels when thinking the First will be to what it feels when thinking its own essence. The object of its love and pride is always, in the first instance, the First. By virtue of its relation to these ten separate existents, the First is forever the first object of love (*al-maḥbūb al-awwal*) and the first object of affection (*al-ma`shūq al-awwal*).<sup>306</sup>

The substantification of the Second Existent produces the First Heaven (*al-Samā` al-Awwal*), and that of the Third produces the sphere (*kurah*) of the fixed stars. The substantification of each of the subsequent existents, except for the Eleventh, produces another celestial sphere.<sup>307</sup> This process continues until the existence of the Eleventh is reached. The most excellent of the celestial bodies is the First Heaven, followed in descending order of excellence until the sphere of the Moon, which is the least excellent of the nine celestial bodies. Whereas the separate existents, because they are incorporeal,

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<sup>305</sup> Ibid., 116-119.

<sup>306</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>307</sup> Celestial spheres (*kurāt samāwiyyah*) are also referred to celestial bodies (*ajsām samāwiyyah*). The degree of the excellence of each celestial body corresponds to the rank of the existent to which it corresponds. Like the existents themselves, the celestial bodies proceed in a descending hierarchical order of excellence: from the substantification of the Second follows the First Heaven, which is the most excellent; from that of the Third, the fixed stars; from that of the Fourth, the sphere of Saturn; from that of the Fifth, the sphere of Jupiter; from that of the Sixth, the sphere of Mars; from that of the Seventh, the sphere of the sun; from that of the Eighth, the sphere of Venus; from that of the Ninth follows the sphere of Mercury; from that of the Tenth follows the sphere of the moon. With the sphere of the moon, the celestial bodies come to an end. Cf. *ibid.*, 100-104.

are actual intellect (*`aql bi-l-fi`l*),<sup>308</sup> the celestial body differs insofar as it is not, completely, actual intellect. Its form is actual intellect, but it also has a substratum, which is intelligible but which is not intellect. In that it thinks with an intellect which is not identical with its entire substance, the celestial body differs from the First and the ten separate intellects, and it has something in common with man.<sup>309</sup> It shares in common with the separate existents the joy it feels in its essence; it takes joy from what it thinks of its own essence, and what it thinks of the separate existents. But the greatest joy it experiences is that which it takes from intelligizing the First.<sup>310</sup>

Each of the existents which have been enumerated above have their utmost perfection – i.e., the most perfect state of existence possible for each to attain, beyond which no further perfection is possible for that existent – in their substances from the very outset of their existence. But with the Eleventh (which is the Active Intellect) and the sphere of the Moon, this given state of perfect existence comes to an end.<sup>311</sup> The existents which come after them, those below the sphere of the Moon, are made in such a way as to have their most defective existences in the beginning. From this defective existence, each proceeds step by step until it reaches the highest degree of perfection possible (for its species), in its substance and in all of its qualities.<sup>312</sup> None of these

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<sup>308</sup> It will be remembered that, according to al-Fārābī, insofar as an existent subsists in matter it cannot be actual intellect. But anything which requires no matter to exist will be actual intellect. Cf. *ibid.*, 70-71.

<sup>309</sup> *Ibid.*, 122-123.

<sup>310</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>311</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>312</sup> *Ibid.*

bodies is given its form from the very outset; each is given first its prime matter, which is in a remote state of potentiality (*quwwah ba`idah*).<sup>313</sup> It rises up gradually until its form becomes present in it, through which it obtains its actual existence.

These existents proceed in an order in which the least valuable of them is placed first. Then the other existents follow in an ascending order of perfection until the most excellent existent is reached, beyond which it is not possible for anything more excellent to exist. The least valuable is the prime matter, common to all; superior to that are the elements; then the minerals, then the plants, then animals which lack speech and thought (*ghayr nāṭiq*); finally come the animals which are endowed with speech and thought (*nāṭiq*, which may also be translated as “rational”).<sup>314</sup> Among these existents, there is nothing beyond the animal endowed with speech and thought which surpasses it in excellence. Thus, according to al-Fārābī, human beings are the most excellent of the sublunary existents.

### ***Qur’anic Parallels***

The parallels to Islamic thought and Scripture here are many, and the following discussion is by no means exhaustive of them all. The most salient of these is the hierarchical nature of al-Fārābī’s cosmology, which echoes the Islamic cosmology as expounded in the Qur’ān and *Ḥadīth*, and which Muslims accept as an axiomatic philosophical truth. The following teachings of the Qur’ān and *Ḥadīth*, demonstrate that the idea of hierarchy is rooted in Islamic revelation. First, although the entirety of the

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<sup>313</sup> Al-Fārābī, *al-Madīnah*, trans. Walzer, 113.

<sup>314</sup> Al-Fārābī, *al-Madīnah*, 112.

Qur'ān is believed to be of divine origin, the verses themselves are variously graded according to value. This is owed, in part, to their dealing with different levels of reality.

Bakar tells us that the widely celebrated Throne Verse (*Āyat ul-Kursī*)<sup>315</sup> was described by the Prophet as the chief (*sayyidah*) of the Qur'anic verses.<sup>316</sup> As explained by al-Ghazzālī, this is because this verse is exclusively “concerned with the divine essence, attributes and works,” and that “it contains nothing other than these”<sup>317</sup>. Furthermore, according to another prophetic *ḥadīth*, the greatest divine name (*al-ism al-a`zam*) lies in the Throne Verse.<sup>318</sup> The Prophet also said that the Chapter of Sincerity/Purity (*Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ*), which consists of four short verses, is equal to a full third of the Qur'ān.<sup>319</sup> The high position occupied by this chapter is due to the fact that it deals with the knowledge of the *Ḥaqīqah*, the Divine Reality,<sup>320</sup> which is the most excellent of the three fundamental forms or levels of knowledge contained in the Qur'ān. The two other divisions of Qur'anic verses are concerned with the *Ṭarīqah* and the *Sharī'ah*, respectively, both of which reflect the *Ḥaqīqah* at their own levels. The *Ṭarīqah*, which is the esoteric spiritual path to Allah,<sup>321</sup> is the qualitative and vertical

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<sup>315</sup> *Qur'ān*, 2:55.

<sup>316</sup> Al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan, Thawāb al-Qur'an*, 2. As cited in Osman Bin Bakar, *Classification of the Sciences in Islamic Intellectual History: A Study in Islamic Philosophies of Science*, dissertation (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1988), 66.

<sup>317</sup> Al-Ghazzālī, *The Jewels of the Qur'an: al-Ghazali's Theory*, trans. M.A. Quasem (Bangi: UKM Dept. of Theology and Philosophy, 1977), 75.

<sup>318</sup> Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan, Wiṭr*, 23. As cited in Bakar, *Classification of the Sciences*, 66.

<sup>319</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī*, and *Tafsīr al-Qurtubī*, as cited in Bakar, *Classification of the Sciences*, 67.

<sup>320</sup> For more on *Ḥaqīqah*, see above section on Sufism. See also Hamiduddin, “Early Sufis,” *passim*.

<sup>321</sup> *Ibid*.

extension of the *Sharī`ah*, which is revered as the divine law and is viewed as the general path to Allah.

The scriptural evidence cited above demonstrates that the Qur`ān reflects the structure of (divine) reality. There are, additionally, numerous verses which refer directly to the hierarchy of creation. These speak of the tripartite division of the universe into the heavens, the earth, and the intermediate world.<sup>322</sup> There is also the lower heaven,<sup>323</sup> and the higher angelic world which is nearer to Allah.<sup>324</sup> According to both the Qur`ān and to *ḥadīths*, angels have been created by Allah with varying degrees of rank.<sup>325</sup> The Qur`ān also teaches that both Paradise and Hell are characterized by degrees.<sup>326</sup>

Both the Qur`ān and the *Ḥadīth* refer to the notion of degrees of intellectual and spiritual realization or the subjective experience of reality. For example, Bakar observes that there is a hierarchy of believers and knowers, as evidenced by the following verse: “Allah will raise up, to suitable ranks and degrees, those of you who believe and who have been granted Knowledge.”<sup>327</sup> According to Ibn `Abbās (d. 687-8), a Companion of

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<sup>322</sup> *Qur`ān*, 37:5.

<sup>323</sup> *Ibid.*, 37:6.

<sup>324</sup> *Ibid.*, 21:17, 19.

<sup>325</sup> *Ibid.*, 78:38. For a detailed discussion of the Islamic doctrine of the hierarchy of angels, see F. Schuon, *Dimensions of Islam*, trans. P.N. Townsend (London: George Allen and Unwin 1970), pp. 102-20. Cited in Bakar, *Classification of the Sciences*, 67.

<sup>326</sup> *Qur`ān*, 9:72; 15:43-44.

<sup>327</sup> *Ibid.*, 58:11.

the Prophet, the learned rank seven hundred grades above ordinary believers.<sup>328</sup> There is, additionally, a hierarchy of witnesses of divine unity. The Qur'ān says that “There is no god but He: That is the witness of Allah, His angels, and those endued with knowledge, standing firm on justice...”<sup>329</sup>. It is also worth mentioning here the three principal classes or divisions of humanity subsequent to the Day of Judgement. These are 1) those nearest to Allah (*al-muqarrabūn*);<sup>330</sup> 2) the Companions of the Right Hand, which is the righteous generally (*aṣḥāb al-maymanah*);<sup>331</sup> and 3) the Companions of the Left Hand (*aṣḥāb al-mash'amah*),<sup>332</sup> those who have rejected Allah and his revelation or have led a wicked and sinful life.

Again, while they are by no means exhaustive, these references from the Qur'ān and prophetic traditions are sufficient to demonstrate that the notion of a hierarchy of existence – and existents – is deeply entrenched in the Islamic revelatory tradition. Even al-Fārābī's significant location of man in the most superior position of the hierarchy of sublunary existents is evidenced in the Qur'ān.<sup>333</sup> I concede that *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah*, like much of al-Fārābī's work, may in fact bear a high degree of resemblance to the

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<sup>328</sup> Al-Ghazzālī, *The Book of Knowledge*, trans. N.A. Faris (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1962), 10. Cited in Bakar, *Classification of the Sciences*, 67.

<sup>329</sup> *Qur'ān*, 3:18.

<sup>330</sup> *Ibid.*, 56:11.

<sup>331</sup> *Ibid.*, 56:8.

<sup>332</sup> *Ibid.*, 56:9.

<sup>333</sup> *Ibid.*, 17:70; 2:34.

works of al-Fārābī's Greek predecessors, on the face of it.<sup>334</sup> However, and as stated above, to acknowledge the parallels with Greek works over against the references made to Islamic concepts results in an impoverished interpretation of this text. Walzer spares no effort in tracking down and tracing every allusion to every known Greek source which al-Fārābī may possibly have made use of in writing not only *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah*, but also several of his other works. To spend that amount of time and energy analyzing one aspect of this text while, yet, virtually ignoring the significance of such overtly discernible parallels and references to Islamic notions, can only be read as a resolute denial of the Islamic character of al-Fārābī's message.

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<sup>334</sup> This work of al-Fārābī's perhaps bears significant resemblance to a particular Greek work by Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Celestial Hierarchy*, which details a hierarchy of beings. However, al-Fārābī would also have been very familiar with the Qur'an's similar, though simpler, celestial hierarchy, consisting of Allah; the angels (created from light, according to various *Hadīths*), who have no free will; the *jinn* or demons, created from fire, who do have free will; and the humans, created from clay or mud, who also have free will.

### *Walzer's Reading of The First and Other Existents*

Although, as has been noted thus far, Walzer's analysis devalues the impact of the Islamic influence in al-Fārābī's philosophy, with regard to its survey of the Greek influence in *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah*, Walzer's analysis is painstakingly thorough and exhaustively comprehensive. He presents a line-by-line Arabic-to-Greek philological investigation of the terms used by al-Fārābī, and he posits that *each single word* can be traced to origins within Greek philosophical texts – Walzer purports to locate each term within the context of not only particular traditions, but locates the origin of each word within specific texts, sections, chapters, paragraphs, and lines of those texts. Barring the obvious fact that this hardly seems believable, nothing in the way of references made by al-Fārābī to Greek works seems to have escaped Walzer's scrutiny. It is so thoroughly meticulous, in fact, that a detailed summary of the analysis is simply impossible within the scope of this dissertation. Moreover, as I have no expertise in Greek and but little proficiency in Greek philosophy, to challenge Walzer's Greek scholarship would be a task beyond my capabilities, so my incredulity must be suspended here. Thus, in place of an itemized treatment of his analysis, I present a condensed summary of the primary theme in Walzer's approach to the treatment of Islamic influences within these chapters of the text; this will be followed by conclusive evidence which demonstrates the faultiness of Walzer's interpretation.

The first section of *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah*, according to Walzer, details al-Fārābī's philosophical (read: un- or anti-Islamic) views on the First Cause (read: not Allah), explained in terms of late Greek natural theology, linking a Peripatetic version of

the description of the Deity with the Plotinian/Neoplatonic law of emanation. The Islamic background against which this very recently imported, “very un-[H]ebraic” set of knowledge and belief is to be seen has partly to be imputed by the modern commentator, as it is only very “sketchily hinted at by al-Fārābī himself.... It is not superfluous to keep emphasizing the *absolute novelty* of this strange and exciting *import from an outside tradition*”<sup>335</sup>.

Furthermore, al-Fārābī’s discussion of the First is completely dependent on the special authority of the Greek tradition,<sup>336</sup> and provides the “philosopher’s answer” to the discussion of a number of divine names which “Muslim theologians had inherited from neo-Platonic and Christian predecessors”<sup>337</sup>. Al-Fārābī’s notion of the First Cause, which can be described as a blend of Aristotelian and Neoplatonic elements,<sup>338</sup> is completely dependent on “the Greek tradition which he seems to continue [and which] appears everywhere in this book as an orthodox Aristotelianism close to Alexander of Aphrodisias with a moderate neo-Platonic superstructure”<sup>339</sup>.

Walzer does acknowledge al-Fārābī’s use of well-known Qur’anic epithets of Allah<sup>340</sup> (described above), but it becomes overtly apparent that this acknowledgement is

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<sup>335</sup> Walzer, *Perfect State*, 367, emphasis added.

<sup>336</sup> *Ibid.*, 334.

<sup>337</sup> *Ibid.*, 335.

<sup>338</sup> *Ibid.*, 352.

<sup>339</sup> *Ibid.*, 339.

<sup>340</sup> *Ibid.*, 346-350.

no more than ostentation as Walzer provides only a terse, cursory treatment of the significance of their appearance in the text. “It is scarcely necessary,” he writes, “to point out their Qur’ānic origin”<sup>341</sup>. In Walzer’s opinion, they do not bear significant influence on the interpretation of the text as an exposition of Islamically-inspired doctrine, and thus deserve no attention. Rather than seeing them as the product of an Islamic interpretation of philosophy, Walzer tells us that in al-Fārābī’s view Greek philosophical doctrine provides the most appropriate explanation of the Qur’anic description of Allah.<sup>342</sup>

Walzer claims that al-Fārābī adamantly asserts the distinction between philosophy and Islam, and the superiority of the former over the latter. He tells us that this beginning section of *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah* comprises the essentials of “a special brand of Greek natural theology which the Muslim al-Fārābī chose to adopt,”<sup>343</sup> with the implication that he adopted it *in place of Islam*, thus making him an apostate. Furthermore, he tells us, al-Fārābī tries

to understand Islam according to his philosophical views and claimed that philosophy alone can explain the proper meaning of the less exact religious terms in an adequate and definitely superior way. It did not occur to him – nor did it occur to his masters Plato and Aristotle – to reject traditional religion as mere superstition; ...he accepted it as a different though inferior approach to truth through symbols.<sup>344</sup>

Walzer’s opinion, which he takes as a point of departure for the reading of the entire text, and which very clearly colors his interpretation of it, is that *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah*

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<sup>341</sup> Ibid., 350.

<sup>342</sup> Ibid., 354.

<sup>343</sup> Ibid., 333.

<sup>344</sup> Ibid., 345.

should be read as the master key to a rational (read: heterodox) understanding of Islam.<sup>345</sup> Walzer aims to establish a reading of al-Fārābī in which the latter affirms and advocates a dichotomous relationship between Islam and rationalism, religion and philosophy, in which the one is completely opposed to the other and the latter is superior to the former in every case. It will be demonstrated that this is a wholly incorrect reading; rather, al-Fārābī asserts that both religion and philosophy are derived from revelation. In this way al-Fārābī transcends the perceived dichotomy between religion and philosophy, while yet maintaining the primacy of revelation and thus remaining within the fold of orthodox Islam.

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<sup>345</sup> Ibid., 333.

### *Al-Fārābī's Position, Revisited: Correct Reading*

Here, I finally submit the evidence which makes al-Fārābī's position on Allah absolutely clear. With reference to the following sources, we can establish beyond question that by the "First," al-Fārābī refers unequivocally to Allah; and that by the "Secondary/Immaterial Existents," he refers to the Islamic notion of Angels in general, as it appears in the Qur'ān. Additionally, al-Fārābī specifically refers to one angel in particular, the Angel of Revelation. In *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah*, as in other of his writings, al-Fārābī refers to this angel by the term "Active Intellect," and asserts that this entity serves an indispensable function in the mediation of revelation. We will be further acquainted the Active Intellect and its relation to the prophet in the next chapter, on revelation.

The veracity of my claim is first established in several short summaries of *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah*, which appear at the very beginning of the text, immediately prior to the first section. The beginning of this summary reads:

Chapter 1. The 'thing' which should be believed to be Allah: what it is; how it is; how it should be described; in which way it is the cause of all the other existents... by which names it should be called; and which of its meanings should be indicated by those names. Chapter 2. The existents which should be believed to be the Angels.... Chapter 6. How those existents should be described, of which it should be said that they are the Angels.<sup>346</sup>

Walzer rejects the attribution of this summary to al-Fārābī himself. The reason for this rejection, he states, is that it introduces certain identifications of philosophical and religious terms which al-Fārābī does not care to discuss in his work, "either because he

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<sup>346</sup> Al-Fārābī, *al-Madīnah*, trans. Walzer, 38-41.

thought them to be self-evident and could expect his readers to know what had explained before elsewhere, or because he did not consider it to be important in the present context”<sup>347</sup>. The premise that al-Fārābī would have deemed the identification of philosophical terms with Islamic religious terms as self-evident would seem to undermine Walzer’s overall argument that al-Fārābī asserts a distinction between philosophy and religion. In fact, it is useful for my refutation of Walzer’s argument: I argue that because of the self-evident synonymy between certain philosophical notions and Islamic notions, made apparent in al-Fārābī’s overt – and sometimes explicit – references to Qur’anic concepts, al-Fārābī blurs the lines between religion and philosophy while maintaining the primacy of the Qur’ān as the well-spring of ultimate human knowledge. This is done even more effectively in the sections on revelation and the relationship between religion and philosophy.

An addendum to the summary reads thus:

This book contains altogether three sections, theological, natural, and voluntary (i.e. ‘ethical’). The first section deals with Allah and His attributes. The second section discusses the Angels and the Spiritual Beings. Among these is the Active Intellect: it should be considered as the Faithful Spirit<sup>348</sup> and the Spirit of Holiness.<sup>349</sup> It ought to be considered as that through which Revelation comes to the man who is a prophet. It should be considered as the intermediary between God Most High and the man who receives revelation. The only felicity for the soul is to be within the domain of the Active Intellect. It is the Active Intellect that ought to be considered as governing man and as providing every man with the principle which ought to be used in attaining felicity, and as guiding man towards the right path for felicity and directing him to the right aim.

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<sup>347</sup> Walzer, *Perfect State*, 331.

<sup>348</sup> *Qur’ān*, 26:139.

<sup>349</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:87, 253; 5:110; 16:102.

Alternatively Allah ought to be considered as providing man with these things through the mediation of the Active Intellect.<sup>350</sup>

While Walzer contends that the division of *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah* into tripartite divisions seems incoherent, and incongruent with al-Fārābī's own division the text into six sections, as attested in several extant manuscripts, he concedes that the part of the addendum concerned with emphasizing the importance of the Active Intellect is, "on the whole," correct.<sup>351</sup> Although he cites (in footnotes) the correct Qur'anic verses which are referenced in this addendum, he does not acknowledge the significance of these references to a proper interpretation of the text. While Walzer willingly acknowledges that the summary and addenda were most likely written by a student of al-Fārābī living the latter's time,<sup>352</sup> he discounts the importance of such a gloss to reading the text in the way the author intended. This is clear evidence of Walzer's obstinate refusal to concede the intentional and explicit Islamic references in this text.

Walzer's above-mentioned assessment, that al-Fārābī does not discuss references made by philosophical terms to Islamic notions because he expects that his readers would be aware of his intended object(s) of reference from his other writings is,<sup>353</sup> in fact, another of Walzer's assertions which go to support my argument. I agree and I further assert that this is ineluctably the case. It would have been impossible for al-Fārābī's educated Muslim readership, familiar with the Qur'ān and Qur'anic exegesis, to miss

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<sup>350</sup> Al-Fārābī, *al-Madīnah*, trans. Walzer, 52-55.

<sup>351</sup> Walzer, *Perfect State*, 333.

<sup>352</sup> *Ibid.*, 331-332.

<sup>353</sup> *Ibid.*, 331.

these clear references. This is especially the case for those Muslims who were also familiar with al-Fārābī's other writings, in which are to be found explicit instructions for reading the First Cause as Allah, and for reading the Active Intellect as the Angel of Revelation. One such reference reads:

‘It should be said of the Active Intellect that it is the Trustworthy Spirit and the Holy Spirit [or Spirit of Holiness],<sup>354</sup> and ‘The First is that which should be considered to be God, and it is the proximate cause of the Secondary Existents and of the existence of the Active Intellect.’<sup>355</sup>

Walzer also cites the specific work<sup>356</sup> in which al-Fārābī unambiguously identifies the Active Intellect with the Holy Spirit and the Angel of Revelation, as it appears in the Qur’ān and in many Qur’ān commentaries.<sup>357</sup> However, in what I gauge as a conscious misreading, Walzer denies what is plainly evident, written in black and white. He writes that al-Fārābī's equation of the separate immaterial intellects with the angels or the spiritual beings of Islam is to be read as another case of his understanding of religious

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<sup>354</sup> Abū Naṣr Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Fārābī, *Kitāb al-Siyāsah al-Madaniyyah*, ed. ‘Alī bū Milḥam (Bayrūt: Dar wa Maktabat al-Hilāl), 23. Also found in Abu Nasr al-Farabi, *The Political Writings: “Selected Aphorisms” and Other Texts*, trans. Charles Butterworth (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 111.

<sup>355</sup> Abū Naṣr Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Fārābī, *Kitāb al-Siyāsah al-Madaniyyah*, ed. ‘Alī bū Milḥam (Bayrūt: Dar wa Maktabat al-Hilāl), 22. Also found in Abu Nasr al-Farabi, *The Political Writings: “Selected Aphorisms” and Other Texts*, trans. Charles Butterworth (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 111.

<sup>356</sup> Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī, *Kitāb al-Siyāsa al-madaniyya al-mulaqqab bi-Mabādi’ al-mawjūdāt (Al-Fārābī’s The Political Regime)* (Bayrūt: Fawzī Mitri Najjar, 1964), 31-32. As cited in Walzer, *Perfect State*, 332, 363-364, 405-406.

<sup>357</sup> The traditional Islamic interpretation of the Qur’anic verses concerning the Holy Spirit or the Trustworthy spirit is that these are titles for the Angel of Revelation, Gabriel (Jibrā’īl). See Ḥāfiẓ Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr, Abridged*, vol. 7 (Riyadh: Darussalam, 2000), pp. 288-289. See also ‘Abdullah Yūsuf ‘Alī’s commentary on Q26:193, at n.3224: “*Al-Rūḥ al-Amīn* [is] the epithet of Gabriel...” In *Qur’ān, op. cit.*, 930. See also Bakar’s note that “Al-Fārābī identified the active intellect with the holy spirit (*Rūḥ al-Quds*) or Gabriel, the archangel of divine revelation,” in Bakar, *Classification of Knowledge*, 56.

terms as mere “symbols of philosophical truth”<sup>358</sup>. He adds that the Arabic word for “angels” frequently renders the Greek “*theos*” in translations of Greek philosophical texts, such as those of Ibn Rushd; “the pagan Greek gods are thus transformed into Muslim angels by al-Fārābī”<sup>359</sup>.

Here, once again, Walzer seeks to make a pagan apostate out of the Muslim al-Fārābī. However, this is a mistake, and it is misleading. If it were the case that the equation of the Active Intellect with an Islamic angel was simply a (mis)translation of the Greek word for “god,” in that case it should not be regarded as an erroneous translation or a misnomer. Rather, it should be regarded as a demonstration of the effort to rehabilitate Greek philosophy in the eyes of the Muslims, and from the perspective of the latter. In the worldview of Muslims like al-Fārābī there is only One God, who is Allah. From al-Fārābī’s perspective, if concepts from the Greek texts are to be seen as an effective tool for elaborating an Islamically intellectual worldview, they must first be made congruent with this fundamental Islamic tenet. Only once they have been (re)interpreted to express the truth, as expounded in the Islamic scriptural tradition, can they be approached by faithful Muslims. In translating “*theos*” as “Angel,” instead of “god,” the Muslim authors have rendered this aspect of such Greek texts as congruent with an Islamic cosmology, and have mitigated one of the obstacles (polytheism) to accepting Greek works as applicable to an Islamic intellectualism. By means of a thorough Islamization of philosophy in *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah* and other works, al-Fārābī

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<sup>358</sup> Walzer, *Perfect State*, 363.

<sup>359</sup> *Ibid.*, 363-364.

has made philosophy accessible and applicable to Muslims, and if al-Fārābī were more widely (and correctly) read his work would have profoundly reshaped and expanded the landscape of Islamic philosophical intellectualism. The harmonizing efforts of al-Fārābī’s work will be further expounded in the next two chapters, on revelation and prophecy and on the relationship between religion and philosophy.

### ***Conclusion***

Walzer’s argument, besides being incorrect, is something of a strawman argument. The fact that what al-Fārābī lays down in *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah* does not appear to be an “original” idea, and that its structural and linguistic frameworks are inspired by a flexibly Greek lexicon – facts which Walzer has meticulously demonstrated – are moot points: they do not, in any way, diminish the Islamic nature of al-Fārābī’s message, or the potential impact of his ideas on interreligious and intercommunal Islamic dialogue. It is not necessary for an idea to be completely new or original for it to be Islamic; it will be remembered that Islam, when it arrived, did not purport itself to be a wholly new worldview.<sup>360</sup> Rather, the Qur’ān serves, in part, as a commentary on earlier (pre-Islamic) revelations, traditions, and customs.<sup>361</sup> In some cases it serves as corrective or an abrogation of earlier revelations,<sup>362</sup> and in some cases it affirms and ratifies them.<sup>363</sup> What is more, as mentioned above, Greek philosophy was viewed by many, including

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<sup>360</sup> *Qur’ān*, 46:9. See also Sharif, “Philosophical Teachings,” 136-155.

<sup>361</sup> *Qur’ān*, 39:23.

<sup>362</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:106; 13:39; 16:101; 48:29.

<sup>363</sup> *Ibid.*, 13:39; 46:9.

Greeks as well as Muslims like al-Fārābī, to be rooted in divine revelation.<sup>364</sup> So it would have been natural for al-Fārābī to notice, and to point out in his work, the similarities between Greek and Islamic notions of God, as they can be said to have issued from the same source. If philosophy is seen as proceeding out of revelation from God, and if, as Muslims believe, there is only one God whose name is Allah, then philosophy necessarily proceeds out of revelation from Allah. Accordingly, as the Qur’ān either confirms or abrogates earlier revelations from Allah, if the descriptions of Allah in the Qur’ān are similar to, or, in some cases, the same as, Greek philosophical notions of God, then this can only be seen as an example of the Qur’ān confirming an earlier revelation from Allah to the Greeks. Seen within this framework, it should not be said of al-Fārābī’s work that it is “influenced” by Greek philosophy, but, rather, that it reveals and clarifies the cognate synonymy of the two traditions.

In this way, like many of the Islamic thinkers discussed above,<sup>365</sup> al-Fārābī seeks to strike a middle-ground position with regard to the relationship between approaches to understanding the nature of God based in revelation and reason – between the extreme adherents of the respective traditionalist and rationalist schools, between the *Falāsifah* and the *Mutakallimūn*, and between Islam and philosophy in general. He appeals to both sides of the issue, by asserting that there is only one position – the Islamic, scriptural position – which encompasses all perceived differences in interpretation. Al-Fārābī’s reading of Islamic Scripture encompasses reason and philosophy by demonstrating that

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<sup>364</sup> Nasr, 109. Al-Fārābī states this very explicitly. This topic will be further discussed, in great detail, in the chapter on *Revelation, Prophet, and Prophecy*.

<sup>365</sup> See, for example, sections on *kalām*; particularly that of al-Ash`arī and al-Ṭahāwī.

Greek notions of God are congruent with Qur'anic notions of Allah because they issue from the same source, and that tensions and hostilities between rationalist and traditionalist Muslims stem from a misunderstanding of this truth, which for al-Fārābī is axiomatic. This is demonstrated in the following chapter.

## 11. Revelation, Prophet, and Prophecy

In *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah*, the prophet – one who receives divine revelation – is described as the man who holds the most complete and perfect rank of humanity, who has reached the highest possible degree of felicity, and knows every action by which felicity may be reached; prophethood is the first condition for being a ruler.<sup>366</sup> A man achieves this status by virtue of the union of his soul with the Active Intellect (*al-`aql al-fi`āl*), which is the tenth of the Separate Intellects, discussed above.<sup>367</sup> The human intellect is potentially intellect (*`aql bi-l-quwwah*),<sup>368</sup> requiring an outside agent to act upon it in order it to become actual intellect; that agent is the Active Intellect,<sup>369</sup> the medium of revelation. When the Active Intellect acts upon man’s potential intellect, the latter is then called the Passive Intellect (*al-`aql al-munfa`il*).<sup>370</sup> When the potential intellect becomes the Passive Intellect, sensibles stored in the soul’s faculty of representation (*al-qūwwah al-mutakhayyilah*)<sup>371</sup> cause to arise, by way of imitation, intelligibles in the rational faculty of the soul (*al-qūwwah al-nāṭiqah*).<sup>372</sup> Rationalized intelligibles are the human mind’s expressed imitation of divine knowledge, and the intellect only becomes

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<sup>366</sup> Al-Fārābī, *al-Madīnah*, 244-246.

<sup>367</sup> Ibid., 244.

<sup>368</sup> Ibid., 202.

<sup>369</sup> Ibid.

<sup>370</sup> Ibid.

<sup>371</sup> Ibid.

<sup>372</sup> Ibid.

actualized when these intelligibles arise in it.<sup>373</sup> Therefore, according to al-Fārābī, revelation is *always* prior to reason and the latter only proceeds from, and depends upon, the former.

***Ru'yah: Prophetic Vision***<sup>374</sup>

Prophethood is first mentioned in *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah* within the context of visionary prophecy, or *ru'yah*. Its source is, like any prophecy, the First; and its mediator is the Active Intellect. In the case of *ru'yah*, the Active Intellect acts upon the same faculties of the soul which are involved in deliberation (*instinbāṭ*); however, *ru'yah* occurs without the intervention of deliberation, and is in all cases prior to it (another example of revelation preceding reason). When the faculty of representation imitates what has been supplied to it by the Active Intellect with sensibles of extreme beauty and perfection, a man with the power of *ru'yah* comes to enjoy “overwhelming and wonderful pleasure, and he sees wonderful things which can in no way whatever be found among the other existents”<sup>375</sup>. A man with the power of *ru'yah* receives divinations (*kihānāt*)<sup>376</sup> of divine things (*ashyā' illāhiyyah*),<sup>377</sup> which mostly come to him during sleep; but when the faculty of representation is extremely powerful and developed to its

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<sup>373</sup> Ibid., 198.

<sup>374</sup> *Ru'yah*, as prophetic vision, appears in the Qur'ān seven times: 12:5, 43(x2), 100; 17:60; 37:105; 48:27.

<sup>375</sup> Al-Fārābī, *al-Madīnah*, trans. Walzer, 222-225.

<sup>376</sup> Another word from the same root as this word appears in the Qur'ān as “soothsayer,” having a thoroughly negative connotation. It is completely opposed to the notion of prophecy as it appears in the context of the Prophet Muḥammad.

<sup>377</sup> Al-Fārābī, *al-Madīnah*, 220.

utmost perfection, *ru'yah* may occur during waking. When the faculty of representation reaches this degree of perfection a man will receive from the Active Intellect, in his waking life, knowledge of present and future transcendent intelligibles and the other “glorious existents,” and he will in fact see them.<sup>378</sup> This man will obtain prophecy (*nubūwwah*) of present and future events, in addition to divine things. This is the highest rank of perfection which the faculty of representation can reach.<sup>379</sup> And once again, having a perfected faculty of representation (the imitative faculty which is the seat of the rational mind), is tertiary in the process of the potential intellect having first been actualized and become the Passive Intellect (*al-`aql al-munfa`il*), and then having become the Acquired Intellect (*al-`aql al-mustafād*),<sup>380</sup> processes which are *wholly dependent* upon the action of the Active Intellect which acts as the agent of the First.

#### **Waḥy: Divine Revelation from Allah to the Prophet (al-Nabiyy)**

The highest rank of prophecy and prophethood is reached by the man whose inborn nature (*fiṭrah*) is predisposed to receive the intelligibles from the Active Intellect, and then to imitate them effectively. His Passive Intellect, having been perfected by apprehending (storing) all of the intelligibles received from the Active Intellect, becomes

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<sup>378</sup> Ibid., 224. Al-Fārābī mentions that seeing divine things always comes as a gift from the Active Intellect. In an interesting side note, he says that some people acquire the capacity to receive such intelligibles from the Active Intellect as the result of some accident or injury, under the impact of which a person’s temperament changes. Some people retain this capacity for a long time and some others only temporarily. In some such injuries, in addition to becoming attuned to the Active Intellect, the faculty of representation is also injured and impaired. In such cases the impaired faculty of representation is incapable of producing images which correspond to anything in reality, and as a result these people see things which are neither real nor imitate reality. This is how al-Fārābī explains madness. See *ibid.*, 226.

<sup>379</sup> Ibid., 224.

<sup>380</sup> Ibid., 242.

the Acquired Intellect (*al-`aql al-mustafād*), which occupies a mid-way position between Passive Intellect and the Active Intellect.<sup>381</sup> This is the final stage of perfection, which is immediately prior to receiving divine revelation. When,

the natural disposition is made the matter of the Passive Intellect which has become actually intellect, and the Passive Intellect the matter of the Acquired Intellect, and the Acquired Intellect the matter of the Active Intellect, and when all this is taken as one and the same thing, then this man is the man on whom the Active Intellect has descended.

When this occurs in both parts of his rational faculty, namely the theoretical and the practical rational faculties, and also in his representative faculty, then it is this man who receives Divine Revelation (*wahy*), and God Almighty (Allah, *`Azza wa Jalla*) grants him Revelation through the mediation of the Active Intellect, so that the emanation from God Almighty (Allah, *Tabāraka wa Ta`āla*) to the Active Intellect is passed on to his Passive Intellect through the mediation of the Acquired Intellect, and then to the faculty of representation. Thus he is, through the emanation from the Active Intellect to his Passive Intellect, a wise man (*ḥakīm*) and a philosopher (*ḥaylasūf*) and an accomplished thinker who employs an intellect of divine quality [*bi-`aql fīhi al-ilāhiyy*], and through the emanation from the Active Intellect to his faculty of representation a visionary prophet (*nabiyy mundhir*):<sup>382</sup> who warns of things to come and tells of particular things which exist at present.<sup>383</sup>

Al-Fārābī very fervently wants us to know that it is this man who has achieved the most perfect rank of humanity and has reached the highest degree of felicity, his soul having been united with the Active Intellect. The first condition for being a ruler is being endowed with the inborn capacity to receive divine revelation from Allah. This man is the sovereign over whom no other human being has any sovereignty whatsoever; he is the

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<sup>381</sup> Ibid., 242.

<sup>382</sup> This is a mistranslation; the reasons for Walzer's rendering it as such will be discussed below.

<sup>383</sup> Al-Fārābī, *al-Madīnah*, trans. Walzer, 245.

Imam.<sup>384</sup> Thus, the first prerequisite for ruling is prophethood established by the power of Allah through revelation, and not by human power through the exercise of reason and deliberation. In *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah*, as in his other works, al-Fārābī clearly and explicitly subordinates the role of reason to the primacy and superiority of revelation from Allah, mediated by the Angel of Revelation. In fact, one becomes a philosopher only through this process of divine revelation; as will be shown in the next chapter, al-Fārābī regards the words “prophet” (*nabiyy*), “philosopher” (*faylasūf*), “sage” (*hakīm*), and Imam to have one and the same meaning, when applied to the ruler of the Excellent City.

### ***Walzer’s Misreading***

Walzer’s interpretation and analysis, as well as even his translation, of this section of *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah* are misleading. His commentary on this section states that the Active Intellect brings divine revelation “first to the philosopher” and only then, in the second place, to the prophet.<sup>385</sup> This is an audacious misreading of the passage, which goes to serve Walzer’s purposes of suppressing the Islamicity of al-Fārābī’s message.

Walzer further emphasizes his point:

To know the true meaning of the Active Intellect is thus essential, according to al-Fārābī, to an adequate understanding of one of the most fundamental Muslim articles of faith, the transmission of eternal truth to mankind through a man of overwhelming mental power – a philosopher-prophet-lawgiver.<sup>386</sup>

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<sup>384</sup> Al-Fārābī, *al-Madīnah*, 246.

<sup>385</sup> Walzer, *Perfect State*, 405.

<sup>386</sup> *Ibid.*, 406.

I agree that a proper understanding of the Active Intellect is, indeed, essential to understanding one of the most fundamental Muslim articles of faith: the word of Allah (the Qur'ān) is delivered to the Prophet through the mediation of the Angel of Revelation. However, Walzer here asserts that Muḥammad was first a philosopher and only in the second place a Prophet, that philosophers and prophets serve two fundamentally different functions, and that the latter is subordinate to the former; he asserts that the importance of the Prophet Muḥammad lies in his capacity as a philosopher and not as the Prophet. This is expressly contrary to the message of *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah*; the text puts it clearly that revelation from Allah is the only source of the knowledge necessary for achieving felicity (*sa`ādah*), i.e., salvation. And since “revelation” (*wahy* – by which prophethood is established) is mentioned in the text prior to “philosopher,” and since the status of the philosopher is only achieved post-revelation and is furthermore only mentioned behind the Wise Man (*ḥakīm*, “sage”), the assertion that the philosopher is of greater importance than the prophet is simply untenable.

Walzer further demonstrates his misrepresentation of al-Fārābī's position on revelation as the source of all salvific knowledge. First, note his rendering of al-Fārābī's phrase “*bi-`aql fīhi al-ilāhiyy*,” Walzer renders this phrase as “he employs an intellect of divine quality”<sup>387</sup>. In the commentary on this point, Walzer tells the reader that “we should be careful again, not to understand the use of the term ‘indwelling’ by al-Fārābī in a technical mystical sense. Man can become ‘divine’ under the impact of the Active

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<sup>387</sup> Al-Fārābī, *al-Madīnah*, trans. Walzer, 244.

Intellect”<sup>388</sup>. This is a distortion of the author’s message, leading the reader away from the reference to Allah implied in the word “*al-ilāhiyy*,” and thus away from al-Fārābī’s intended understanding of Allah as the source of revelation. Man does not become divine, or godlike; for Muslims like al-Fārābī, only Allah is divine. Walzer resumes his assault on the author’s intended reading, telling the reader that, in al-Fārābī’s opinion, “prophecy is not the result of some divine intervention,” but is rather due to the natural endowment of certain rare individuals and can be fully explained in rational terms.<sup>389</sup> Any connection between the philosopher and the higher supernatural world, which is not based on reasoned arguments, would be due to his representative faculty and would be confined to it – that is, it would be imaginary, i.e., unreal somehow.<sup>390</sup> But this is directly contrary to al-Fārābī’s description of the process of revelation. In every case of humans coming to know divine wisdom, the action of human reason is preceded by the action of the First through its agent, the Active Intellect.<sup>391</sup> The rational faculty merely imitates the sensibles supplied to it by the Active Intellect: Since it is clear “that the Active Intellect is the cause of the potential intelligibles becoming actual and of the potential intellect becoming actual; and that it is the rational faculty which is made to become actually intellect...”<sup>392</sup>. The arising of knowledge in the rational faculty is the tertiary step in the

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<sup>388</sup> Walzer, *Perfect State*, 410.

<sup>389</sup> *Ibid.*, 415.

<sup>390</sup> *Ibid.*, 421.

<sup>391</sup> Al-Fārābī, *al-Madīnah*, 222, 242.

<sup>392</sup> Al-Fārābī, *al-Madīnah*, trans. Walzer, 219.

process of the potential intellect having first been actualized and become the Passive Intellect (*al-`aql al-munfa`il*), and then having become the Acquired Intellect (*al-`aql al-mustafād*),<sup>393</sup> processes which are *wholly dependent* upon the action of the Active Intellect which acts as the agent of the First. The human intellect is only potential intellect until an outside agent,<sup>394</sup> the Active intellect, acts upon it.

Walzer insists, incorrectly, that al-Fārābī reduces the “highest conceivable form of prophetic experience” to the working of imitation within the faculty of representation.<sup>395</sup> Finally, continuing in this line of thought, Walzer makes the most atrocious accusation by explicitly asserting that al-Fārābī is a *kāfir* (infidel) and an apostate; he maintains that al-Fārābī’s position,

indicates an unheard-of degradation of a fundamental tenet of Islam by reducing visionary prophecy to the second rank of human perfection and making it dependent on philosophical reason.... In addition, the word *nabiyy* is used again, in the same new sense as before, the prophet being distinguished by an extraordinarily accomplished faculty of representation which is subordinate to reason.<sup>396</sup>

Not only does Walzer slander the status of the Prophet Muḥammad in al-Fārābī’s name, but also insists that al-Fārābī’s express purpose, his “special intention,” in using the word “Allah” in this chapter is to denigrate and defame the name of Allah,<sup>397</sup> and to propagate

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<sup>393</sup> Al-Fārābī, *al-Madīnah*, 242.

<sup>394</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.

<sup>395</sup> Walzer, *Perfect State*, 416.

<sup>396</sup> *Ibid.*, 440-441.

<sup>397</sup> *Ibid.*, 440.

the view that Islamic “prophecy is inferior to philosophy”<sup>398</sup>. This is all rather scandalous and shocking, and it based in a willful misreading of al-Fārābī’s process of intellection as the process of the human acquisition of divine wisdom, which is initiated by Allah and mediated by Angel of Revelation. Walzer’s aim here is to diminish al-Fārābī’s emphasis on Allah as the source of revelation and to assert the efficacy of human reason in arriving at ultimate wisdom; this has been shown to be a specious reading of *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah*.

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<sup>398</sup> Ibid., 415.

### *Walzer's Mistranslations*

Walzer avoids translating unequivocally Islamic terminology and phraseology, and instead he substitutes words or phrases devoid of any Islamic nuance. In this section appear the phrases “Allah, *`Azza wa Jalla*,” and “Allah, *Tabāraka wa Ta`āla*.” Walzer translates them, in both cases, with the religiously-uninflected term “God Almighty.”<sup>399</sup> In the case of the first phrase, “Almighty” is nearly adequate, as *`Azza* renders most often as “Mighty.” However, Walzer leaves out “*Jalla*,” which is translated as “Exalted.” The whole phrase, “Allah, *`Azza wa Jalla*” (Allah, Mighty and Exalted) is particularly and emphatically Islamic, being used by no other religion. The second phrase, “Allah, *Tabāraka wa Ta`āla*,” (Allah, Blessed and Sublime), is equally particular to the religion of Islam and uttered by Muslims alone. Additionally, although “Allah” is the Arabic word for “God,” it is a proper name and in translation it is usually not rendered. Hence, even English-speaking Muslims refer to Allah by his proper name. To consistently render it as “God” is to diminish the unambiguous Islamicity of the passages in which the name appears, especially since its appearance is so infrequent. The name of Allah appears only four times in the entire text, and each appearance has a special significance and is intended to establish a specifically Islamic context; to render Allah as “God” in these cases makes it religion-nonspecific and voids the passages in which it appears – and, thus, the entire text – of specifically Islamic content and context. By having *wahy* appear in the text *only* in the passages in which the name of Allah is mentioned, al-Fārābī intends the reader to understand that true Revelation, *wahy*, only occurs when Allah is

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<sup>399</sup> Al-Fārābī, *al-Madīnah*, trans. Walzer, 245.

present, and through His power. By rendering the name of Allah as “God,” Walzer nullifies this association. For anyone who can read Arabic, this much is transparent; however, readers with no knowledge of Arabic will be unfortunately misled.

Taking palliative measures, Walzer attempts to render his neutralization of al-Fārābī’s Islamic terms more palatable by asserting that al-Fārābī himself “prefers throughout to avoid specifically Muslim terms in this book; he puts forward views which are supposed to be universally valid and may be applied to non-Muslim communities as well”<sup>400</sup>. He claims, furthermore, that al-Fārābī “deliberately avoids specifically Islamic terms as far as possible. He does so, *I assume*, in order to make his view more universally accepted...”<sup>401</sup>. Walzer’s “assumption,” if it were an honest mistake, would merely be woefully incorrect. However, as will be shown presently, this is not a mistake; Walzer’s assumption is an authorizing claim, allowing him to take unwarranted liberties with the text to further his suppressing, de-Islamizing agenda. Al-Fārābī’s intent *is* to present a universally acceptable message; however, the universal message is Islam. The message of *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah* is that Islam is universal and comprehensive, encompassing both domains of religion and philosophy; Islamic revelation is the source of both.

A further example of Walzer’s de-Islamizing efforts is evinced in his avoidance of the Qur’anic reference implied by al-Fārābī’s use of the term “*nabiyy mundhir*” (warning prophet), which Walzer flagrantly mistranslates as “visionary prophet.”<sup>402</sup> One of the

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<sup>400</sup> Walzer, *Perfect State*, 436.

<sup>401</sup> Ibid., 425. Emphasis added.

<sup>402</sup> Ibid.

missions of the Prophet Muḥammad, as it is written in the Qur’ān, was to be a warner (*mundhir*) of mankind.<sup>403</sup> “[Muḥammad,] thou art truly a warner, and to every people a guide”<sup>404</sup>. He warned of the fate of sinners, and of those who reject Allah’s true revelation. But in most of the verses in which “*mundhir*” appears, “*bashīr*” (a bringer of glad tidings) also appears; Muḥammad’s mission was not only to warn mankind of the dire consequences of unbelief, but also to announce and celebrate the way to salvation and paradise. By Walzer’s substitution of “visionary prophet” for “*warning prophet*,” the reference to the Prophet Muḥammad implied by this latter term is stripped from the passage. Additionally, “visionary prophecy,” which is one of the meanings of *ru’yah*, is described by al-Fārābī as a form of prophecy of lesser rank than *wahy*, and it is associated with *kihānāt* (divinations)<sup>405</sup> which connotes *kāhin* (soothsayer, false prophet)<sup>406</sup> instead of the Prophet. Walzer commits this crime again on p. 251, where he mistranslates the same word, *indhār* (warning prophecy), with “visionary prophecy,” once again nullifying al-Fārābī’s clear reference to the Prophet Muḥammad. This is another example of the disregard for accurate and honest scholarship which appears frequently in Walzer’s translation and commentary. We shall have occasion to observe this tendency of Walzer’s again presently, in the next chapter.

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<sup>403</sup> *Mundhir* (warner) appears fifteen times in the Qur’ān: 2:213; 4:165; 6:48; 13:7; 18:56; 26:194; 26:208; 27:92; 37:72; 38:4, 65; 44:3; 46:29; 50:2; 79:45. *Nadhīr*, from the same root, appears 58 times. In all of its forms, this word appears over 100 times as either “warner(s),” “warning,” or having “been warned.”

<sup>404</sup> Qur’ān, 13:7.

<sup>405</sup> Al-Fārābī, *al-Madīnah*, 220.

<sup>406</sup> Qur’ān, 52:29; 69:42.

## ***Conclusion***

Walzer's incorrect reading of this passage, along with his misleading suppression of emphatically Islamic phraseology, reveal his ultimate purposes, which seem to be the de-Islamization of al-Fārābī's message and to make him an apostate infidel philosopher as opposed to an Islamic religionist. Walzer's agenda also aims at a reification of the ideological rift and the boundaries separating Islam and philosophy, asserting that the two are mutually unintelligible concepts and completely opposed to each other. This is utterly and appallingly contrary to the overall aim of al-Fārābī, which is to harmonize Islam and philosophy, bridging the *perceived* gap between the two traditions by asserting their common origin in revelation from Allah. This is demonstrated in the following chapter, which discusses al-Fārābī's position on the relationship between religion and philosophy, and his proposed solution to the problem of reconciling them.

## 12. Religion vs. Philosophy: Revelation and Reason

According to al-Fārābī, the ultimate goal of humanity is to attain to perfect felicity (*sa`ādah*), i.e., salvation in the afterlife. However, al-Fārābī makes it abundantly clear that the attainment of supreme happiness in the afterlife is conditional upon happiness in this temporal life on earth (*al-sa`ādat al-dunyā*), which he calls man's first perfection.<sup>407</sup> Either eternal felicity or eternal misery are the direct consequence of the soul's state of health in earthly life, so it is necessary that man perfect all the virtues and be rid of all the vices.<sup>408</sup> In order to attain to his highest perfection man is need of things which he cannot provide for himself, so he depends on other people who meet some particular need of his. Everyone finds himself in the same relation to everyone else in this respect, and thus mankind cannot attain to perfection unless everyone in the community contributes in order to ensure that each person has what he needs to preserve and perfect himself. To serve this very purpose, al-Fārābī tells us, mankind has established societies, outside of which man would be unable to attain to perfection.<sup>409</sup>

### *The Sovereign: Titles and Functions*

According to al-Fārābī societies exist on three levels based on their respective sizes, and it is the city-state, the smallest union of the three, in which the "most excellent good and the utmost perfection" of human life is possible.<sup>410</sup> The city requires a ruler, a

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<sup>407</sup> Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī, *Al-Fārābī: Fuṣūl al-Madanī (Aphorisms of the Statesman)*, ed. and trans. D.M. Dunlop (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), 39, as cited in Bakar, *Classification of Knowledge*, 107.

<sup>408</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>409</sup> Al-Fārābī, *al-Madīnah*, 228.

<sup>410</sup> Ibid., 230.

sovereign (*ra'īs*). It will be remembered that the first condition for being a ruler is to have been elected by Allah and to have received revelation: such a man “holds the most perfect rank of humanity and has reached the highest degree of felicity.” His soul is united with the Active Intellect, which is “the first condition for being a ruler.... This is the sovereign over whom no other human being has any sovereignty whatsoever: he is the Imām”<sup>411</sup>. Having achieved the highest earthly felicity, he is the standard to be emulated, and as such he is the sovereign of all three levels of society: the excellent city (*al-madīnah al-fāḍilah*), the excellent nation (*al-ummah al-fāḍilah*), and the entire universal state (*al-ma`mūrah kullahā*).

The functions of the sovereign in leading the people to felicity are many, as we are informed by his many titles, which include the *nabiyy* (revelatory prophet) and the Imam.<sup>412</sup> Throughout the entire text and commentary of *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah* Walzer asserts that of these many titles and the functions they denote, “philosopher” is the most preeminent; it is the most significant and important title of all and is completely opposed to all others, and is particularly opposed to, and contrasted with, *nabiyy*. However, the Arabic word which Walzer consistently renders as “philosopher” is *ḥakīm* (sage). Once again, Walzer is misleading us, insisting that the primary role of the sovereign of the virtuous city is philosophy, as opposed to delivering revelation. But we know that his

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<sup>411</sup> Ibid., 244-246.

<sup>412</sup> “*Imam*” denotes several meanings at the same time. It means prayer leader; one who is a standard, or criterion for judgement; a teaching or spiritual authority; it is also used as a title for high-ranking religious dignitaries, such as the Rector of al-Azhar University. As discussed earlier, in the first part of the dissertation, Imam is also the title of the *Shī`ah* successors to the Prophet Muḥammad. Writing in the tenth century, al-Fārābī would not have used this term uncritically and the connection will be discussed in the paragraphs below.

consistent rendering of *ḥakīm* as “philosopher” is incorrect, insofar as al-Fārābī uses both *ḥakīm* (wise man or sage) and *faylasūf* (philosopher) at the same time, in the same sentence. And, of course, Walzer translates them correctly in this instance: When Allah grants the prophet divine revelation (*wahy*) through the Active Intellect, “he is, through the emanation from the Active Intellect to his Passive Intellect, a wise man (*ḥakīm*) and a philosopher (*faylasūf*),”<sup>413</sup> in whom the divine indwells (*fīhi al-ilāhiyy*).<sup>414</sup>

In this particular sentence there is no escaping, for Walzer, al-Fārābī’s calculated juxtaposition of these terms, and his indication of their having slightly different shades of meaning in this context. Within the context of uttering the name of Allah, first importance is given to the term *wahy*, which also necessarily implies the prophet (*nabiyy*), who is the receiver of *wahy*; second in importance is the wise man (*ḥakīm*); the philosopher (*faylasūf*) is only mentioned in the third place, and is only specifically mentioned one time in the entire text.<sup>415</sup> It should be noted that in Arabic *ḥakīm* may also render “philosopher.” But the fact that al-Fārābī juxtaposes *ḥakīm* and *faylasūf* demonstrates that by the former, in this context – the context in which appears the name of Allah – he does not intend “philosopher,” but rather intends it to be read as “wise man” or “sage.” As *ḥakīm* is a Qur’anic term – a title of Allah, meaning the “All-Wise”<sup>416</sup> –

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<sup>413</sup> Al-Fārābī, *al-Madīnah*, trans. Walzer, 245.

<sup>414</sup> Al-Fārābī, *al-Madīnah*, 244.

<sup>415</sup> Ibid.

<sup>416</sup> *Ḥakīm* appears in the Qur’ān 97 times; the related word *ḥikmah* (wisdom), which is also crucial for al-Fārābī, appears 20 times. For the former see examples at 2:32, 129, 209; 3:18, 58, 62; 4:11, 24; 8:71; 9:28, 110; 12:83; 16:60; 31:9; 34:27; 42:51; 45:2; 59:24; 66:2; 76:30; for the latter see examples at 2:129, 151, 231; 4:54, 113; 16:125; 17:39; 33:34; 43:63; 54:5; 62:2.

translating it as “philosopher” nullifies the Qur’anic reference implied by the author; by using a term which has extremely high frequency in the Qur’ān, and which had subsequently become associated with philosophy only after the arrival of Greek texts to the Arabic-speaking world, al-Fārābī is here once again asserting the roots of philosophical truth in Islamic revelation. By now, having shown Walzer to be a thoroughgoing enemy of any inclination towards Islam in al-Fārābī’s work, it should come as no surprise that Walzer consciously denies al-Fārābī’s Qur’anic references. This is one of his primary weapons in the effort to purge *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah* of Islamic content and an Islamically-inclined message.

### ***Titles, Conclusively***

Walzer’s assertion is that the function of the ruler is primarily that of the philosopher, and much of his argument hinges on the premise that the roles of prophet and philosopher are defined by two different and fundamentally opposing functions with regard to the ruler’s interactions with the common people, and that the philosopher is far superior to the prophet. In this reading, however, he could not be more incorrect. In the *Attainment of Happiness (Taḥṣīl al-Sa`ādah)*, al-Fārābī states:

So let it be clear to you that the idea of the Philosopher, Supreme Ruler, Prince, Legislator, and Imam is but a single idea. No matter which one of these words you take, if you proceed to look at what each of them signifies among the majority of those who speak our language, you will find that they all finally agree by signifying one and the same idea.<sup>417</sup>

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<sup>417</sup> Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī, *Kitāb Taḥṣīl al-Sa`ādah*, appearing as Part I of *Alfarabi’s Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*, ed. and trans. Muhsin Mahdi (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1962), 47.

Prophet (*nabiyy*) and sage (*ḥakīm*) can also be added to this list, as al-Fārābī has already established in *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah* that the prophet, the philosopher, the sage, and the Imam are different titles for the same individual.<sup>418</sup> All of these titles and functions together, in one and the same individual, are applied to the man who has achieved the highest rank of perfection which the faculty of representation can reach, which is described by al-Fārābī as the state of prophethood (*nubūwwah*).<sup>419</sup> So Walzer’s assertion, that the prophet is inferior to the philosopher in al-Fārābī’s cosmology, is utterly untenable. In fact, the criterion for judging the degree of perfection of this individual is his having reached the state of *nubūwwah*. So all of these titles and functions of the ruler are subsumed under his function as the prophet. From this it should be clearly understood that al-Fārābī is asserting that all philosophy proceeds from revelation, and is subsumed under the latter’s aegis. And it should be read with all certainty that since al-Fārābī chooses to retain the Islamically-inflected titles of *nabiyy* and Imam and *ḥakīm*, and does not choose to coin a new term or simply apply to this individual only the cognate term *faylasūf*, al-Fārābī’s intention is to affirm the primacy and universality of Islamic prophecy.

### ***The Object of Philosophy***

Al-Fārābī defines the highest wisdom as “the most excellent knowledge of the One as the First Cause of all existence and as the First Truth which is the source of all

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<sup>418</sup> Al-Fārābī, *al-Madīnah*, 244-246.

<sup>419</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.

truths”<sup>420</sup>. Following Aristotle, al-Fārābī uses the term philosophy to refer not only to this metaphysical knowledge expressed in rational forms, but also the sciences derived from the former based on the same method of certain demonstration.<sup>421</sup> In his *Enumeration of the Sciences* (*Iḥṣā’ al-’Ulūm*), al-Fārābī meticulously defines and describes all of the human sciences and ranks each according to its level of importance and its utility to man in his process of perfecting virtue and achieving felicity. In this text, al-Fārābī states unequivocally that metaphysics (*al-’ilm al-ilāhiyy*, the science of the divine) is the paramount of all science, because it deals with Allah, the Supreme Good, and with spiritual beings close to Allah. It expresses and demonstrates the principles of that without which there could be no existence, which is the most deserving of the name “the One” and its meaning, and of the name “Existence” and its meaning; it is that which in itself is One, Existence, Truth, and Reality. Al-Fārābī makes clear that “that which is described by these characteristics is He who should be considered to be Allah, Mighty and Exalted, how Holy His names”<sup>422</sup>. Al-Fārābī finally describes metaphysics as the science which demonstrates that all existence subsists in Allah, how the existents proceed from him, and how they acquire their existence from him. It establishes principles based on revealed knowledge of Allah’s deeds, his creation of the world and all of humanity. It

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<sup>420</sup> Al-Fārābī, *Fuṣūl al-Madanī*, pp. 43-4, as cited in Bakar, *Classification of Knowledge*, 82.

<sup>421</sup> Ibid.

<sup>422</sup> Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī, *Kitāb Iḥṣa’ al-’Ulūm*, ed. ’Alī Bū Milham (Bayrūt: Dār wa Maktabat al-Hillāl, 1996), 75, 76-77.

makes clear the faulty (wicked) from the correct views about Allah, making it possible to know that without which it would be impossible for man to return to felicity in Allah.<sup>423</sup>

Again, according to al-Fārābī metaphysics is the most useful branch of philosophical science because it deals with knowledge of Allah and the spiritual beings close to Allah. The knowledge of Allah is sought for its own sake as it constitutes man's true happiness. The knowledge of the separate intelligences is the next most useful knowledge in that due to their proximity to Allah, their knowledge of Allah is the most complete. The knowledge which the separate intelligences have of the First Cause is the prototype of all gnosis (*ma`rifah*), and man's intellectual perfection is based on that of the separate intelligences, which is known only through revelation.<sup>424</sup> All gnosis, which is the object of both philosophy and religion, has its source in revelation; in this way we understand that al-Fārābī sees the religion-philosophy distinction within the context of one and the same revealed tradition.

### ***Relationship Between Religion and Philosophy***

At this point it becomes important to know al-Fārābī's position on the relationship between religion and philosophy. The object of both is gnosis and thus both proceed, according to al-Fārābī, from revelation. The ultimate goal of both religion and philosophy is to use the wisdom gained from revelation to perfect the virtues and to attain to felicity. Where religion and philosophy differ is in their respective *modi operandi*. Philosophy demonstrates, through reasoned arguments, the principles learned through revelation.

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<sup>423</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>424</sup> Bakar, *Classification of Knowledge*, 115.

But, as the above-cited passages show, philosophers are rare individuals who have been born with a unique predisposition for the union of the representative faculty of their soul with the Active Intellect. Philosophers may understand the intelligibles supplied by Active Intellect in the form in which the prophet receives them; but the general masses, who are not philosophically inclined and thus incapable of understanding revealed wisdom in its original nature, must be instructed by means of corporeal similitudes which represent the principles of revealed wisdom symbolically.<sup>425</sup> Al-Fārābī describes religion (*millah*) as systems of symbols which the ruler of the Virtuous City employs for the benefit of the people, by which he imparts to them close similitudes approximating the principles inherent in the gnosis which he receives in the form of revelation from Allah. By virtue of his having received revelation, the ruler has achieved the highest degree of felicity achievable, and as such it is his duty to impart this knowledge to the non-philosophic masses.<sup>426</sup> Al-Fārābī's chosen term for the systems of symbols which the ruler employs to impart the principles of revealed wisdom to the people is religion (*millah*).<sup>427,428</sup>

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<sup>425</sup> Al-Fārābī, *al-Madīnah*, 278; Al-Fārābī, *Tahṣīl al-Sa`ādah*, 45.

<sup>426</sup> Al-Fārābī, *Tahṣīl al-Sa`ādah*, 45.

<sup>427</sup> In *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah* al-Fārābī gives a list of the knowledge necessary for citizens of the *Madīnah* to attain to felicity, which is similar to the list enumerated in *Iḥṣā' al-'Ulūm*. It includes gnosis (*ma`rifah*) of the First Cause and all of its qualities; gnosis of the spiritual beings and their ranks, including the Active Intellect; gnosis of the natural bodies and how they come into being and pass away, and how everything that happens among them takes place according to order, perfection, providence, justice, and wisdom. Citizens should also have a knowledge of how man comes about, how he is directed by the Active Intellect, and how revelation comes to the ruler of the city; finally, they should know the dire consequences which come as a result of failure to heed the prophet. See Al-Fārābī, *al-Madīnah*, 278.

<sup>428</sup> Note this further Qur'anic reference made by al-Fārābī: *millah* appears in the Qur'ān 15 times at 2:120, 130, 135; 3:95; 4:125; 6:16; 7:88, 89; 12:37, 38; 14:13; 16:123; 18:20; 22:78; 38:7.

In *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah*, al-Fārābī elaborates on the distinction between religion and philosophy. He writes that the knowledge necessary to achieve felicity can be understood in two ways, either by being impressed on the soul as it really is, or by being impressed on the soul through affinity and symbolic representation. In the latter case, symbols arise in man's mind which reproduce that knowledge by imitation. The philosopher is able to understand these things through demonstration and insight. Those who are close to the philosopher assent to the philosopher's understanding because they trust his insight. But others know them through symbols which reproduce them by imitation, "because their nature has not provided their minds with the gift to understand them as they are"<sup>429</sup>. Furthermore,

Now these things are philosophy when they are in the soul of the legislator. They are religion when they are in the souls of the multitude. For when the legislator knows these things, they are evident to him by sure insight, whereas what is established in the souls of the multitude is through an image and a persuasive argument.... They are a religion for others, whereas, so far as he is concerned, they are philosophy.<sup>430</sup>

The distinction is clear. Religion, as defined by al-Fārābī, consists of symbols which approximate truths, while philosophy seeks to demonstrate those truths directly as they are. If that were the end of the story, Walzer's argument would be slightly more correct: Walzer argues that in discussing the ultimate felicity of man, al-Fārābī has in mind "the sum total of his philosophical convictions, without exception"<sup>431</sup>. He claims

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<sup>429</sup> Ibid., 278.

<sup>430</sup> Al-Fārābī, *Taḥṣīl al-Sa`ādah*, 47.

<sup>431</sup> Walzer, *Perfect State*, 475.

that al-Fārābī's position is that "there exists, in reality, only one felicity as there is only one God and one truth, and philosophy alone provides the key to this knowledge"<sup>432</sup>. Walzer's misconception stems from his misunderstanding of a key point. He is correct that there is only one truth leading to salvation, and that the knowledge necessary for salvation may be apprehended in two ways: it may be impressed on the mind as it is, or it may be impressed on the mind by symbols which represent it. This is a description of the mental processes involved in the human acquisition of gnosis – how that gnosis is apprehended in the human mind. However, Walzer misses the point when he claims that the first of the above-mentioned two processes is reserved for the "philosophers *who acquire it through strict demonstration and the exercise of their own insight*"<sup>433</sup>. Walzer's fundamental flaw is in his assertion that for the philosopher the source of gnosis is the human exercise of deliberation and reason. Gnosis may be apprehended in either of the two above-mentioned fashions, but the source of that gnosis is always the same. Al-Fārābī makes it very clear that the source of all gnosis is revelation, mediated by the Active Intellect; revelation is the one and only source of the true wisdom man requires to perfect the virtues and attain to felicity. The philosopher is capable of understanding this knowledge on a higher level than the common non-philosophic masses; and he may reproduce demonstrable paradigms, built upon the principles which he has come to understand through revelations made to the prophet. However, the philosopher's first

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<sup>432</sup> Ibid., 475-476.

<sup>433</sup> Ibid., 474. My emphasis.

acquisition of ultimate wisdom is always by way of the prophet, who receives that knowledge through revelation.

***Conclusion: Religion Is Necessary***

The prophetic “imitations” of revealed truths with images and symbols are necessary because, for those among the common masses devoid of any capacity for philosophy, they provide the only effective means for understanding those truths and eventually attaining to the goal of ultimate felicity. Without religion the common people would perish, both in this life and the next; al-Fārābī is very detailed in his descriptions of the eternal consequences of dying outside of a state of felicity. Therefore, upon the prophet, in his capacity as ruler and legislator, is the duty of establishing laws for the religious community, the *millah*. However not only the philosophically uninclined, but also the philosophers are equally bound by the religious law as ordained by the prophet. The prophet’s intellectual experience of the reality of the divine principles on which he bases his religious law is not preceded by his learning about these principles from a human source, or by some kind of reasoning which likewise presupposes the possession of certain data pertaining to them.<sup>434</sup> Bakar points out that philosophical training and realization, on the other hand, presuppose the existence of a living philosophical and spiritual tradition whose origin is prophetic. Al-Fārābī even goes so far as to say that the pursuit of philosophy is legitimate only when it is rooted in and never divorced from a revealed tradition, including its rites and legal-moral injunctions (religious law).<sup>435</sup>

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<sup>434</sup> Bakar, *Classification of Knowledge*, 75.

<sup>435</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

Accordingly, a “philosopher must perform the external (bodily) acts and observe the duties of the law, for if a person disregards a law ordained as incumbent by a prophet and then pursues philosophy, he must be deserted. He should consider unlawful for himself what is unlawful in his millah”<sup>436</sup>. The philosopher’s capacity for understanding the principles of gnosis as they are revealed, without the aid of symbolic representation, does not exempt him from the duty to obey the law; the revealed principles on which the law is based are universally applicable to all.

Al-Fārābī does not disparage philosophy as it is also rooted in revelation, the principles which philosophy demonstrates being the same as those represented by the symbols employed in religion; philosophy and religion are two ways of understanding the same principles, two sides of the same coin. However, the philosopher remains bound, like the non-philosophic masses, to obey the law established on the principles revealed to the prophet. Al-Fārābī asserts that religion and philosophy both have their source in revelation; in this way he seeks to harmonize religion and philosophy while at the same time affirming the primacy of revelation. This is the solution which al-Fārābī posits in order to solve the tenth-century problem of rising tensions between Islam and philosophy, and between Traditionalist and Rationalist Muslims.<sup>437</sup> How does al-Fārābī legitimate this solution? Firstly, and most importantly, he appeals to the authority of Islamic Scripture, demonstrating that the model for his interpretation of philosophy is revealed in

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<sup>436</sup> Al-Fārābī, *Sharḥ risālat zaynūn al-Kabīr* (Hyderabad, 1349 AH), p. 9; as cited in Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, 63.

<sup>437</sup> Al-Fārābī is demonstrates that Islam is rational, as it can be explained in philosophical terms; he also demonstrates that rationalism is dependent on revelation.

the Qur'ān, a view which he supports by his many Qur'anic references. Secondly, al-Fārābī's understanding of philosophy as proceeding from revelation can be demonstrated to have been relatively common in the thinking of the ancient Greeks, of whose traditions al-Fārābī is the inheritor. The following chapter briefly discusses the origins of this point of view in the thought of some of al-Fārābī's Greek predecessors and how – by not only adopting this point of view, but also by Islamizing it and demonstrating that it is congruent with the message of Islam – al-Fārābī harmonizes Islam and philosophy, legitimating and naturalizing philosophy in the eyes of the Muslims.

### 13. Philosophy as Revelation in The Ancient World

Al-Fārābī is not the first to see philosophy as being rooted in divine revelation or to posit that philosophy and religion both issue from the same source of revelation. The Greeks and Romans associated philosophy with revealed wisdom since the dawn of the former, and al-Fārābī shows his awareness of this in *Tahṣīl al-Sa`ādah*. He writes that the word applied by Greeks to that knowledge which leads to supreme happiness and ultimate perfection was “wisdom” (*ḥikmah*). And

they called the acquisition of it *science*, and the scientific state of mind *philosophy* [*falsafah*]<sup>438</sup> (by which they meant the quest and the love for the highest wisdom). They called the one who acquires it *philosopher* [*faylasūf*] (meaning the one who loves and is in quest of the highest wisdom).<sup>439</sup>

This dawn of the Greek love of wisdom, which later came to be known as philosophy,<sup>440</sup> began as the quest for the ultimate truth by the early sages. This truth could not be discovered by recourse to mundane human means: “being superhuman, it could only be revealed by the gods to those whom they favoured”<sup>441</sup>.

Yulia Ustinova observes that many tend to belittle the significance of revelation in the activities of ancient thinkers, merely because their doctrines contained brilliant insights and were formulated in discursive form. However, to assume that Greek thinkers

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<sup>438</sup> Notice, here, that al-Fārābī juxtaposes the words *ḥikmah* and *falsafah*, demonstrating that the equation of the two terms, such as is Walzer’s practice throughout his translation of *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah*, is patently incorrect. When al-Fārābī intends *philosophy*, he uses *falsafah*; when he intends *wisdom*, he uses *ḥikmah*.

<sup>439</sup> Al-Fārābī, *Tahṣīl al-Sa`ādah*, 43. Original emphasis.

<sup>440</sup> The Pythagoreans were the first to refer to themselves as “lovers of wisdom.” See F.M. Cornford, *Principim Sapientiae: The Origins of Greek Philosophical Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952), 115.

<sup>441</sup> Yulia Ustinova, *Caves and the Ancient Greek Mind: Descending Underground in the Search for Ultimate Truth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 177.

were altogether opposed to revelation and prophecy, and to prophetic religions would be a myopic error. Instead, “many of the greatest of them – Socrates, Plato, the Stoics – sought to provide rational justification for the phenomenon of prophecy.... As Cicero notes, Xenophanes was in fact the only one of the ancients who completely denied” revelation and prophecy.<sup>442</sup>

Revelation was a unique and powerful authorizing force in ancient Greece, and those who wielded the power of revelation held positions of authority and influence. According to Michael Flower, it was the seers who gave the Athenians immediate and daily access to divine knowledge, and their services were patronized by the private services of influential thinkers to lend credence to their positions. They were often hired by rival thinkers of competing schools of thought, and for both the believer of the traditional religion and for the skeptic, “the testimony of oracles and religious experts was important ammunition in making their respective cases to the Athenian people”<sup>443</sup>. For other oracles, including the Pythia, their roles as the conduits of divine knowledge and as the spokesperson for a god authorized them to pronounce orally and intelligibly on a wide range of private and public issues.<sup>444</sup>

For many ancient Greek thinkers, prophecy, more than any other religious act, confirms not only that the gods exist, but that they are interested in the affairs of human beings. The stoic arguments for the validity of divination and prophecy were built on the

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<sup>442</sup> Robert Flaceliere, *Greek Oracles*, trans. Douglas Garman (New York: W.W. Norton, 1965), 73.

<sup>443</sup> Michael Attyah Flower, *The Seer in Ancient Greece* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008), 177.

<sup>444</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

assumption that if divinity exists, it must be beneficent; if it is beneficent, then it will find some means of communicating with us in order to steer our lives according to the divine will. The salient questions, then, are those which ask how the gods communicate and how we can most effectively take part in the communication ourselves.<sup>445</sup> These kinds of questions led to ruminations about how the physical and metaphysical worlds operate, which in turn led to the development of systems of “rational” interpretation of the information revealed in reply to the “non-normal” states of inquiry involved in prophecy and divination.<sup>446</sup> Parmenides, for example, avowed direct experience of the divine through revelation, and, although his noetic insight was ecstatic, he insisted that *post eventum* it was always subjected to rational analysis.<sup>447</sup>

This phenomenon of mutual cooperation and interdependence was the beginning of the harmonizing trend between revelation and philosophy, which Plutarch himself hailed: “For my part, I cannot see any reason why the philosopher and the seer should not have reached agreement...”<sup>448</sup>. Thinkers as far back as Empedocles (c.495-435 BCE) endorsed the cooperation between religion and philosophy. Empedocles considered the vocations of the prophet and the ruler to be the highest point which the human soul can reach, and the dichotomous binarism between religion and natural philosophy, so commonly accepted by us today, was seemingly foreign to him.<sup>449</sup> According to Morgan,

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<sup>445</sup> Sarah Iles Johnston, *Ancient Greek Divination* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 4-5.

<sup>446</sup> Flower, 86.

<sup>447</sup> Ustinova, 216.

<sup>448</sup> Flaceliere, 74.

<sup>449</sup> Ustinova, 209.

Plato in particular associated philosophical doctrines with ecstatic revelation, which demonstrates that in his view the human enterprise of philosophy derives from a superhuman source on which it is dependent.<sup>450</sup>

Despite the trend of some thinkers toward an ecumenism between revelation and philosophy, the aforementioned thinkers such as Epimenides and Parmenides, as well as their contemporaries, nevertheless expected to find the ultimate truth and wisdom exclusively in the divine realm. Parmenides' confidence in the divine revelation and mistrust of human wisdom is congruent with the traditional Greek conviction that "human understanding is deceitful and the true knowledge belongs to the gods"<sup>451</sup>. This vacillating insecurity in their position on the status and utility of human reason is a common trait, typified within the scope of a broad survey of ancient Greek thinkers. Such, indeed, was the "ambiguous position of the Greeks, torn between reason, the chosen guide that they knew to be inadequate, and their deep, instinctive belief in hidden powers"<sup>452</sup>. These ancient thinkers allotted practical philosophy its due role in the grand scheme of the pursuit of wisdom; but they recognized the limited utility of human reason, and therefore maintained the primacy of revelation as the source of all ultimate wisdom.

### ***Conclusion***

Al-Fārābī's notion of the pursuit and acquisition of *ḥikmah* takes inspiration from the Greek notion of the pursuit of absolute wisdom, as al-Fārābī demonstrates in *Taḥṣīl*

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<sup>450</sup> C. Morgan, *Athletes and Oracles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 22-24, 64, 195.

<sup>451</sup> Ustinova, 203.

<sup>452</sup> Flaceliere, 87.

*al-Sa`ādah*, cited above. For al-Fārābī, as for the ancient Greeks,<sup>453</sup> the quest for the ultimate truth is the kernel of both inspired prophecy (and religion based on prophecy) and early philosophy. Its knowledge belonged to the gods alone, and it could not be perceived by the limited human mind, held back by mundane and inferior thoughts; “prophecy was considered to be inspired by the gods and immeasurably superior to anything deliberated by the senses”<sup>454</sup>.

This is the central import of al-Fārābī’s principal argument in *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah*. The measure of a ruler’s perfection is his having arrived at the capacity for receiving revelation (*wahy*) from the First Cause, via the union of the Active Intellect with his soul. Revelation is, for al-Fārābī, just as it was for the Greeks, the only source of *ḥikmah* which is the wisdom necessary for perfecting the virtues and achieving felicity, i.e., salvation. The philosopher, through the deliberation of his rational faculty, in which is endowed by Allah the capacity for understanding the truth of revealed wisdom in the form in which it is received by the prophet, demonstrates by reasoned arguments the validity of the truths which are revealed to the prophet. Revelation is sent for the benefit of all; but the non-philosophic multitude, being incapable of understanding the truths revealed to the prophet in their original revealed form, must receive these truths by means of symbols which imitate them – this is how al-Fārābī defines religion, *millah*. It is the

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<sup>453</sup> “In fifth-sixth-century Athens, philosophy appears more and more as a systematic whole, its study guided by a canon of authoritative works, including both Aristotle and Plato. The peak of the philosophical curriculum is no longer metaphysics, but theology, i.e., a philosophical discourse about divine principles, whose sources lie first and foremost in the revelations of late paganism, and then Plato’s dialogues, allegorically interpreted as conveying his theological doctrine.” Thus, al-Fārābī’s understanding of philosophy as revelation was not a novel or aberrant one. D’ancona, 16.

<sup>454</sup> Ustinova, 256.

duty incumbent upon the prophet to establish the *millah* for the people, and it is the duty incumbent upon every individual to heed the laws of the *millah* established by the prophet. Neither the philosopher, nor even the prophet himself, is exempt from following the religious laws established for the *millah*.

Just like the ancient Greeks mentioned above, al-Fārābī allows a role for philosophy; however, al-Fārābī, having likewise recognized the inadequacies inherent in human reason, affirms and maintains the primacy of revelation as the one and only source of the ultimate wisdom by which felicity is achieved. Furthermore, by rendering each key concept of this paradigm with a distinctly Qur’anic term, al-Fārābī demonstrates that this paradigm is fundamentally Islamic: Allah is the only source of *ḥikmah*; *ḥikmah* is necessary for salvation and is imparted to one man, the *nabiyy*; it is imparted through the process of *wahy* (revelation); *wahy* is mediated by Angel of Revelation; the religious community of the *millah* corresponds to the Islamic *Ummah*; and religious laws established for the *millah/Ummah* correspond to the Islamic *Sharī`ah*. Failure to heed the *Sharī`ah* leads to a state of *Jāhiliyyah* (Ignorance); and the communities which exist in *Jāhiliyyah* will surely perish, suffering both in this life and eternally in the hereafter.

The following short chapter examines the ancient city, like the ones proposed by both Plato and al-Fārābī, as a model of the ideal community, which was for al-Fārābī indistinguishable from the religious community. It briefly discusses the excellent city and the cities opposed to it, and I also present some further thoughts on Walzer’s translation of and commentary on *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah*. Finally, I will discuss the implications of

what I believe to be al-Fārābī's intended reading of the text, within the historical context of tenth-century Islamic thought.

## 14. The Ancient City as Model of Religious Community

### *The Ignorant Cities*

There can be only one excellent city; in opposition to this excellent city are several other cities. These are the ignorant city (*al-madīnah al-Jāhiliyyah*), the wicked city (*al-madīnah al-fāsiqah*), the city which has deliberately changed its character (*al-madīnah al-mubaddalah*), and the city which has gone astray (*al-madīnah al-Ḍāllah*).<sup>455</sup> The ignorant city is the city whose inhabitants do not know true felicity, the thought of it never having occurred to them. Even if they were rightly guided (*urshiduww*) to it they would neither understand it nor believe in it. The only good things they recognize are superficially good: common aims in life such as bodily health, wealth, enjoyment, freedom to follow desires, and being held in honor and esteem. According to the ignorant city, perfect felicity is the sum-total of all of them. The ignorant city is divided into a number of sub-cities, each one characterized by some aberrance from the good which characterizes the excellent city: deviant sexual practices; meanness; the hoarding of wealth; depravity; idleness; seeking after fame, glory, and power; democracy; and more. There are as many kings of the ignorant cities as there are cities of this kind, each exercising his control over the city so as to manipulate it towards his own designs.<sup>456</sup>

The wicked city is a city whose views are those of the excellent city: it knows felicity, and how to achieve it; it knows Allah *ʿAzza wa Jalla*,<sup>457</sup> and the existents of the

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<sup>455</sup> Al-Fārābī, *al-Madīnah*, 252.

<sup>456</sup> Ibid., 256.

<sup>457</sup> Ibid.

second order, the Active Intellect, and everything which as such should be believed in and revered by the people of the excellent city. However, its actions are those of the people of the ignorant cities. The city which deliberately changed is a city whose views and actions were previously the views of the people of the excellent city, but they have been changed and different views have taken their place, and its actions have been replaced by different actions.

The city which has gone astray is the city which aims at felicity in the afterlife; but it holds pernicious and useless beliefs about Allah *`Azza wa Jalla*,<sup>458</sup> and the secondary existents and the Active Intellect, even if they are taken as symbols of true felicity. Its first ruler is a man who falsely pretended to be receiving *wahy*; he produced this wrong impression through falsifications, cheating, and deceptions. The kings of all of these cities are contrary to the excellent rulers of the excellent cities; their ways of ruling are contrary to the excellent ways of ruling, and the ways of their people are contrary to those of the people of the excellent cities.

### ***Qur'anic Parallels***

Al-Fārābī collectively refers to those who reject the message of the prophet as people of ignorance. Walzer asserts that al-Fārābī's use of the term *jāhiliyyah* is devoid of any Islamic association and that by it al-Fārābī means simply that these cities are ignorant of true philosophy.<sup>459</sup> This is incorrect; it is an *emphatic* reference to the Islamic

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<sup>458</sup> Ibid., 258.

<sup>459</sup> Walzer, *Perfect State*, 482.

concept of the great pre-Islamic Period of Ignorance (*al-Jāhiliyyah*).<sup>460</sup> If al-Fārābī had intended the reader to understand simply “ignorance,” independent of any Islamic inflection, he would most likely have used the word *jahālah* instead of the very Islamically-charged *al-Jāhiliyyah*. In the world of Islamic thought, *jāhiliyyah* has come to represent not only pre-Islamic ignorance but also the world outside of the realm of Islam, in general; to be outside of Islam is to be in *jāhiliyyah*. Al-Fārābī, making this association, makes it clear that the excellent city represents the abode of Islam by asserting that those outside the excellent city are in *jāhiliyyah* – and thus outside of the abode of Islam. Furthermore, strengthening this association is his use of the words *Ḍāllah* and *Fāsiqah*, as well as *Mubaddalah*; these are emphatically Islamic terms, found in many places throughout the Qur’ān,<sup>461</sup> and used to refer to those who have rejected Allah and his messenger.

### ***The Excellent City: The Culmination of al-Fārābī’s Position***

It will be remembered that according to al-Fārābī human societies exist for the purpose of the mutual cooperation of the collectivity, to provide for each individual that which he needs in order to be rid of vice, to perfect the virtues, and thus to attain to felicity. And as the knowledge of how felicity is achieved is only reached through

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<sup>460</sup> Words from the Arabic root word *jahala*, “to be ignorant,” appear 24 times in the Qur’ān. *Al-Jāhiliyyah* specifically, the pre-Islamic Period of Ignorance, appears at 3:154; 5:50; 33:33; 48:26.

<sup>461</sup> Words stemming from the same root as *Ḍāllah*, *ḍalala*, appear 191 times; see examples at 2:108; 4:44; 5:77; 6:140; 10:10; 20:92; 27:92; 40:74; 68:7. The root of *fāsiq*, in all of its forms, appears 54 times, and *fāsiq* (defiantly disobedient) itself appears 37 times; see examples at 2:26, 99; 3:82, 110; 5:47; 7:102; 9:8; 24:55; 32:18; 49:6; 57:26; 59:19. The root of *mubaddalah*, *baddala*, appears 44 times, mostly with negative connotations in the context of changing from the ways of Allah. See examples at 2:181, 211; 10:64; 30:30; 33:23, 62; 35:43; 48:23; 76:28.

revelation, it follows necessarily that these collectivities must be led by a prophet. The prophet establishes laws, by obeying which the people may attain to felicity; only then may it be said that such a collectivity is excellent. And finally, the most excellent size for a human collectivity is the city-state. It follows, then, that the most excellent human collectivity is one in which all of these criteria have been met: it is a city (*Madīnah*);<sup>462</sup> it is ruled by a prophet (Muḥammad); who establishes religion based on revelation from Allah (Islam); and who establishes law based on that revelation (*Sharī`ah*); the city contains a religious community (*Ummah*); by accepting and practicing the religion established by the prophet, the community learns the most excellent wisdom (*Hikmah*); and by obeying the religious law each member of the community attains to perfection, i.e. felicity (*Jannah*). The union which fulfills all of these criteria is the most Excellent City, al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah, for which the text is named.

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<sup>462</sup> Even the word *madīnah* is Qur'anic: it appears 17 times, four of which refer directly and explicitly to the City of the Prophet, *al-Madīnah*. See 9:101, 120; 33:60; 63:8.

## *Conclusion*

As discussed above, *millah* (religion) is necessary to the salvation of the people of the excellent city, as it is through the symbols of the *millah* that the non-philosophic multitude learns the wisdom necessary to progress in virtue and achieve felicity. What gives the symbols of the *millah* their validity is the fact that they are derived from divine revelation (*wahy*) to the prophet. Walzer asserts that because *millah* is only a symbolic approach to truth, *wahy* is to be “kept separate from ‘religion’ and to be taken together with philosophy instead and to be connected with the highest human knowledge which only the metaphysician is able to attain”<sup>463</sup>. Walzer, yet again, misses the point here. Yes, *millah* is a symbolic representation of the truth, but it is valid because it is derived from *wahy*; *wahy* is not validated by symbolic representation which is derived from it. The prophet teaches the people by means of symbols which are imitations of revealed truths, but it must be remembered that the prophet does not produce or invent these symbols himself, independent of divine guidance; the working of imitation in the representative faculty of the prophet is not the result of his intellectual deliberation.<sup>464</sup> Before the activity of the Active Intellect, the prophet’s mind is completely passive; in the process of revelation, the prophet himself sees only imitations of the intelligibles supplied to his Passive Intellect by the Active Intellect.<sup>465</sup> The philosopher has the capacity to apprehend these truths in their original revealed form, but the philosopher who is not additionally a

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<sup>463</sup> Walzer, *Perfect State*, 441.

<sup>464</sup> Bakar, *Classification of Knowledge*, 74.

<sup>465</sup> Al-Fārābī, *al-Madīnah*, 240.

prophet does not receive revelation and thus must depend on the *wahy* of the prophet to first acquire these truths. Furthermore, because he is not a prophet, the philosopher cannot institute new law:

This prophetic status is that of a teacher (of the whole Milla) and cannot be reached by everyone. My master Aristotle reported his master Plato as saying that the peak of knowledge (gnosis) is too high for any and every bird to reach.<sup>466</sup>

Therefore, the religion and the religious law established by the prophet on the basis of divine revelation is the only means of salvation for all people – including the prophet himself, the philosopher, and the common masses.

To equate *wahy* with the human insight of the philosopher, as Walzer does above, renders contact with the divine as unnecessary and it negates the central importance of the prophetic function of the ruler as the *nabiyy*. This would leave only philosophy to guide mankind; it would make prophecy unnecessary, and it would make the authority claims made by the prophets (and hence *the Prophet*) baseless. It would reduce all prophets who claim to receive divine revelation to false prophets, and it would render the religions based on such revelation meaningless. This is what results if Walzer's commentary on *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah* is accepted uncritically. Throughout the chapters of this dissertation, I have shown his translation to be, at times, unfaithful to al-Fārābī's original Arabic, and I have shown his overall reading of the text to be incorrect. Walzer misrepresents al-Fārābī's message, which is that only the souls of the inhabitants of the excellent city achieve both temporal felicity and eternal salvation. That is, only the souls of those individuals who live in a city which is governed by a Prophet who receives

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<sup>466</sup> Al-Fārābī, *Sharḥ*, 8.

revelation from Allah; only those who follow the religion of Islam; who are members of the Islamic *Ummah*; who follow the Islamic *Sharī`ah*; and who, first and foremost, believe in the eternal Unity of One God, Allah. According to al-Fārābī, only these individuals will spend eternity in a state of felicity, in *Jannah*.

At a cursory glance, this conclusion would seem to make al-Fārābī's message more exclusive than inclusive; however, in the preceding chapters I have shown the opposite to be the case. For example, in *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah* al-Fārābī enumerates a specific list of personal qualities which the prophet-philosopher must possess in order to qualify to rule the excellent city. It has been noted by many scholars that many of the qualities al-Fārābī lists are virtually identical with those of Plato's philosopher-king as they appear in *Republic* VI, and equally similar to those which the Islamic Caliphs were expected to possess according to legal scholars and jurists.<sup>467</sup> From this perspective, it could be said that the excellent city is a blend of Platonic utopianism and Islamic political doctrine. In Islamic political theory, as Majid Fakhry observes, the Caliph-Imam was very much expected to be guided by the ordinances of the *Sharī`ah* rooted in divine revelation; Islamic revelation is analogous in al-Fārābī to illumination by the Active Intellect. Al-Fārābī was the first Muslim philosopher to extract this concept from the emanationist metaphysics and cosmology of Plotinus and Proclus, and to erect upon it a political utopia corresponding in many ways to the caliphal model, remarkably so, many scholars have also said, in its various *Shī`ah* forms.<sup>468</sup>

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<sup>467</sup> Fakhry, *Islamic Philosophy*, 46.

<sup>468</sup> *Ibid.*, 46-47.

This is just one example of the greatest potentiality hidden with al-Fārābī's work. By adopting, appropriating, and Islamizing the doctrines of the Greek philosophers, al-Fārābī makes philosophy acceptable to Muslims. That is, by using Greek concepts to articulate a clearly Islamic and Qur'anic cosmology and theology, al-Fārābī establishes that the essential message of his Greek predecessors is congruent with the message of the Qur'ān. By establishing that the essential message of many of the Greek philosophers is congruent with the message of the Qur'ān, al-Fārābī effectively naturalizes philosophy to the Islamic community, making it approachable by even Traditionalist orthodox Muslims. One might even venture as far as to say that al-Fārābī seeks to make the Greek philosophers Muslims. In fact, in his *Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*, al-Fārābī asserts that both of these two Greek Masters believed in a single God, whom al-Fārābī explicitly refers to by the name of Allah.<sup>469</sup> In the title and throughout this text, Plato and Aristotle are given the title *Hakīm*, the Qur'anic term applied to one who is wise in the way of Allah – as opposed to *faylasūf*, the cognate term which renders *philosopher* specifically and connotes no Islamic meaning. In casting philosophical ideas in unmistakably Qur'anic language, al-Fārābī demonstrates that philosophy can be regarded as congruent with Islamic doctrine, and that it can be germane to an Islamic worldview and applicable to life from an Islamic perspective.

In closing the gap between Islam and philosophy, al-Fārābī contributes to the tenth-century debate on the relationship between revelation and reason. He answers to the

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<sup>469</sup> Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī, *Kitāb al-jama` bayna ra`yiyy al-Hakīmāyn* ed. `Alī Bū Milḥam (Bayrūt: Dār wa Maktabat al-Hilāl, 1996), 73. It is interesting that the subtitle of this book refers to the two Greek Masters as “Muslim Thinkers.”

Traditionalists who claimed that there is no role whatsoever for human reason or philosophy in Islam. He also answers to the Rationalists who advocated reason over against revelation. Al-Fārābī, like al-Ash`arī and al-Ṭahāwī, aims at a middle-ground position between the two extremes, allowing a significant role for reason while maintaining the primacy of revelation. And though for that reason al-Fārābī's position is somewhat critical of the Rationalists, it is definitely the case that al-Fārābī's position is far more inclusive and approving of philosophy and rationalism than al-Ash`arī's. Fakhry points out that al-Fārābī's characterization of the individual as a *zoon politicon* who could never attain to felicity outside of the collectivity of a society takes a position against the solitary life which would later be recommended by the Sufis,<sup>470</sup> even while al-Fārābī espoused the apparently very mystical notion of contact with the divine through the Active Intellect, which is the object of all human cognition. Al-Fārābī's position also speaks to the issues of the world of *kalām*, which latter he considers to be a necessity for the protection of the non-philosophic masses of the Islamic community.<sup>471</sup>

It has been speculated by Walzer<sup>472</sup> and countless others that al-Fārābī identified with the *Shī`ah* community of Islam, and some scholars even posit al-Fārābī's open affiliation with the *Shī`ah*; this is perhaps due to al-Fārābī's emphatic use of the term *Imam* and his association of the Imam with the prophet, as well as placing him in the role of community leadership owing to his prophetic capacity.<sup>473</sup> It may well also be due to

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<sup>470</sup> Fakhry, *Islamic Philosophy*, 45.

<sup>471</sup> Bakar, *Classification of Knowledge*, 147.

<sup>472</sup> For instance, see Walzer, *Perfect State*, 15-16.

<sup>473</sup> See Al-Fārābī, *al-Madīnah*, 246, 251.

the fact that al-Fārābī spent the last years of his life as a member of the court of the *Shī`ah* Ruler Sayf al-Dawlah. If al-Fārābī's excellent city is to be taken as a blueprint for a living, present-day society – one which depends on the presence of an incarnate prophet-Iman who is in constant communication with Allah – then al-Fārābī's doctrine might seem to be consistent with *Shī`ah* doctrine. However, if al-Fārābī's prophet is to be taken strictly as a reference to the Prophet Muḥammad, and the Excellent City taken to represent the Islamic *Ummah*, then al-Fārābī's doctrine should be seen to be fully in line with orthodox Islamic doctrine. Whether or not al-Fārābī should be counted among the *Shī`ah* is, however, a matter for another study.

The object of the present study has been to show that Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī was both a Muslim *and* a philosopher. In his work, he synthesizes the teachings of Greek philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle, as well as the Neoplatonists, within the universal perspective of Islam. In demonstrating that philosophical ideas are in many respects similar to Islamic ideas, and by asserting that both are dependent on divine revelation, al-Fārābī, like other orthodox Muslim thinkers of his time, harmonizes the two otherwise disparate traditions and asserts their interrelatedness. In doing so, al-Fārābī approaches a rehabilitation of Greek philosophy for Muslims who reject it, and he naturalizes a philosophically interpreted approach to Islam for those who yearn for a more reasoned approach to Allah than would typically have been found in the Traditionalist Islamic intellectualism of his time. In his work, al-Fārābī answers the tenth-century call to bring peace to a community divided over conflicting perspectives on the relationship of revelation to reason. When al-Fārābī's doctrine is properly understood, in

the way in which the evidence demonstrates that it was intended to be understood, the brilliant work of this Muslim philosopher has the potential to solve many of the ideological conflicts and hostilities which still rage between Islam and philosophy today.

In the next chapter, we will examine some of the most far-reaching consequences of the framework established by Walzer, the members of his camp, and those not immediately touched by Walzer but whose work evinces a thoroughgoing agreement with his paradigm. With this chapter, we demonstrate just how prolific the Walzerian paradigm has become.

## 15. The Impact of Walzer's Framework

### *Introduction to Walzer*

Richard Walzer (d. 1975), born in Berlin in 1901, was among the first to introduce the tenth-century Muslim philosopher al-Fārābī (d. 950) to English language scholarship. His first commentaries on al-Fārābī and Islamic philosophy in general were published in German in 1934. From 1943 until his death in 1975 Walzer continued to publish in English and German, in various European journals and other scholarly fora.<sup>474</sup> He lectured at Oxford from 1938-1970 and he died ten years before the publication of his unfinished magnum opus, a translation and commentary of al-Fārābī's *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah (On the Perfect State)*.<sup>475</sup> *The Perfect State*, largely based on previous scholarship by Friedrich Dieterici, represents al-Fārābī's first appearance on the Anglo-European stage, a debut bringing with it all of the *de rigueur* influence of Dieterici's orientalist paradigm.<sup>476</sup> Under Walzer's weighty scholarly and ideological influence, which carried on the tradition of Dieterici in painting a picture of the Arabic philosophical tradition as one which merely retained Greek philosophy for future transmission to other more elite (read: western) cultures, the West was introduced to a representation of al-Fārābī that should be regarded, at best, as merely two-dimensional.

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<sup>474</sup> Nicholas Rescher, *Al-Fārābī: An Annotated Bibliography* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1962); see esp. p. 38. See also Richard Walzer, *Greek into Arabic: Essays on Islamic Philosophy* (Oxford: Bruno Cassirer, 1962).

<sup>475</sup> *Op. cit.*

<sup>476</sup> Friedrich Dieterici (d. 1903), a Berlin-based German commentator on the Arabic philosophic tradition, published somewhat prolifically in German and Italian sources on al-Fārābī and other Muslim philosophers from 1858-1904. Also acknowledged under the alternate spelling of his given name, Friederich.

And, unfortunately for contemporary scholarship, this impoverished reading of al-Fārābī is the one that still survives today in what we shall call the Walzerian school of al-Fārābī commentary.<sup>477</sup> It is the aim of the current chapter to demonstrate the failings of Walzer’s framework and to discuss the very salient impact it has wrought upon subsequent generations of the al-Fārābī commentariat across the whole of English-speaking academia. It is impossible to treat every single work of al-Fārābī commentary here, so we will consider works by what we intend as a representative slice of this relatively small community.

***The Second Master’s First Appearance: Walzer’s Imperfect State***

Walzer’s work should be commended for its introduction of al-Fārābī to English-speaking and -reading audiences. As al-Fārābī is celebrated as one of the most important philosophers in the Arabic tradition – indeed, he is hailed as the Second Master, after the great Aristotle – our picture of the Arabic literary and philosophical traditions would be incomplete without Walzer’s contributions. As is the case with all things, however, when our knowledge of the facts surrounding subjects of historical analysis grows, certain readings of history become less valid and more obsolete. So, we give Walzer’s work the respect it is owed, and we carry on his efforts to refine our understanding of the Second Master. My reading at this point is informed by Wayne Proudfoot’s advice that reductionism is a faulty theoretical strategy.<sup>478</sup> Not only is Proudfoot’s theoretical

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<sup>477</sup> We make a point to differentiate our “Walzerian” school of philosophic commentary from the Walzerian School of economic philosophy and social criticism. For a thorough treatise on Michael Walzer’s philosophical conservatism, see the 2006 London University doctoral thesis of James Henry Gregory: <http://etheses.lse.ac.uk/2142/1/U613374.pdf>. First retrieved on 26 March 2019.

<sup>478</sup> Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1985), p. 190.

criticism valuable as an analytical framework in which to situate Walzer, but it is a welcome reminder not to be reductive in my own analysis of Walzer.

Before he was anything else, al-Fārābī was a tenth-century Muslim. He was thoroughly educated in the classical Islamic curriculum which consisted of Arabic language studies, including grammar, syntax, and literature; memorizing the entire Qur'ān; *tafsīr* (Qur'anic exegesis); *Ḥadīth* sciences, including substantive or positivist *Ḥadīth* study and memorization, as well as the science of *Ḥadīth* criticism and evaluation; *uṣūl al-fiqh* (jurisprudential sciences); and *sharī'ah* court procedure, as al-Fārābī worked for a time as a *qāḍī* (a judge in a *sharī'ah* court).<sup>479</sup> These make up the bedrock foundational levels of al-Fārābī's thought. To ignore these facts, as Roger Arnaldez seems to do in his somewhat general blanket statement about Islamic philosophy,<sup>480</sup> or as Richard Walzer does in his more specific comment to the effect that al-Fārābī's most mature and seminal work betrays exactly zero Islamic influence,<sup>481</sup> is to neglect what is arguably the most important thing to know about al-Fārābī.

At first glance, Walzer does seem to pay lip service to al-Fārābī's status as a Muslim. He writes that al-*Madīnah al-Fāḍilah* is "to be considered as the product of an Islamic philosopher of the tenth century... addressed to the Arabic-reading Muslim

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<sup>479</sup> Ibn Abī Usaibi'ah, *Uyū*, p. 604; as cited in Osman Bakar, *Classification of Knowledge in Islam: A Study in Islamic Philosophies of Science* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1998), p. 13. The assertion that al-Fārābī served as a *qāḍī* is one that was challenged by Charles Butterworth in a conversation I had with him over coffee in 2018. I have yet to speak with him about this reference from Ibn Abī 'Usaibi'ah, however.

<sup>480</sup> R. Arnaldez, "Falsafa." *The Encyclopaedia of Islam, New ed., Vol. 2* (Leiden: Brill, 1991), pp. 769-775. *Gale Virtual Reference Library*. Accessed 20 February, 2017.

<sup>481</sup> Richard Walzer, *Perfect State*, p. 5.

public of his own day.”<sup>482</sup> He continues, writing that al-Fārābī composed the book with a special purpose of his own, to give a new answer to the intellectual, religious, and political questions of his century. So far, Walzer and I agree. However, immediately following this assessment, he writes that,

the answer [al-Fārābī] puts forward, it is true, is *not of specifically Arabic or Islamic ancestry. It is wholly derivative and... Greek throughout, with regard to the ideas put forward as well as to the arguments used and the solutions reached,*” and without reference to “any special time or particular circumstances.”<sup>483</sup>

So, according to Walzer, al-Fārābī is somehow a “Muslim” whose views are in no way inspired or informed by his faith or his thorough and exhaustive Islamic education, in which he learned quite a great deal about the *special time* and *particular circumstances* of the Prophet Muḥammad – so what does Walzer mean when he says that al-Fārābī is a “Muslim”?

As we have noted in earlier chapters, Walzer goes on to declare unequivocally that al-Fārābī’s philosophy is completely dependent on the special authority of the Greek tradition,<sup>484</sup> and provides the “philosopher’s answer” to the discussion of a number of metaphysical discussions which “Muslim theologians had inherited from neo-Platonic and Christian predecessors.”<sup>485</sup> Al-Fārābī’s notion of the First Cause, for example, which, according to Walzer, can be described as a blend of Aristotelian and Neoplatonic

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<sup>482</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>483</sup> Ibid. My emphasis.

<sup>484</sup> Ibid., 334.

<sup>485</sup> Ibid., 335.

elements,<sup>486</sup> is completely dependent on “the Greek tradition *which he seems to continue* [and which] appears everywhere in this book as an orthodox Aristotelianism close to Alexander of Aphrodisias with a moderate neo-Platonic superstructure.”<sup>487</sup> Walzer incorrectly summarizes al-Fārābī’s account of prophecy as demoting the loftiest and most revered form of Muslim prophetic experience to a mere cognitive process of imitation within the deliberative faculties of the mind.<sup>488</sup> This is Walzer’s attempt at cementing the image of al-Fārābī as somehow averse to a doctrinally orthodox understanding of Muhammad’s prophetic role. Continuing in this line of thought, Walzer asserts explicitly that al-Fārābī is a *kāfir* (i.e., an infidel) and an apostate; he insists that al-Fārābī’s position,

indicates an unheard-of degradation of a fundamental tenet of Islam by reducing visionary prophecy to the second rank of human perfection and making it dependent on philosophical reason.... In addition, the word *nabiyy* is used again, in the same new sense as before, the prophet being distinguished by an extraordinarily accomplished faculty of representation which is subordinate to reason.<sup>489</sup>

Walzer thus coopts the prestige of the Second Master to malign the very foundations of Islamic philosophy as the work of a subversive anti-Muslim. These statements are based wholly on a misreading of al-Fārābī’s process of prophetic intellection as the result of merely-human volition and effort. A close reading of the *Madīnah*, however, as we will see in the sections below, clearly establishes al-Fārābī’s theory of prophecy as a process

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<sup>486</sup> Ibid., 352.

<sup>487</sup> Ibid., 339. My emphasis.

<sup>488</sup> Walzer, *Perfect State*, 416.

<sup>489</sup> Ibid., 440-441.

that can only be initiated by God and is mediated by the Angel (or Spirit) of Revelation. Walzer's misreading here diminishes al-Fārābī's emphasis on Allah as the source of divine revelation and asserts the efficacy of human reason in arriving at divine wisdom. That is, he attributes to al-Fārābī the view that merely human effort enough to attain to *wahīyy*, divine revelation.

In another similar work, Walzer makes clear his intent to put al-Fārābī at odds not just with Islamic doctrine, *per se*, but with the Islam and the community of Muslims at large. According to Walzer, al-Kindī attempted to introduce Greek philosophy into the Islamic world as the handmaiden of theology, an attempt which may, "have been more in keeping with the true Islamic way of life than *the attempts of Al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā and Ibn Rushd to understand prophecy and revelation in exclusively philosophical terms*"<sup>490</sup>. Here, Walzer holds that al-Kindī subordinated philosophy to revelation – which is true. However, in contrasting al-Fārābī with al-Kindī in this regard and declaring that al-Kindī may have been more in keeping with Islam than al-Fārābī, he suggests that their respective projects differed in this very fundamental way and that al-Fārābī should be bracketed out of the group of philosophers whom we should include in the "Islamic" tradition. He puts al-Fārābī on a footing with Muḥammad b. Zakariyyā al-Rāzī, who, according to Walzer, "rejects Moses, Jesus and Muḥammad as *impostors*."<sup>491</sup> Walzer's mechanism of separating al-Fārābī from the Muslims hinges on reading al-Fārābī as having subordinated revelation to philosophy, which he absolutely never did. Al-Fārābī

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<sup>490</sup> Richard Walzer, *Greek into Arabic: Essays on Islamic Philosophy* (Oxford: Bruno Cassirer, 1962), p. 180.

<sup>491</sup> *Ibid.* My emphasis.

did have his doubts about “religion”, as we have discussed above, but “religion” is not revelation and the two should not be conflated.<sup>492</sup> As will be shown below, however, this crucial mistake is made nearly universally across the board in western scholarship.

### ***The Picture Among Walzerian Scholars***

By “Walzerian” scholars, I do not intend to impart the idea that all such authors studied under Walzer or were in some way directly influenced by him. In many cases such scholars cite Walzer and approve of his paradigm and his conclusions about al-Fārābī. In other cases, the Walzerian scholar simply affirms a similar paradigm without any apparently direct influence by Walzer but having received similar training or having been trained in a related methodology with similar ideological commitments. Lawrence Venuti explains that translating source material from cultures foreign to our own is indeed informed by discourses, genres, and traditions, but also by values, beliefs, and social representations that are fundamentally ideological, affiliated with the interests of individuals, groups, and institutions in the commentator’s culture.<sup>493</sup> Drawing, as it does, from such a narrowly defined intellectual tradition, the Walzerian school lives off of the conceptual capital of its ancestors and adds very little more than minor empirical enrichment of it.<sup>494</sup> Thus whether an al-Fārābī scholar cites Walzer directly or merely affirms a similarly limiting paradigm, we find little more than the reduplication of the

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<sup>492</sup> The very necessary distinction which must be maintained between these two concepts will be discussed in a later chapter.

<sup>493</sup> Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator’s Invisibility: A History of Translation* (London: Routledge, 2018), p. 55.

<sup>494</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973, 2000, 2017), p. 93.

achievements of accepted scholars publishing in the Walzerian vein. I would agree here with Clifford Geertz, who, channeling Leo Steinberg, tells us that to move past this brand of academicism we must abandon the false sense of accomplishment achieved from “parading habitual skills” and finally address ourselves to problems sufficiently unclarified as to make new discovery possible.<sup>495</sup> Only then can our work become anything more than a reincarnated facsimile of the achievements from the past century of al-Fārābī commentary. In the final sections of this study, we will consider the works of several one-time Walzerian scholars whose more recent publications evince an effort to break out of the self-limiting paradigm.

### *The Claims of Western Scholarship*

In my assessment, the claims of the majority of Walzerian scholars are based on a faulty reading of al-Fārābī’s concept of prophecy and revelation, religion, and philosophy. Richard Walzer informs us that, in al-Fārābī’s opinion, “prophecy is not the result of some divine intervention,” but is rather due to the natural endowment of certain rare individuals and can be fully explained in rational terms.<sup>496</sup> Any connection between the philosopher and the higher supernatural world, which is not based on reasoned arguments, would be due to his representative faculty and would be confined to it – that is, it would be merely “imaginary.”<sup>497</sup> According to Walzer, revelation is not understood by al-Fārābī to be the result of divine action. But this is directly contrary to al-Fārābī’s

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<sup>495</sup> Ibid., p. 94.

<sup>496</sup> Walzer, *Perfect State*, p. 415.

<sup>497</sup> Ibid., 421.

description of the process of revelation. According to al-Fārābī, in every case of humans coming to taste divine wisdom, the action of human reason is preceded by the action of the First Cause through its agent, the Active Intellect.<sup>498</sup> Al-Fārābī tells us clearly that neither mankind’s rational faculty nor what is provided in man by his inborn nature has the wherewithal to attain to, in and of itself, the status of intellect in actuality: “To become intellect in actuality it needs something else which transfers it from potentiality to actuality, and it becomes actually intellect only when the intelligibles arise in it.”<sup>499</sup> And just so that it would not be unclear, al-Fārābī gives us explicit instructions for reading the Active Intellect as the Angel of Revelation and for reading the First Cause as Allah. On this subject, al-Fārābī writes, “It should be said of the Active Intellect that it is the Trustworthy Spirit and the Holy Spirit [“Spirit of Holiness”],”<sup>500</sup> and “*the First should be considered as Allah*, and it is the proximate cause of the Secondary Existents and of the existence of the Active Intellect”<sup>501</sup>. Walzer references the very work<sup>502</sup> in

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<sup>498</sup> Al-Fārābī, *al-Madīnah*, 222, 242.

<sup>499</sup> Al-Fārābī, *al-Madīnah*, p. 199, trans. Walzer. Here, Walzer’s translation is correct; when he has no immediate agenda concerning a particular line of text, his translation is usually correct for the most part. However, he derives the wildest of conclusions regarding the text which he has just translated.

<sup>500</sup> Abū Naṣr Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Fārābī, *Kitāb al-Siyāsah al-Madaniyyah*, ed. ‘Alī bū Milḥam (Bayrūt: Dar wa Maktabat al-Hilāl), 23. Also found in Abu Nasr al-Farabi, *The Political Writings: “Selected Aphorisms” and Other Texts*, trans. Charles Butterworth (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 111.

<sup>501</sup> Abū Naṣr Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Fārābī, *Kitāb al-Siyāsah al-Madaniyyah*, ed. ‘Alī bū Milḥam (Bayrūt: Dar wa Maktabat al-Hilāl), 22. Also found in Abu Nasr al-Farabi, *The Political Writings: “Selected Aphorisms” and Other Texts*, trans. Charles Butterworth (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 111. My emphasis.

<sup>502</sup> Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī, *Kitāb al-Siyāsa al-madaniyya al-mulaqqab bi-Mabādi’ al-mawjūdāt (Al-Fārābī’s The Political Regime)* (Bayrūt: Fawzī Mitrī Najjar, 1964), 31-32. As cited in Walzer, *Perfect State*, 332, 363-364, 405-406.

which al-Fārābī unequivocally identifies the Active Intellect with the Holy Spirit and the Angel of Revelation, as it appears in the Qur’ān and in many Qur’ān commentaries.<sup>503</sup> Yet, in spite of all the unambiguous evidence, Walzer still insists on denying that this is what al-Fārābī means in his use of these unmistakably clear terms.

The next step in al-Fārābī’s account of revelation is that the representational faculty of the soul transfers to the rational faculty the images of the sensibles which were revealed to it by the Active Intellect (=Angel of Revelation). The faculty of representation is that “by which [man] retains the imprints of the sensibles in the soul after these sensibles are absent from the senses”<sup>504</sup>. Upon emanation “from the Active Intellect, intelligibles arise at the same time in the rational faculty from the sensibles which are preserved in the faculty of representation”<sup>505</sup>. Al-Fārābī tells us that perceived intelligibles are “imitations” of the sensibles which have been impressed upon the faculty of representation by the Active Intellect. Finally, the conscious mind, where philosophy is supposed to happen, is the very last faculty of the soul to get the memo when knowledge has been transferred from the Active Intellect to the human consciousness. When the Active Intellect acts upon man’s potential intellect, the latter is then called the

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<sup>503</sup> The traditional Islamic interpretation of the Qur’anic verses concerning the Holy Spirit, or the Trustworthy spirit, is that these are titles for the Angel of Revelation, Gabriel (Jibrā’īl). See Ḥāfiẓ Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr, Abridged*, vol. 7 (Riyadh: Darussalam, 2000), pp. 288-289. See also `Abdullah Yūsuf `Alī’s commentary on Q26:193, at n.3224: “*Al-Rūḥ al-Amīn* [is] the epithet of Gabriel....” In *Qur’ān, op. cit.*, 930. See also Bakar’s note that “Al-Fārābī identified the active intellect with the holy spirit (*Rūḥ al-Quds*) or Gabriel, the archangel of divine revelation,” in Bakar, *Classification of Knowledge*, 56.

<sup>504</sup> Al-Fārābī, *al-Madīnah*, p. 164.

<sup>505</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 202.

Passive Intellect (*al-`aql al-munfa`il*).<sup>506</sup> When the potential intellect becomes the Passive Intellect, sensibles stored in the soul’s faculty of representation (*al-qūwwah al-mutakhayyilah*)<sup>507</sup> cause to arise, by way of imitation, intelligibles in the rational faculty of the soul (*al-qūwwah al-nāṭiqah*).<sup>508</sup> Rationalized intelligibles are the human mind’s expressed imitation of divine knowledge, and the intellect only becomes actualized when these intelligibles arise in it as a result of the Active Intellect’s first having acted upon it.<sup>509</sup> Therefore, according to al-Fārābī, revelation is *always* prior to reason and the latter only proceeds from, and depends upon, the former. Thus, philosophy also depends entirely upon revelation.

**“Revelation Is Not Genuine Truth, Merely an Imitation”**

In his agenda to confound al-Fārābī’s concept of “imitation,” we note again Walzer’s insistence upon that al-Fārābī’s having degraded and debauched the “highest conceivable form of prophetic experience” to a merely human cognitive process open to absolutely anyone. This completely misconstrues al-Fārābī’s use of the term “imitation.” Knowledge, for al-Fārābī, is but a specter of images – imitations of things-in-themselves; since the things-in-themselves (“forms” – *ṣūrah/ṣuwar*) cannot physically be transferred to the inside of the mind, what exists in the mind are “imitations” (*muḥākāt*).<sup>510</sup> Forms

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<sup>506</sup> Ibid.

<sup>507</sup> Ibid.

<sup>508</sup> Ibid.

<sup>509</sup> Ibid., 198.

<sup>510</sup> Al-Fārābī, *al-Madīnah*, p. 210, §2.2.5; §2.3.4 See also pp. 212-216, *passim*.

are not constituted in themselves but, rather, they need to exist in a material subject (*mādah*). The traces of the intelligibles sensed in the sense-perceptive faculty and conceived of in the representative faculty are not the numerically-same forms-in-themselves, as the material existent is not itself transferred into the mind of the knower. “They are called forms only due to similarity”<sup>511</sup>. We will see this concept again below, in Ibn ‘Arabī’s *qūwwah muṣawwirah*, or form-giving faculty.

Christopher Colmo, in a very Walzerian vein, cannot seem to wrap his head around this idea, either. He writes, “Alfarabi makes it clear that he means to subordinate religion to philosophy, but it is not clear why this subordination takes the form of imitation”<sup>512</sup>. Once again, al-Fārābī’s “imitation” is a philosophical concept which holds that in the transfer of knowledge from outside of the soul (mind) into the soul of the knower, the things-in-themselves are not actually transferred to the inside of the mind – an image of the thing is presented to the faculty of representation which stores the imprints of sensibles (*maḥsūsāt*) once they are no longer in contact with the senses.<sup>513</sup> This is made clear in al-Fārābī’s *Political Regime (Kitāb al-Siyāsah al-Madaniyyah)*, in which he writes that “the imaginative (faculty) is what preserves the traces of sense-perceptions after they have been absent from sense...”<sup>514</sup>. Al-Fārābī’s notion of religion,

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<sup>511</sup> Al-Fārābī, *al-Siyāsah al-Madaniyyah*, in Charles E. Butterworth (trans.), *Alfarabi: The Political Writings, Volume II: “Political Regime,” and “Summary of Plato’s Laws,”* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015), 34.

<sup>512</sup> Christopher A. Colmo, *Breaking with Athens: Alfarabi as Founder* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2005), p. 12.

<sup>513</sup> Al-Fārābī, *al-Madīnah*, pp. 166-170.

<sup>514</sup> Al-Fārābī, *Political Regime*, p. 31.

which holds that religious concepts are imitations or similitudes of truth-in-actuality (known through revelation and demonstrably true via logical methods), is thus not accusing religion of being lesser-than, in any qualitative sense, relative to truths which are expressed demonstratively, such as in sentential logic.<sup>515</sup> All language is definitionally symbolic, including the demonstrative calculus of sentential logic. Al-Fārābī does not impugn the quality of the truths imparted through the expressive methodologies of “religion”; it is merely that he prefers *burhān* (i.e., demonstration), because he thinks that symbolic logic is a cleaner method of expression than metaphor.

### ***Revelation Is Subordinate to Reason***

From this misunderstanding of al-Fārābī’s notion of revelation and prophecy Walzer justifies the accusation, detailed above, that al-Fārābī is a *kāfir* (infidel) and an apostate; he insists that al-Fārābī’s position,

indicates an unheard-of degradation of a fundamental tenet of Islam by reducing visionary prophecy to the second rank of human perfection and making it dependent on philosophical reason.... In addition, the word *nabiyy* is used again, in the same new sense as before, the prophet being distinguished by an extraordinarily accomplished faculty of representation which is subordinate to reason.<sup>516</sup>

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<sup>515</sup> See Lara Harb, *Arabic Poetics: Aesthetic Experience in Classical Arabic Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 80-88. For a very in-depth study of al-Fārābī and sentential logic, see Joep Lameer’s incredible book, *Al-Fārābī and Aristotelian Syllogistics: Greek Theory and Islamic Practice* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994). For a somewhat shorter study on al-Fārābī and his use of symbolic and sentential logic, see Shukri B. Abed, *Aristotelian Logic and the Arabic Language in Al-Fārābī* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991). Though we disagree with some of Abed’s pronouncements on the state of al-Fārābī’s status as a faithful “Muslim”, his examination of al-Fārābī’s Aristotelian logic was especially valuable in the 1990s when little work was being conducted in this area, and remains a groundbreaking effort to this day.

<sup>516</sup> Walzer, *Perfect State*, 440-441. This quote bears repeating here to demonstrate the closeness with which Colmo reproduces Walzer’s point of view.

Once again, Christopher Colmo seems to be taking cues from Walzer and his camp, writing that the “contrast between Alfarabi’s view and the Muslim view is visible to all.”<sup>517</sup> Furthermore, “Alfarabi departs too far from the teachings of Islam for him to be able to base his own teaching... on the authority of [Islamic] revelation.”<sup>518</sup>

First, we dispel the notion that faculty of representation is subordinate to reason. If the representational faculty were subordinate to reason, it would follow that reason and deliberation, as loci within the soul (mind) of the philosopher, would be reached by revelation before the faculty of representation. However, al-Fārābī writes that all the particulars revealed by the Active Intellect “reach the faculty of representation *without the intervention of deliberation*. It is for this reason that such things can also be present in the faculty of representation without having been discovered by deliberation.”<sup>519</sup> Thus, it becomes eminently clear that al-Fārābī does not superordinate reason in any sense, to the faculty of representation: revelation reaches the faculty of representation without any involvement or interference from the faculties of deliberation, which, again, process theoretical and practical reason. Furthermore, all this flies in the face of A.R. Booth’s claims that while, for Avicenna, prophecy can be the source of new knowledge, “for [al-Fārābī], prophecy can only really facilitate *understanding* knowledge that one already has....”<sup>520</sup> I would insist that Booth has conflated the related yet not synonymous terms

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<sup>517</sup> Colmo, p. 106.

<sup>518</sup> Ibid., p. 107.

<sup>519</sup> Al-Fārābī, *al-Madīnah*, p. 220. My emphasis.

<sup>520</sup> Anthony Robert Booth, *Analytic Islamic Philosophy* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 110. Original emphasis.

“prophecy” and “revelation.” This conflation notwithstanding, it is no less incorrect to assert that either prophecy or revelation can only aid in the understanding of already-extant knowledge. As shown above, revelation directly bypasses the mechanisms of deliberation, instead of acting upon them to elucidate such knowledge as one may already possess.

### ***Subordination, Continued***

Muhammad Ali Khalidi alleges that al-Fārābī views prophecy as “the capacity to convey demonstrative philosophical truths in symbolic idiom.”<sup>521</sup> But this misses the point that “demonstrative philosophical truths” are nothing more than regular human concepts expressed in symbolic logic. Even the linguistic processes of demonstrative philosophy amount to hardly more than symbolic representation. But I digress. To return to the point at hand, in Khalidi’s view, prophecy is dependent upon philosophy and philosophical truths. However, in *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah*, al-Fārābī puts it clearly that revelation from Allah is the one and only source of the knowledge necessary for achieving felicity (*sa`ādah*), or salvation. And since “revelation” (*waḥy* – by which prophethood is established) is mentioned in the text prior to “philosopher,” and since the status of the philosopher is only achieved post-revelation and is furthermore only mentioned behind the Sage (*ḥakīm*), any assertion that the philosopher is of greater importance to al-Fārābī than the prophet is simply untenable.<sup>522</sup>

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<sup>521</sup> Muhammad Ali Khalidi, “Introduction,” in Muhammad Ali Khalidi (ed.), *Medieval Islamic Philosophical Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. xi-xl, here, p. xx.

<sup>522</sup> Al-Fārābī, *al-Madīnah*, p. 244. Note the order of terms: *Waḥy* (revelation; establishes *nubūwwah*, prophethood), followed by *Ḥakīm* (Sage, a Qur’anic term), and only in third place, *faylasūf* (philosopher).

In the *Attainment of Happiness (Taḥṣīl al-Sa`ādah)*, al-Fārābī states:

So let it be clear to you that the idea of the Philosopher, Supreme Ruler, Prince, Legislator, and Imam is but a single idea. No matter which one of these words you take, if you proceed to look at what each of them signifies among the majority of those who speak our language, you will find that they all finally agree by signifying one and the same idea.<sup>523</sup>

Prophet (*nabiyy*) and sage (*ḥakīm*) can also be added to this list, as we have just noted that the prophet, the philosopher, the sage, and the Imam are just different titles for the same individual in his performance of different functions.<sup>524</sup> All of these titles and functions together, in one and the same individual, are applied to the man who has achieved the highest rank of perfection that the faculty of representation can reach, which is described by al-Fārābī as the state of prophethood (*nubūwwah*).<sup>525</sup> So Khalidi's assertion that the philosopher is equal to the prophet is not one which should be agreed with. In fact, the criterion for judging the degree of perfection of this individual is exactly his having reached the state of *nubūwwah*. So, all of these titles and functions of the ruler are subsumed under his function *as* the prophet. From this we clearly understand al-Fārābī's assertion that all philosophy proceeds from revelation, and it is always subsumed under the latter's aegis.

### ***Al-Fārābī's Unbelief (Kufr) Revisited***

Far from resorting only to implied insinuations of al-Fārābī's status as an unbeliever, Walzerian scholars also make more explicit claims to this effect. Not only

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<sup>523</sup> Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī, *Kitāb Taḥṣīl al-Sa`ādah*, appearing as Part I of *Alfarabi's Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*, ed. and trans. Muhsin Mahdi (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1962), 47.

<sup>524</sup> Al-Fārābī, *al-Madīnah*, 244-246.

<sup>525</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.

does Walzer decry the status of the Prophet Muḥammad in al-Fārābī's name, but he also insists that al-Fārābī's express purpose, his "special intention," in his sparing use of the word "Allah" is to denigrate and defame the name of Allah,<sup>526</sup> and to propagate the view that Islamic "prophecy is inferior to philosophy"<sup>527</sup>. Damien Janos seems to follow suit. In his discussion of the relatively low frequency of al-Fārābī's use of the Arabic name for God, "Allah," he claims that the term *Allāh* is virtually absent from al-Fārābī's metaphysical treatises. "This says a lot about the Second Teacher's philosophical project," he writes, "which was aimed more at continuing the Greek tradition of reflection on the principles (*ārcāi/mabādi'*) and causes (*aitāi/asbāb/ 'ilal*) of the universe, than at creating a system of thought compatible with the Islamic revelation"<sup>528</sup>. Neither Walzer's assertion nor Janos' is correct.

Al-Fārābī tells us that the highest rank of prophecy and prophethood is reached by the man whose inborn nature (*fiṭrah* – a direct Qur'anic reference to created dispositionality<sup>529</sup>) is predisposed to receive the intelligibles from the Active Intellect and imitate them effectively. His Passive Intellect, having been perfected by apprehending (storing) all of the intelligibles received from the Active Intellect, becomes the Acquired Intellect (*al-`aql al-mustafād*), which occupies a mid-way position between the Passive

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<sup>526</sup> Walzer, *Perfect State*, 440.

<sup>527</sup> *Ibid.*, 415.

<sup>528</sup> Damien Janos, *Method, Structure, and Development in al-Fārābī's Cosmology* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012), p. 184, n.203.

<sup>529</sup> A direct Qur'anic reference: For example, see Q30:30.

Intellect and the Active Intellect.<sup>530</sup> This is the final stage of perfection, which is immediately prior to receiving divine revelation. When this occurs,

then it is this man who receives Divine Revelation (*wahy*), and God Almighty (Allah, *`Azza wa Jalla*) grants him Revelation through the mediation of the Active Intellect, so that the emanation from God Almighty (Allah, *Tabāraka wa Ta`āla*) to the Active Intellect is passed on to his Passive Intellect through the mediation of the Acquired Intellect, and then to the faculty of representation. Thus he is, through the emanation from the Active Intellect to his Passive Intellect, a wise man (*ḥakīm*) and a philosopher (*faylasūf*) and an accomplished thinker who employs an intellect of divine quality [*bi-`aql fīhi al-ilāhiyy*], and through the emanation from the Active Intellect to his faculty of representation a [warning] prophet (*nabiyy mundhir*).<sup>531</sup> who warns of things to come and tells of particular things which exist at present.<sup>532</sup>

This man has achieved the most perfect rank of humanity and has reached the highest degree of felicity, his soul having been united with the Active Intellect; this, according to al-Fārābī, is the first condition for being a ruler. This man is the sovereign over whom no other human being has any sovereignty whatsoever; he is the *Imam*.<sup>533</sup> Thus, the first prerequisite for ruling is prophethood established by the power of Allah through revelation, and not by human power through the exercise of reason and deliberation. In *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah*, as in his other works (as noted above), al-Fārābī clearly and

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<sup>530</sup> Ibid., 242.

<sup>531</sup> Walzer mistranslates this phrase as “visionary prophet,” which is incorrect. The phrase is “warning prophet,” which is a direct reference to the Prophet Muḥammad, who was sent as a prophet to warn mankind. *Mundhir* (warner) appears fifteen times in the Qur’ān: 2:213; 4:165; 6:48; 13:7; 18:56; 26:194; 26:208; 27:92; 37:72; 38:4, 65; 44:3; 46:29; 50:2; 79:45. *Nadhīr*, from the same root, appears 58 times. In all of its forms, this word appears over 100 times as either “warner(s),” “warning,” or having “been warned.”

<sup>532</sup> Al-Fārābī, *al-Madīnah*, trans. Walzer, 245. We have quoted a longer version of this passage in an earlier chapter, but this part bears repeating again here, in this context.

<sup>533</sup> Al-Fārābī, *al-Madīnah*, 246.

explicitly subordinates the role of reason to the primacy and superiority of revelation from Allah, mediated by the Angel of Revelation.

### ***Who Receives Revelation? Who Can Do Philosophy?***

Al-Fārābī's view holds that humans are endowed by God with specific and unalterable capacities resulting in either the ability or the inability to receive revelation.

Al-Fārābī writes,

Not every human being is *created* so as to be disposed to receive the first intelligibles, because individual human beings are by nature generated with varied faculties and divergent preparations. So some of them do not by nature receive any of the primary intelligibles. Others receive them, but not as they are – [these are] like mad persons. And others receive them as they are. These are the ones whose human innate character is sound.<sup>534</sup>

Thus, diverging from Maimonides<sup>535</sup>, according to whom man may attain to the capacity for receiving revelation through his own effort – a honing of one's abilities, say – al-Fārābī holds that one's philosophic and/or prophetic capacities are endowed at the very moment of creation, and these are the only capacities he will ever possess. Revelation, which is the necessary precondition of all philosophy and rulership, occurs only very rarely, in a human being with a very extraordinary nature, “[whose] soul has joined with the active intellect.... This human being is the king in truth according to the ancients, and he is the one of whom it ought to be said that he receives revelation [from Allah]”<sup>536</sup>.

These citations from al-Fārābī serve, additionally, to refute the claim of A. R. Booth, who

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<sup>534</sup> Al-Fārābī, *Political Regime*, trans. Butterworth, p. 65. My emphasis.

<sup>535</sup> Moses Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, trans. M. Friedländer, Second Edition (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), pp. 219-250.

<sup>536</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

alleges that al-Fārābī never “explicitly” tells us that the first condition of rulership is prophecy or that al-Fārābī’s First Ruler is the prophet.<sup>537</sup>

In the same text, Booth incorrectly asserts that the common man has the capacity to reason like the philosophers, thereby attaining to the level of prophecy: “The more we reason like philosophers,” he writes, “the more our knowledge resembles that of the prophets”<sup>538</sup>. The suggestion that we reason *like* the philosophers indicates the reality that we are in fact *not* philosophers. Furthermore, only those born with the capacity for philosophy and/or revelation are capable of either. Al-Fārābī has made it perfectly clear that neither philosophy nor revelation are capacities which are reached by one’s individual human effort. He writes,

the counterfeit philosopher is he who studies the theoretical sciences [philosophy] without being naturally equipped for them. Therefore, although the counterfeit and the vain may complete the study of the theoretical sciences, in the end their possession of them diminishes little by little. By the time they reach the age at which a man should become perfect in the virtues, their knowledge will have been completely extinguished.<sup>539</sup>

Al-Fārābī’s views concerning those who are capable of philosophy and/or revelation are clear: only those created by Allah with such a capacity (*qūwwah*) may ever hope to attain to either.

Yet another audacious charge against al-Fārābī is leveled by Steven Harvey, who shockingly misunderstands the role of Islamic revelation for the establishment of

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<sup>537</sup> Booth, p. 187.

<sup>538</sup> Ibid., p. 93.

<sup>539</sup> Al-Fārābī, *The Attainment of Happiness (Kitāb Tahṣīl al-Sa‘ādah)*, in *Alfarabi: Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, Revised Edition*, trans. Muhsin Mahdi (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), pp. 48-49.

rulership and the conduct of governance which al-Fārābī envisions. He tells us that al-Fārābī assigns to the philosopher a function usually only associated with the Prophet, in contradistinction to the hierarchical order professed in Islam. “Al-Fārābī thus describes here the emergence of natural religion whereby the philosopher brings into being and establishes a religion in a natural way *by means of his knowledge and imagination, without divine revelation*”<sup>540</sup>. If the above discussion were not enough to dispel this wildly incorrect reading of al-Fārābī’s notion of revelation, I submit the following. In a notably orthodox turn of phrase, our philosopher writes,

...the trustworthy spirit [the Angel of Revelation, see Q26:193]... is the one through which God [Allah],<sup>541</sup> may He be exalted, communicates the revelation to the first ruler of the city... Revelation descends from Him level by level until it reaches the first ruler who thus governs the city or the nation and nations with what revelation from God [Allah], may He be exalted, brings, so that the first ruler’s governance also extends to every one of the divisions of the city in an orderly manner until it finally reaches the last divisions... God [Allah], may He be exalted, is also the governor of the virtuous city, just as He is the governor of the world...<sup>542</sup>

Very clearly, al-Fārābī considers the First Ruler as a mere vicegerent taking his instructions from Allah, who is the real ruler – ruling both the virtuous city (i.e., the Muslim community, the *Ummah*) and the rest of the world.

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<sup>540</sup> Steven Harvey, “Islamic and Jewish Philosophy,” in Peter Adamson and Richard C. Taylor (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 349-369, here, p. 360.

<sup>541</sup> In the original Arabic text, the only direct name for God used by al-Fārābī is Allah.

<sup>542</sup> Al-Fārābī, *Book of Religion (Kitāb al-Millah)*, in *Alfarabi: The Political Writings: “Selected Aphorisms” and Other Texts*, trans. Charles E. Butterworth (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), pp. 111-112.

### ***Who Needs Religion?***

As we can see, far from neglecting the mention of Allah's name in his treatises, al-Fārābī could not possibly clarify any further the fact that he believes in Allah as the source of revelation, from which latter the first ruler derives the system of governance that he implements under his reign – obedience to which is incumbent upon all, philosophers and non-philosophers alike. Accordingly, the next inaccuracy we will address here is the claim that al-Fārābī's philosophers were somehow exempt from following the religious law established by al-Fārābī's prophet, because they were in no need of it. For example, Khalidi tells us that in al-Fārābī's paradigm, the philosophers will object to the prophet's religion, "until they realize that it contains figurative representations of philosophical truths"<sup>543</sup>. That is, they believe that religion is not necessary for them.

Christopher Colmo levels a similar charge, alleging that al-Fārābī takes for granted the superiority of philosophy to religion in order to avoid offending those of his readers who see themselves as "among those who understand what is spoken about philosophically and are, therefore, in no need of religion"<sup>544</sup>. Furthermore, al-Fārābī not only raises the question of whether or not one needs religious knowledge which goes beyond that supplied by philosophy, "he everywhere answers the question negatively"<sup>545</sup>. Colmo's view, put succinctly, is that al-Fārābī believes religion is unnecessary for the

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<sup>543</sup> Khalidi, p. xvii.

<sup>544</sup> Colmo, p. 11.

<sup>545</sup> Ibid.

philosophically inclined. Echoing this view, which, quite frankly, astonishes me, is the Muslim scholar of Islamic history, Fazlur Rahman, who writes, “the importance of al-Farabi lies in his attempt to elevate philosophy to the place of highest value and to subordinate the revelation and the *sharī‘ah*, or religious law, to it”<sup>546</sup>.

By now, the reader will have come to expect my reply to these contentions: It is blatantly false that al-Fārābī denies the binding power of religious law upon the philosophers. On the contrary, he held that the *Sharī‘ah* is incumbent upon all humans, philosophers and prophets alike. Interestingly, and ironically, we find evidence of this cited in the writings of Fazlur Rahman himself. He tells us directly and explicitly that the Muslim philosophers, including al-Fārābī, do not “envisage that the philosopher can remain above or beyond the *Milla* [religion, religious law].” Citing al-Fārābī, he writes, “A philosopher must perform the external (bodily) acts and observe the duties of the law [*Sharī‘ah*], for if a person disregards a law ordained as incumbent by a prophet and then pursues philosophy, *he must be deserted*. He should consider unlawful for himself what is unlawful for his *Milla*”<sup>547</sup>. Rahman explains that this is because an ordinary philosopher may understand the intentions of the prophet more clearly than the non-philosophic masses, but he cannot institute new law, new *Sharī‘ah*.

We may cement this point further by continuing our examination of the texts. In the *Political Regime* al-Fārābī tells us that,

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<sup>546</sup> Fazlur Rahman, “Islamic Philosophy,” in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol. IV, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan and Free Press, 1967), pp. 219-24, here, p. 220; as cited in Colmo, p. 10.

<sup>547</sup> Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam: Philosophy and Orthodoxy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 63; cf. Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī, *sharḥ risāla zainūn al-Kabīr* (Hyderabad, 1349 AH), p. 9. My emphasis.

the first cause [Allah] is what brings revelation to this human being [the ruler] by the intermediary of the active intellect [Angel of Revelation]. The rulership of this human being is the first rulership, and the rest of the human rulerships are subsequent to this one and proceed from it.<sup>548</sup>

This explains clearly that rulership is established by revelation and that future rulerships are to be modeled on the example of the first, which we understand as a reference to the Sunnaic model set down by the Prophet Muḥammad and followed by subsequent Muslims.

A second reading clarifies that it is the first ruler who establishes religious law – also a reference to the Prophet Muḥammad. “Now the craft of the virtuous first ruler is kingly and joined with revelation from God [Allah]. Indeed, he determines the actions and opinions in the virtuous religion *by means of revelation.*” Al-Fārābī goes on to explain that either every single action and opinion is revealed to him by Allah or “he determines them by means of the faculty he acquires from revelation and from the Revealer, may He be exalted,” so that even by this secondary means, the entire religion is indeed still revealed to him.<sup>549</sup>

A third reading, in addition to the ones cited above by Rahman, indicates that al-Fārābī’s position held even the philosophers liable to obey the *Shari‘ah*. He instructs unequivocally that it is the vain philosopher who studies the theoretical sciences, “but without going any further and without being habituated to doing *the acts considered virtuous by a certain religion* or the generally accepted noble acts.” Instead of the religious law, “he follows his own inclination and appetites in everything, whatever they

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<sup>548</sup> Al-Fārābī, *Political Regime*, trans. Butterworth, p. 69.

<sup>549</sup> Al-Fārābī, *Book of Religion*, trans. Butterworth, p. 94. My emphasis.

may happen to be”<sup>550</sup>. This “certain religion” to which al-Fārābī refers is unquestionably Islam. From all of this we can see clearly that, in the world envisioned by al-Fārābī, even the philosophers are indeed required to obey the *Sharī‘ah*, as it is the only means of attaining to the salvific wisdom leading to felicity (*sa‘ādah*) or salvation.

### ***What Is Religion to al-Fārābī?***

Finally, I would be remiss if I did not clarify al-Fārābī’s position on what, exactly, religion *is*. Admittedly, he was critical of “religion,” as a general concept, insofar as he viewed it as a system of rhetorical imagery which was not entirely capable of imparting revealed wisdom in a form which is mathematically certain to reach the soul of the knower in its originally revealed form. That is, he preferred demonstrative sentential logic, as he sees those symbols as less likely to be misconstrued than the rhetorical methodologies of metaphor, allegory, parable. Al-Fārābī is critical of religion only insofar as philosophy expresses the content of revealed wisdom in cold, mathematical, non-rhetorical language, while he views religion as rhetorical and flowery. However, he tells us that the same wisdom is certain (i.e., non-rhetorical) when it is in the soul of one endowed with the capacity for philosophical understanding of revelation, but it is religion (i.e., rhetorical) in the soul of one who is not so endowed.<sup>551</sup> This is because philosophers may understand revelation in the form in which the prophet receives it, but the general masses – who are not philosophically inclined and thus incapable of understanding revealed wisdom in its original revealed form – must be instructed by means of corporeal

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<sup>550</sup> Al-Fārābī, *Attainment of Happiness*, trans. Muhsin Mahdi, p. 48. My emphasis.

<sup>551</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

similitudes which represent the principles of revealed wisdom symbolically.<sup>552</sup> In other words, all al-Fārābī is saying is that if everybody could express and understand truth in the math-like symbols of sentential logic, that would cut down on the confusion and it would be better than some people having to attempt to glean truth by listening to homilies and sermons for their lack of ability to understand sentential logic.

Religion, then, is nothing more than a mode of expression. It is one way of saying a thing, which could be said any number of ways. For al-Fārābī, religion consists of symbols which closely approximate truths, while philosophy seeks to demonstrate those truths directly as they are through a less-likely to be misconstrued medium of expression such as sentential logic.<sup>553</sup> The “multitude” is not equipped for the certainty of understanding which is provided by a capacity for “philosophy,” and those who are endowed with such a capacity are incredibly rare; they are exceptional individuals who have been born with a unique predisposition for the union of the representative faculty of their soul with the Active Intellect. So, the non-philosophic masses really do *need* religion in order to approach an understanding of, and then benefit from, the revealed wisdom which provides the only key to salvation. And, as shown above, everyone including the philosophers are required to obey Islamic religious law, the *Sharī’ah*.

### **Religion’s Context**

Clifford Geertz, paraphrasing Clyde Kluckhohn, informs us that culture is a storehouse of pooled learning and a set of standardized orientations to recurring

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<sup>552</sup> Al-Fārābī, *al-Madīnah*, 278; Al-Fārābī, *Tahṣīl al-Sa`ādah*, 45.

<sup>553</sup> Al-Fārābī, *Tahṣīl al-Sa`ādah*, 47.

problems.<sup>554</sup> As an inextricable part of culture, religion is an effort to conserve a culture's collective fund of the general Meaning in terms of which individuals interpret their experience and organize their conduct. Any individual who spent formative years inside a culture in which religion is a paramount socializing force must be considered within his religious context. Seeming to take this into account, Henry Corbin, in his 1993 work on the history of Islamic philosophy, does attempt to qualify his rather inexplicable disregard for the Islamic elements in al-Fārābī's philosophy. Having duly acknowledged al-Fārābī's concern with Islamic prophecy, he proceeds to excuse himself for not including it as a factor in his analysis. "To undertake," he writes, "a comparative study of the features of Islamic thought, which is far more diverse and rich than has been hitherto supposed in the West, and to isolate the particular context of a philosophy which does not identify itself with the Greek contribution, is a task for the future"<sup>555</sup>. We have here, at the very least, an acknowledgement that it will be necessary in the future to consider al-Fārābī's religion as an influence on his writings.

Peter Adamson, a recovering member of the Walzerian school, has, in his more recent publications, come to an understanding of al-Fārābī that is more in keeping with a reading informed by the historical, religious, and cultural context of the tenth-century Islamic world. Adamson tells us "it's pretty clear that when he describes the ideal, prophet-philosopher ruler who brings a revealed religion, [al-Fārābī] is thinking of

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<sup>554</sup> Geertz, p. 3.

<sup>555</sup> Henry Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2014), p. 79. First published in French in 1993.

Muḥammad as a primary example.” This is because “the prophet-ruler is also a lawgiver, which should put us in mind of Islamic law and its basis in Muḥammad’s revelation and teachings. [Al-Fārābī’s] *Book of Religion* strongly suggests this...”<sup>556</sup>. Additionally, Damien Janos, another erstwhile Walzerian whose work frequently cites Adamson, explicitly acknowledges al-Fārābī’s Islam in a recent detailed analytical overview of al-Fārābī’s essay, *On the One and Oneness*. Janos writes that this essay by al-Fārābī should be included in the works that we consider as Islamic apologetics and anti-Christian (specifically anti-trinitarian) polemics.<sup>557</sup> Finally, David Burrell represents a third example of a scholar willing to allow for al-Fārābī’s Islam. He explains that the prophet-philosopher of al-Fārābī’s *Virtuous City* is “of course” the Prophet Muhammad.

“Indeed,” he writes,

what distinguishes the Messenger of God from Plato’s ‘philosopher king’, now overtly recast in Neoplatonic terms, is that the divine emanation reaches well beyond his intellect into his imagination, so that the idiom of the Qur’an will not be limited to those who have undergone a rigorous intellectual training, but is eminently comprehensible to all who hear it.<sup>558</sup>

We take this last characterization as agreement with our argument that divine revelation is conceived of in al-Fārābī’s cosmology as pre-verbal or pre-linguistic. That is, the content of the revelation is imputed in a non-linguistic manner.

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<sup>556</sup> Peter Adamson, *Philosophy in the Islamic World: A History of Philosophy Without Any Gaps, Vol. III* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 73.

<sup>557</sup> Damien Janos, “Al-Fārābī’s *On the One and Oneness*,” in Khaled El-Rouayheb and Sabine Schmidtke, *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 101-128, here, p. 122-123.

<sup>558</sup> David b. Burrell, CSC, “Creation,” in Tim Winter (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 141-160, here, p. 148.

### *Socio-Cultural-Historical Context*

The translation movement (*Bayt al-Hikmah*) of the first ‘Abbāsid century marks the beginning in-earnest of the Arabs’ involvement in philosophy, *per se*. And according to Jim al-Khalili it is impossible to understand Arabic philosophy “without considering the extent to which Islam influenced scientific and philosophical thought. Arabic science was, throughout its golden age, inextricably linked to religion”<sup>559</sup>. The scientific revolution would never have taken place if not for Islam, in contradistinction to the spread of Christianity over the preceding centuries, which had “nothing like the same effect in stimulating and encouraging original scientific thinking”<sup>560</sup>.

Khalid Blankinship tells us that before the Ninth Century the proto-*Sunnīs*, descendants of the Companions of the Prophet, had long been engaged in a scrambling effort to find and preserve information. By the time of al-Fārābī, then, the Muslims had established a well-entrenched cultural practice of recording, maintaining, and transmitting information that was formative of their identity as Muslims. Thus, we should read the translation movement – of which al-Fārābī was an integral part – as blooming out from the “great thirst of the Muslims from the great cities of the Fertile Crescent and beyond for authentic information about earlier times”<sup>561</sup>. Furthermore, Muhsin al-Musawi tells us that in these efforts the Arabic language had become an all-encompassing

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<sup>559</sup> Jim al-Khalili, *The House of Wisdom: How Arabic Science Saved Ancient Knowledge and Gave Us the Renaissance* (New York: Penguin Books, 2010), p. 33.

<sup>560</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>561</sup> Khalid Blankinship, “The Early Creed,” in *Cambridge Companion*, *op. cit.*, pp. 33-54, here, p. 42.

nomizing mechanism for the “spread of a culturally oriented Islamic identification”<sup>562</sup>. He writes that the Arabs’ “lifelong preoccupation with and veneration of Arabic cannot be adequately comprehended by secularized modernists, who thus fail to recognize the driving force behind such encyclopaedic efforts over the centuries”<sup>563</sup>. According to al-Musawi, it is this modernist depreciation of premodern Arabic cultural production which redounds to a substantial disengagement from a tradition which was vital for the promotion of education and culture in newly emerging Islamic communities.

But what exactly were the *Bayt al-Hikmah* translators propagating? Was it Greek knowledge, or do translations of ancient works become something entirely new and different? Without a reliable chain of transmission, no product of the translation movement coming out of *Bayt al-Hikmah* could have been considered an authoritative representation of an original work. To maintain the integrity of authoritative information, Muslim scholars developed their own hegemonic system for authorizing the legitimate transmission (*riwāyah*) of reliable knowledge. Muhsin al-Musawi describes *samāʿ* as the “certified and authorized audition whereby a specific disciple was given a license [*ijāzah*] to have a book read, copied, circulated, sold, discussed, and passed through contrafaction... and commentary.” An *ijazah* is “given to a disciple on the basis of a strong belief in his capacity, commitment, faith in the subject of transmission, and intimate familiarity with both the work and the author”<sup>564</sup>. In Islamic literary culture there

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<sup>562</sup> Muhsin J. al-Musawi, *The Medieval Republic of Arabic Letters: Arabic Knowledge Construction* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015), p. 56.

<sup>563</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>564</sup> Al-Musawi, pp. 121-122.

is also the question of the higher authority of either the written or the spoken word.

Konrad Hirschler tells us that by 980 Muslim litterateurs still paid deference to “the long-standing primacy of the non-written word...”<sup>565</sup>. Scholars fearing that the proliferation of texts and literacy would endanger the authority of the spoken word as received at the foot of the master required that even oral/aural learning required certification by an authorized transmitter.<sup>566</sup>

These questions about the reliability of the written word as opposed to the oral/oral tradition ensured the entrenchment of the notion that teacher-student contact validated the text and ensured the reliability of the transmission. By his death in 1251 al-Idrīsī was still including isnads (chains of transmission) for the knowledge contained in the works he authored.<sup>567</sup> And even by the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the likes of Ibn al-Ḥājj and al-Suyūṭī still criticized popular teachers for having gained their knowledge from an unauthorized teacher.<sup>568</sup> Ibn Raḍwān (d. 1061) did agree that the individual acquisition of theoretical knowledge was acceptable for one’s personal use, but not as a means of transmission. Thus, without having an *ijāzah* to transmit from Plato or Aristotle or one of their students, neither al-Fārābī nor any other Muslim philosopher of his time would have considered himself as engaged in the transmission of Greek philosophy.

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<sup>565</sup> Konrad Hirschler, *The Written Word in the Medieval Arabic Lands: A Social and Cultural History of Reading Practices* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), p. 11.

<sup>566</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>567</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 16-17.

<sup>568</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 184.

### *Philologico-Translational Context*

Besides the more obvious indication that al-Fārābī lacked a license to transmit Greek philosophy directly from a Greek source, there is also the theory that all translations domesticate the text. Lawrence Venuti's research shows that any translation's meaning is always provisional on the basis of varying cultural assumptions and interpretive choices, in specific social situations and historical periods.<sup>569</sup> Thus, any and every translation results in a product that is wholly and completely different from the source material. A.M. Goichon points out that even by Ibn Sīnā's time (d. 1037) Arabic translations of Greek words were still cumbersome, and that Arabic philosophy was laden with Greek stylistic influence until al-Ghazālī.<sup>570</sup> One might reasonably assume that this is reason to believe that Arabic philosophy before Ghazali would have been more Greek, not less; but this would be an error. A more fluid, fluent translation necessitates a wider and deeper understanding of the source language. A clunky translation by a translator fluent in the target language can only indicate a lack of familiarity with the source language. This assertion finds agreement in Venuti, who tells us that the illusion of transparency – i.e., a more fluid, readable translation – conceals the process of naturalizing the foreign text within the domestic cultural and social setting.<sup>571</sup>

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<sup>569</sup> Venuti, p. 13.

<sup>570</sup> A.M. Goichon, *The Philosophy of Avicenna and its Influence on Medieval Europe*, trans. M.S. Khan (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1969), pp. 49-50.

<sup>571</sup> Venuti, p. 51. Al-Musawi puts the relative date of the domesticating translation even later, around the time of Ibn Nubātah's (d. 1366) account of al-Ma'mūn's Aristotle dream. See Muhsin al-Musawi, *op. cit.*, p. 207.

Venuti's theories are born out in the historical writings of Majid Fakhry, which demonstrate that even ninth- and tenth-century Muslims believed that the Arabo-Islamic culturo-linguistic paradigm indelibly colors the translation of philosophical writing. Fakhry tells of a debate that took place in 932 between Abū Bishr Mattā, a logician, and Abū Sa'īd al-Sīrāfī, a grammarian, in which Abū Bishr was chided for his Greek bias and his imperfect knowledge of Arabic. Abū Bishr's retort was that logic is free from linguistic encumbrances and thus his lack of proficiency in Arabic should not affect his translations. Sīrāfī accused him of having mutilated and corrupted the Arabic language by introducing alien terms.<sup>572</sup> Muhsin al-Musawi also relates this historic debate, coming to similar conclusions about its implications. Abū Bishr translated Greek texts through the medium of Syriac and thus doubly altered the final translational product. He maintained that the Greek knowledge passed down by Aristotle is free from locality and "Greekness," and thus is a translatable commodity that amounts to universal knowledge.<sup>573</sup> This premise of Abū Bishr's, in addition to sparking the debate mentioned above, also incited opposition as both the traditionalists and the grammarians were "alarmed by its foreignness." As such they viewed it as no less a threat than the Frankish raids of the Crusades, which gave rise to a contending conservative view of Islamic culture led in no small part by Ibn Taymiyyah.<sup>574</sup>

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<sup>572</sup> Majid Fakhry, *A History of Islamic Philosophy, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed.* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), pp. 186-192.

<sup>573</sup> Muhsin J. al-Musawi, *The Medieval Republic of Arabic Letters: Arabic Knowledge Construction* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015), p. 211.

<sup>574</sup> *Ibid.*

The implications of al-Musawi's and Fakhry's conclusions agree with those of Robert Hoyland, who sees the Arabic language as having been an effective mechanism of resistance against insurgent forces. He tells us that as Christianity made headway into northern Arabia from the Fourth through the Sixth Centuries, Arabia saw a massive campaign to destabilize Arab societies and peoples launched by imperialist forces, both Roman and Greek. Documents written in Arabic (first in the Nabataean-Arabic alphabet and later the Arabic alphabet) must have been a deliberate choice. Facing the steamrolling power of imperialist armies and having the option to write in other, more stable alphabets, the choice to write in Arabic must have been meaningful to Arabs' self-perception as a people bound by a common identity bound up in *Murūwwah*, blood ties, and a sense of pan-Arab moral community.<sup>575</sup>

### ***Conclusion***

This chapter has been intended to demonstrate the foolhardiness of attempting to remove al-Fārābī from his own cultural-linguistic and -religious context, that to do so is clearly to strip the analytical subject of much of its most valuable content. Interpretations are only valid within limited frameworks and categorical schemas, because the source material is itself only valid within equally limited frameworks and categorical schemas.<sup>576</sup> Every scholar whose work we have visited above has made the crucial mistake of decontextualizing al-Fārābī's writing and then still expecting the validity of the schema to endure outside of its originating frameworks and categories. Instead of

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<sup>575</sup> Robert G. Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs: From the Bronze Age to the Coming of Islam* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 237-242.

<sup>576</sup> See Thomas A. Tweed, *Crossings and Dwellings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 17.

trying to fit the subject into the ideologically-determined mold, we should take Muhsin Mahdi's advice by attempting to shed as much as we can of our methodological commitments to follow the evidence wherever it leads. For whatever reason, the Walzerian school has been reluctant to follow al-Fārābī into his own world of medieval Islam, choosing instead to chase him into an imagined past or project him into the future.

In the following chapter we will take a closer look at Muhsin Mahdi's advice, which arises in large part out of his seminal study of Ibn Khaldūn and his own experience at the University of Chicago. We will evaluate his prescriptions and assess their potential to serve as a viable framework for reading al-Fārābī.

## 16. Approaching a Viable Framework: Muhsin Mahdi

This chapter examines stages in the intellectual development of the late philosophic researcher, commentator, author, and historian, Muhsin Mahdi. After writing his PhD dissertation on Ibn Khaldun's *Philosophy of History* Mahdi went on to become perhaps the foremost leading expert on al-Fārābī in the West and elsewhere. In his later years Mahdi changed concentrations a second time, moving into the field of manuscript editing where he succeeded in publishing what is considered today as the most authentic and authoritative edition of the *Thousand and One Nights*<sup>577</sup>. We examine Mahdi's intellectual formation during his graduate studies at the University of Chicago and the writing of his dissertation there, before he embarked upon his prestigious career as a foundational expert on al-Fārābī. It appears that Mahdi had chosen to adopt the philosophy of Ibn Khaldun – the object of his dissertation – as an interpretive lens through which to read al-Fārābī, applying Ibn Khaldun's proposed framework as his own theoretical lens. This reading becomes complicated when Mahdi's reading of Ibn Khaldun suggests Mahdi's projection of a composite or synthesis of his erstwhile mentors' paradigms onto his reading of the medieval Ibn Khaldūn. As mentioned briefly above, Mahdi recommended doffing one's intellectual, methodological, political, and ideological commitments before engaging in any interpretive work and checking the proverbial baggage at the door, so to speak, but a close reading shows him either unwilling or unable to do this himself. How, then, should we read al-Fārābī, when

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<sup>577</sup> Muhsin Mahdi, *The Thousand and One Nights* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995); and Husain Haddawy (trans.), *The Arabian Nights, based on the Text of the Fourteenth-Century Syrian Manuscript Edited by Muhsin Mahdi* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1990).

arguably the foremost expert in the early history of western al-Fārābī commentary was unable to follow his own recommendations for establishing a viable framework?

***Introduction: Discovering Muhsin Mahdi***

My discovery of Muhsin Mahdi happened around the same time as my discovery of al-Fārābī. One might even say I discovered them at the same time. At the start of my first foray into the world of al-Fārābī scholarship, I knew nothing about Richard Walzer, nor was I conversant in the prevailing arguments and disagreements between the fields of discourse germane to my new quest, so I began to read some of the relevant works on al-Fārābī and the history of Islamic Philosophy. I read Majid Fakhry's *History of Islamic Philosophy*,<sup>578</sup> a general history of the foundational figures and formative ideas at the fountainhead of Islamic Philosophy, and his turn away from the general towards a more specific take on al-Fārābī's writings.<sup>579</sup> I read Damien Janos' *Method, Structure, and Development in al-Fārābī's Cosmology*.<sup>580</sup> I read Fazlur Rahman's *Prophecy in Islam*,<sup>581</sup> and works on medieval philosophical thought by Muhammad Ali Khalidi<sup>582</sup> and Osman Bakar,<sup>583</sup> and a laundry list of other philosophic commentators and historians, writing in

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<sup>578</sup> Majid Fakhry, *A History of Islamic Philosophy 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

<sup>579</sup> Majid Fakhry, *Al-Fārābī: Founder of Islamic Neoplatonism: His Life, Works, and Influence* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1997).

<sup>580</sup> Damien Janos, *Method, Structure, and Development in al-Fārābī's Cosmology* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012).

<sup>581</sup> Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam: Philosophy and Orthodoxy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

<sup>582</sup> Khalidi, *Medieval Islamic Philosophical Writings*.

<sup>583</sup> Bakar, *Classification*.

western languages and in Arabic. The problem that remained was that I found little agreement between them on the important questions surrounding al-Fārābī's positions, conclusions, and intentions. Most of these authors could read Arabic, being either native speakers or trained at the research level, but it was unclear whether any of them had read the extant manuscripts of al-Fārābī writings – *any* of the manuscripts. Luckily, however, after a bit more initial research I stumbled upon an author who had read the relevant manuscripts – *all* of them, every single one.<sup>584</sup> This scholar was the incredibly erudite linguist, historian, and scholar of Islamic history and philosophy, the late Muhsin Mahdi. For reasons that will become apparent below, it was the meticulous work of Professor Mahdi that finally enabled me to cut through much of the confused tension I had experienced at the outset of my headlong plunge into al-Fārābī studies.

Mahdi's research bridges the chasmic gap between the respective Western and Arabic traditions of al-Fārābī scholarship, so his body of work is *the* place to start for anyone considering a foray into the relatively obscure realm of the religio-political philosophy of the tenth-century Muslim world. The current project comes as a result of an effort to look deeper into Mahdi's intellectual formation in order to better understand his rather unique positionality on al-Fārābī's role as the founder of Islamic political philosophy. As Mahdi's thought began to take a formative role in the development of my own positions on al-Fārābī, I wondered whose thought had been influential in Mahdi's own formation. Professor Peter Gran, a former student of Mahdi's and familiar with his

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<sup>584</sup> Cf. Muhsin Mahdi, "Al-Fārābī's Imperfect State," in *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 110.4 (1990), pp. 691-726. Mahdi demonstrates his intimate knowledge of the MSS, relating in intricate detail the historiography and transmission of individual recensions. See pp. 715-725.

work, suggested an examination of Mahdi's major writings against the backdrop of his developmental influences.<sup>585</sup> The results are interesting. Mahdi is open about having adopted Ibn Khaldūn's philosophy as a theoretical framework, applying it as a lens in his own work throughout his career. But when Mahdi's study of Ibn Khaldūn is read in concert with a close reading of his own autobiographical discussion of his intellectual formation at Chicago, it becomes apparent that Mahdi may have projected his own philosophy – a composite adaptation of the principles of his most admired professors – onto that of Ibn Khaldūn.

### ***Early Years***

Mahdi was born in 1926 in Kerbala, Iraq.<sup>586</sup> After finishing secondary school in Baghdad he received an Iraqi government scholarship to study business administration at the American University in Beirut. Attracted more to philosophy than to business he fulfilled the requirements for both majors. Then he lectured on economics at the University of Baghdad before being awarded yet another scholarship to study economics at the University of Chicago. Arriving at Chicago in 1948, Mahdi had brought along with him both a yearning for philosophy and the formative imprint of a culture in crisis. In an autobiographical chapter published in *Jusoor Magazine*, "Years of Chicago," Mahdi recalls the hunger pangs he had felt for philosophy during undergraduate studies at Beirut as he pursued a business degree in fulfillment of duties to family and country. His

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<sup>585</sup> See Muhsin al-Musawi, *Reading Iraq: Culture and Power in Conflict* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006).

<sup>586</sup> Charles Butterworth, "In Memoriam: Muhsin Mahdi (1926-2007)" in *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin* 41.2 (2007), pp. 227-228, here, p. 227.

government scholarship stipulated that he study business administration, but he “kept trying to evade that subject and devote as much time as possible to the study of philosophy”<sup>587</sup>. He did earn the business degree but his time with the philosopher Charles Malik, a professor at Beirut and former student of Whitehead and Heidegger, had left him with the impression that “the pursuit of wisdom is the only pursuit worth living for”<sup>588</sup>. So when he won the second scholarship to study economics at Chicago, he had already been planning to transfer out of economics and into a department where he could study philosophy.

### ***Forming a Soul***

Professor Mahdi characterizes the overall thrust of his experience at the University of Chicago’s Committee on Social thought as an opportunity to develop an interest combining “the rigor of the training offered by the specialized departments with broader concerns for the meaning of the past and the fate of humanity at large, in particular the fate of what was then called the underdeveloped world...”<sup>589</sup>. This is an apt description as it encapsulates the essence of Mahdi’s philosophy of history. Mahdi prizes the rigor of the specialized disciplines, even as he decries the blinding commitment to methodology that often comes with departmental specialization. In place of obeisance to the tyranny of a single, narrowly circumscribed methodology, he recommends scholars develop their skills at whichever methodology the evidence calls for. This way, the

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<sup>587</sup> Muhsin Mahdi, “Years of Chicago: Forming a Soul” in Munir Akash and Amira El-Zein (eds.), *Jusoor* 7/8 (1996), pp. 171-199, here, p. 172.

<sup>588</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 173.

<sup>589</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 172.

scholar may proceed to excavate the wisdom of the Ancients while availing himself of an unlimited array of tools. Furthermore, the sentiments arising out of Mahdi's experiences in postwar, post-colonial Iraq found a welcome home in the romanticism of the Committee's faculty, fertile ground for the cultivation of a philosophy of history that speaks against the West's proclivity towards characterizing today's Middle East – the "Orient" – as the product of a culture in decline.<sup>590</sup>

In further description of the formation of his paradigm Mahdi points, retrospectively, to a conflict he perceived between "analysts" and "historians." He muses that he had been interested in both philosophical analysis and the philosophy of history but that, ultimately, he landed in the historians' camp. The reason for his having chosen history as his home, he remembers, was his interest in the role of contextual history in analyzing the phenomenon of philosophy's transmission across national borders.<sup>591</sup> Here again we see Mahdi's aversion to the methodological assumptions inherent in the commitment to a single discipline or methodology, as well as his own commitment to contextual history as an absolutely-necessary factor in any well-rounded historical analysis. Referring to a 1985 work on al-Fārābī by Richard Walzer, Mahdi describes a phenomenon in which the common sense of those "under the spell" of a particular discipline and its methodological assumptions is overwhelmed. Blind commitment to methodology "tends to turn the commentator away from his primary task of analyzing and explaining [a] work's structure, method, problems, and point of view," and

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<sup>590</sup> Oliver Leaman, "Orientalism and Islamic Philosophy," in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol. 7 (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 159.

<sup>591</sup> Mahdi, "Years," p. 176.

“distract[ing] the commentator’s attention from even the salient characteristics of the work on which he is supposed to be commenting”<sup>592</sup>.

Arguably the most salient influence on Mahdi’s intellectual formation, visible in his writing and acknowledged explicitly in his works, was the philosopher Leo Strauss, who arrived at Chicago in 1949. Leaving a deep and lasting impression on Mahdi, Strauss preach[ed] the comforting thought that wisdom was to be *sought among the Ancients*, especially Plato and Aristotle; that things had been *going downhill ever since*; and that the world as we knew it was not going to last much longer... [but] we must go down fighting, that is, knowing ourselves and *the truth of our past*.<sup>593</sup>

This creed of “the best is in the past” was echoed for Mahdi by another chief influencer, Jon Nef, who taught Mahdi that the best of wisdom will always have been with the Greeks. To the benefit of contemporary scholars, however, Nef impressed upon Mahdi the possibility of ascertaining “seamless [*sic*] interrelations among the different aspects of history at particular times and places”<sup>594</sup>. So, while the best of wisdom may indeed have lived with the Greeks, it need not have died with them – with the right set of tools it remains accessible.

Philosophies with which he disagreed were also rather dominant in Mahdi’s thought. He valued the advice of Jon Nef from whom he “learned the meaning of commitment to searching for whatever truth was communicated throughout the Western tradition *from the classical Greeks to the moderns*”<sup>595</sup>. But he was disappointed with the

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<sup>592</sup> Muhsin Mahdi, “Al-Fārābī’s Imperfect State,” see especially pp. 17-19, 20-21.

<sup>593</sup> Mahdi, “Years,” p. 176. My emphasis.

<sup>594</sup> Ibid., p. 190.

<sup>595</sup> Ibid., p. 177. My emphasis.

myopically-construed sense of romanticism he found at Chicago, exemplified by Arnold Toynbee who asserted that the only hope of “Oriental” peoples lay in “their adopting Western civilization”<sup>596</sup>. This line of thought is not uncommon among western thinkers. Charles Butterworth, a former student of Mahdi’s points to those who assert that “Islamic thought failed to make a crucial transition, perhaps even an ascension, and thus never arrived at the kind of thinking on which modern technological success is premised”<sup>597</sup>. Mahdi placed great stock in the romantic concept of the Return to Greatness, and he felt that a process of tracing the communication of Truth from the Greeks to the moderns would be incomplete without taking up and considering the thought coming out of the nineteenth-century Oriental Renaissance. But Mahdi found among the faculty at the Committee a tendency to completely do away with the Romantic-Oriental Renaissance, opting instead for a “return to the seventeenth/eighteenth-century and to the original Renaissance, and [to] re-establish the pre-eminence and uniqueness of the Greco-Latic world as the true source of the Western humanistic tradition”<sup>598</sup>.

Mahdi prized the romantic positionalities of his mentors who felt the need for return, mentors including Leo Strauss, T.S. Eliot, Jacques Maritain, Yves Simon, Otto von Simpson, and Jon Nef. But, insofar as the ancient Greeks are subsumed under the general aegis of “the West,” the West’s return is *to the West*, back to a time of its own greatness. On the other hand, however, insofar as the greatness of the so-called Orient is

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<sup>596</sup> Ibid., p. 181.

<sup>597</sup> Charles Butterworth et. al., *The Political Aspects of Islamic Philosophy: Essays in Honor of Muhsin S. Mahdi* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 2.

<sup>598</sup> Mahdi, “Years,” p. 178.

relative to the degree of its appropriation and successful adoption of western civilization, the Orient's return must also be to the West, to a greatness not its own, the greatness of the superior Other. This was Mahdi's great lament. He recognized in the mentors he so admired an entrenched reluctance to turn the nostalgic yearning of their romantic gaze towards the Orient, a willingness to take it for granted that the West is the only Temple of Greatness and that *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*. Apparently, for them, the only greatness to come out of the Orient had been an appropriated and transplanted greatness, the stolen valor of intellectual conquest. Nothing outside the West could stand alone on its own merit. In this view, Islamic philosophy is construed as a mere repository of ancient principles, storing them in preservation for later, greater Europeans.<sup>599</sup> Mahdi does not express ire or malcontent for the views of his beloved and admired mentors; rather, in fact, his tone is apologetic. Nonetheless it is readily apparent that he did not share their Philhellenic Eurocentrism, and he chose – consciously or unconsciously – to blaze a divergent trail.

### ***Ibn Khaldūn: Forming a Framework***

In order to address this moral-intellectual quandary in which he had found himself, Mahdi set to work on constructing a solution to his problem. His prior acquaintance with the manuscripts of Ibn Khaldūn highlighted for him the providence of his having met Leo Strauss, whom, Mahdi had learned, was also acquainted with Ibn Khaldūn, having written a great deal on Islamic and Jewish Arabic philosophy by the

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<sup>599</sup> Mohammad Azadpur, "Is Islamic Philosophy Islamic?" in Vincent J. Cornell and Omid Safi (eds.), *Voices of Islam: Voices of Change, Vol. 5* (Westport: Praeger, 2007), pp. 244-274, here, p. 26.

time of his arrival at Chicago in 1949. Mahdi expresses a sense of having been fated to cross paths with Strauss and a deeply edifying satisfaction at having had the opportunity to work closely with him on his dissertation. The main objective of this project was “an analysis of Ibn Khaldun’s method and the interpretation of his relation to Greek and Muslim philosophers and to earlier Muslim historians...”<sup>600</sup>. Ibn Khaldūn thus turned out to be, for Mahdi, the bridge he had been searching for between history and philosophy in its Greek and Islamic forms. He also turned out to be a figure in whom Mahdi could locate an autochthonous non-western greatness to satisfy his cultivated romantic longing for the Return. As Charles Butterworth points out, an understanding of the way medieval Islamic philosophers “respond[ed] to their unique position as thoughtful members of a community guided by a revealed law sheds light on the momentous age-old question about the proper relationship between religion and politics,” and, furthermore, “such an understanding is fundamental to our appreciation of the way Greek... philosophy was transmitted to the medieval Islamic world and, through it, to us”<sup>601</sup>.

There are numerous indicators in Mahdi’s *Philosophy* which suggest a projection of his mentors’ principles into his reading of Ibn Khaldūn.<sup>602</sup> The first identifying trait, seen very early on in the text, is the stark romanticism of the faculty at the Committee on Social Thought. Mahdi describes the revolt of the moderns against the ancients as “not merely an event of the past which has been settled in favour of one party or another, but a

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<sup>600</sup> Mahdi, “Years,” p. 194.

<sup>601</sup> Butterworth et. al., *Political Aspects*, pp. 1-2.

<sup>602</sup> Muhsin Mahdi, *Ibn Khaldūn’s Philosophy of History: A Study in the Philosophic Foundation of the Science of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2016).

disturbing present reality raising the deepest and most significant problems of human life and thought, and demanding humble and conscientious enquiry...”<sup>603</sup>. Put succinctly, Mahdi understands the present state of postmodernism and its disregard for the eternal wisdom of the ancients as a crisis of no small magnitude. True to the romantic paradigms of Strauss and Nef, Mahdi agrees that ‘the best is in the past,’ holding as an absolute necessity the payment of deference to the principles of the Golden Age while also acknowledging the benefits of scientific advancement. In *Philosophy of History* Mahdi reads this paradigm into Ibn Khaldūn, ascribing it to the medieval philosopher himself. He describes Ibn Khaldūn as rising to fulfill a pressing need for the development of a new science of history while acknowledging the eternal legitimacy of established principles of scientific investigation. According to Mahdi, Ibn Khaldūn “found that only by admitting the *validity of these principles* and norms as developed by the ancients could the *new science* be constructed”<sup>604</sup>. This is made clear, Mahdi tells us, by the fact that Ibn Khaldūn applied the principles and norms of the Ancients in constructing his new science of history.

Next, in “Years,” Mahdi drives home the importance of prolonged, intense concentration on the contextual background of one’s subject in order to absorb the spirit of the subject’s milieu. He explains that “[t]his concentration leads... to the intuition of relationships between different aspects of human history, just as it is an intuition of the

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<sup>603</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>604</sup> Ibid. My emphasis.

meaning, message, and implications of the great works of the mind. It is a method that requires patience, time, absorption”<sup>605</sup>. This principle which Mahdi asserts was learned at the Committee on Social Thought is echoed in his reading of Ibn Khaldūn. In detailing the formation of Khaldūn’s philosophy of history Mahdi writes that

as a result of continuous experience in, and the practice of these sciences, men slowly acquire the *habitus* of the theoretical rational sciences and the ability to think in terms of cause and effect apart from the immediate experience of particular events or the application of such knowledge to particular situations for practical purposes.<sup>606</sup>

Thus, by absorbing the contextual background of the author one seeks to analyze, one also absorbs the habitus of the author, endowing the scholar with a capacity to think as the author thought.

Mahdi’s concept of the “habitus” in *Philosophy of History* should be read as synonymous with his description of “cultivated scholarly intuition” in “Years.” Once again, we see Mahdi defining and taking on the principles he learned and adopted at Chicago, and then we see those same principles and definitions read into Ibn Khaldūn – a superimposition of Mahdi’s own scholarly habitus onto his mental image of Ibn Khaldūn. Curiously, Mahdi asserts that this method allows for the determination of the “deliberate intention of the author,” and that this process is decidedly in contravention to any theory “seeking to explain [the author’s] meaning as the product of his psychological or social conditions”<sup>607</sup>. We should read this as an apologetic yet ultimately rebuking criticism of

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<sup>605</sup> Mahdi, “Years,” p. 191.

<sup>606</sup> Mahdi, *Philosophy of History*, p. 223. Original emphasis.

<sup>607</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

Mahdi's mentor Leo Strauss. Mahdi's writing evinces several of the more central notions asserted in the field of social science regarding mental processes, while, ironically, denying the validity of the field's methodology and conclusions.

A final observation that we can make in this analysis of Mahdi's philosophy of history concerns his treatment of Arabs who preceded the fathers of the Arabo-Islamic philosophical tradition. Put bluntly, he tends to treat them with contempt, using Ibn Khaldūn as a mouthpiece to characterize them as "provincial," "primitive," "dogmatic," "limited," and incapable of "meet[ing] the demands of concrete social life" while still maintaining the validity of their religious tradition.<sup>608</sup> I read this as Mahdi's attempt at establishing a framework in which to conceive of an autochthonously-Arabic greatness, one not appropriated or adapted from, or in imitation of, the Greeks as the original font of western greatness.<sup>609</sup> As discussed above Mahdi prized the romanticism of his mentors and their longing for the Return, but he lamented their refusal to look upon the Orient with that same longing.

To resolve this, he conceived of a period of post-prophetic *jāhiliyyah* (ignorance), from which the fathers of Islamic philosophy could rise to greatness of their own accord without the help of Philhellenic Christian Europeans. These later Muslims he describes as positively enlightened, possessed of a habitus cultivated through a profound steeping in

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<sup>608</sup> Ibid., pp. 29-33.

<sup>609</sup> A point which some are beginning to argue against. In fact, some hold that the Greeks did not even develop the intellectual sciences on their own, but, instead, appropriated them from the Orient. See Jonathan Lyons' remarks on Ibn Khaldūn in *The House of Wisdom: How the Arabs Transformed Western Civilization* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2009), p. 62ff.

all the requisite scientific principles<sup>610</sup> – the exact same principles he professes to having learned at the Committee on Social Thought. Furthermore, Mahdi reiterates his assertion of these later Arabs’ having reached this dawn of greatness without the help of the Western Mind by pointing out that “Ibn Khaldūn’s only direct and personal contact with Christian Europe and its culture” in the year 1364 left him utterly convinced of the dross and dearth and destruction that Christianity would always leave in its wake.<sup>611</sup> He saw no value in it and, thus, was not influenced by it. This point is interesting insofar as we have recognized that Mahdi denies the value of certain paradigms and yet he still appears to have been influenced by them.

***Conclusion: Further Questions To Be Asked?***

The sum of Mahdi’s experiences and opportunities at the Committee on Social Thought amounted to a fruitful result. Steeping himself in theory, methodology, and substantive philosophy – affirming and rejecting, cultivating and pruning, synthesizing and extracting – Mahdi developed a sophisticated technique of composite overlay or compound veneer. What we have described above as Mahdi’s ideal interpretive framework reveals itself, in a reading of his work on Ibn Khaldūn, as a reified mental structure superimposed onto the thought of the medieval philosopher. What Mahdi sees in Ibn Khaldūn is very conceivably what he chooses to see, even if this choice is an unconscious one. Mahdi explicitly disavows unconscious psychology as a valid

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<sup>610</sup> Mahdi, *Philosophy of History*, pp. 48-49. This is a point Mahdi would later take up again in his work on al-Fārābī. See Muhsin S. Mahdi, *Alfarabi and the Foundation of Islamic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2001). See esp. p. 1.

<sup>611</sup> Mahdi, *Philosophy of History*, pp. 40-41.

interpretive methodology so he would, in all likelihood, reject this reading of mine.<sup>612</sup>

But, as a concept, it does lend itself to a reasonably convincing narrative explanation of the congruities between the philosophies of his mentors, that of Ibn Khaldūn, and his own.

He constructs the ideal romantic philosophy of history from the spare parts of his favorite professors; next, he reads this composite into Ibn Khaldūn; then, finally, he adopts “Ibn Khaldūn’s” philosophy for his own. Insofar as he is ostensibly adopting the paradigm of a Great Philosopher, this process legitimates Mahdi’s reading while also fulfilling Leo Strauss’s requirement of seeking Wisdom only in the ancients, and it also pays obeisance to Jon Nef’s admonition to seek for Truth among the Greeks.<sup>613</sup> By deconstructing and projecting his mentors’ romantic philosophy onto Ibn Khaldūn and adopting it for his own, he has honored them and validated the conformity of his framework to theirs in one seamless move. Mahdi himself acknowledges the profound impact that his mentors had on him during his formative days at Chicago and throughout his career, so it is not unreasonable to attribute to him motivations along these lines.<sup>614</sup>

What gives further credence to this theory is the fact that Mahdi ascribes to the text its own motivations. That is, he declares the text to be self-aware, capable of making its own decisions about its translation from one language into another. In the introduction

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<sup>612</sup> Ibid., p. 9. For his mentor Strauss’s own rejection of unconscious psychology as an interpretive mechanism, see Nathan Tarcov and Thomas L. Pangle, “Epilogue: Leo Strauss and the History of Political Philosophy,” in Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey, *History of Political Philosophy, Third Ed.* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1987), pp. 907-938, here, p. 916.

<sup>613</sup> See above.

<sup>614</sup> Mahdi, “Years,” p. 171.

to his 1962 translation of al-Fārābī's *Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*, Mahdi explains that certain of the interpretive choices he made in translating the text were not conscious choices made by him but by the text itself. He remarks that, "the requirement of intelligibility has been given precedence over literalness and that idiomatic niceties have been subordinated to the requirement of remaining faithful to the style of the Arabic text. *This choice was imposed by the text itself*"<sup>615</sup>. To fail to acknowledge that every translation involves interpretive choices is tantamount to an implicit avowal of the influence of unconscious psychology in the act of translation. Arabic is a sprawling and circuitous language, every single word in the lexicon being subject to quibbles and quiddities on the question of its translation into any given language.

We must cede that Mahdi is not engaged in equivocating prevarication when he declares that the Arabic word translates itself; rather, what is most likely is that he is making a sort of meta-analytical commentary against Strauss's structuralist-constructionist paradigm of unconscious social influence on individual actors.<sup>616</sup> Mahdi tells us that a reader can never know what the author deliberately intended to say better than the author himself knows what the author meant to say, and that the full understanding of what the author intended to say must precede interpretations and judgments based on principles other than those accepted by the author.<sup>617</sup> Mahdi's stream

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<sup>615</sup> Muhsin Mahdi (trans.), *Alfarabi's Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, Revised Ed.* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), p. 9. My emphasis.

<sup>616</sup> Consider, for example, Kojève's gripping rebuttal of Strauss's structuralism. See Alexandre Kojève, "Tyranny and Wisdom", in Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny - Revised and Expanded Edition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) p. 135-176.

<sup>617</sup> Mahdi, *Philosophy of History*, pp. 8-9.

of circular logic declares a sort of wholistic positivism which allows no admission of unconscious social influences in interpretation, in the same breath as it necessitates steeping oneself in the contextual habitus of the author in order to be able to intuit his meaning. Any reasonable definition of “intuition” must include the idea of unconscious knowledge, so how can Mahdi evoke intuition while at the same time disavow unconscious influences in our thought processes?

We might reasonably conclude that Mahdi sees himself in Ibn Khaldūn and that, knowingly or unknowingly, he has projected his paradigm onto Ibn Khaldūn and adopted the latter’s philosophy of history for his own. However, Mahdi also tells us that only the author knows best what he intends to be understood, that he knows it far better than his readers might presume to know, and that, when in doubt, we must read what is explicitly on the page. Nevertheless, Mahdi also tells us that it is necessary to understand fully the context of the author’s environment, history, influences, etc., in order to get to the core of what he intends to impart – this way, being steeped in his habitus, we may intuit his intentions. So, then, what if our understanding of his contextual habitus contradicts what he declares explicitly? Reading in the fullness of context suggests to us that Mahdi’s philosophy, which he has projected onto Ibn Khaldūn, is very conceivably the product of his years at Chicago’s Committee on Social Thought rather than the adoption of an ancient philosopher’s watershed paradigm.

I posit a solution stemming from a theory with which Mahdi might possibly agree. Like unto the *‘uṣūliyy* approach to *fiqh* (jurisprudence), it is necessary to reconcile these

discrepancies while paying deference to the letter of the explicit text.<sup>618</sup> This solution would resolve the problem in keeping with Mahdi's rule of reading the letter of the text, and it is in keeping with Mahdi's contextual milieu of Islamic Philosophy and Science. When our understanding of the context leads to a contradiction in our explicit reading of the text, we should acknowledge that we have misunderstood the context or that our information about the context is incorrect.

However, even this solution only further legitimates the conclusions we have made. It demonstrates that one chooses a solution to a particular problem based on the lens through which one views the problem, the solution, and the tools used in analyzing both the solution and the problem. This indicates clearly that one's framework of interpretation will necessarily color the results. It also demonstrates the significance of Mahdi's point, that methodological assumptions, which constitute the bane of specialized university departments, in his opinion, will necessarily skew the results of any analysis made without awareness and acknowledgement of one's assumptions. For instance, Mahdi reads Ibn Khaldūn as holding the concept of prophecy to be merely figurative, and holding also that any person can attain to something like prophecy through concentrated and prolonged effort, as in Maimonides. However, this reading of Ibn Khaldūn may be a product of Mahdi's reading his own philosophy into Khaldūn's. According to Fazlur Rahman, Ibn Khaldūn took the concept of prophecy quite literally and he also held that no human could attain to prophethood, outside of those gifted with prophecy by God, as in the reading of al-Fārābī for which I have argued here. That is, prophecy is an endowed

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<sup>618</sup> Mustafa as-Sibā'ee, *The Sunnah and its Role in Islamic Legislation* (Riyadh: International Islamic Publishing House, 2008), pp. 356-357ff.

capacity, and no human can acquire it by any volitional means regardless of intent or effort.<sup>619</sup> Thus, if one admits context into the interpretive equation – as one always should and as Mahdi requires – there will always be quibbling over shades of gray. But those shades of gray are incredibly informative and important and thus should never be elided.

In conclusion, Mahdi asserts that the interrelation of Ibn Khaldūn’s experiences, reflections, and decisions must be taken as a whole. Ibn Khaldūn’s practical career and scientific thought can only be understood when studied together. So, with this conviction in mind, we must also hold the same principles to be true in our reading of Muhsin Mahdi. We must take all his words, his history, his writings, and our record of his experiences together as one whole informing the parts, even as much as we allow the parts to inform the whole. We may never answer the further questions of whether Mahdi is – rather than superimposing his mentors’ paradigms onto Ibn Khaldūn – superimposing his philosophy of Ibn Khaldūn onto his memories of Chicago. Perhaps it is not his mentors’ philosophies that he has read into Ibn Khaldūn, but, rather, Ibn Khaldūn’s philosophy that he remembers into those of his mentors? But this is how scholarship is done. We make our best effort to find a balance between explicit concrete evidence, the contextual background of the evidence’s provenance, and the broader scale of the social implications and further questions stemming from our findings. We continue this work in the spirit of the legacy left by a scholar whose prominence in his field bespeaks the greatness he sought for Arab philosophers in the Farabian tradition.

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<sup>619</sup> Rahman, *Prophecy*, pp. 106-107.

In the next and final chapter, I will propose a trial framework of interpretation, one which is perhaps not conclusive, but which approaches viability, nonetheless. Through an investigation into several diverging opinions on a philosopher less distant to us than al-Fārābī, we will demonstrate that even relatively recent figures are very easily misunderstood when viewed through an inadequate lens. Having demonstrated the ease with which one falls into error by eliding or ignoring context, we will then prove how facilely one may avoid these problems through the application of a suitable framework.

## 17. A Trial Framework, Illustrated With Reference to a Not-So-Distant Philosopher

### *Introduction*

What does Arthur Schopenhauer have to do with Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī? Probably not much on the face of it, as there were more than nine hundred years between them, unless one counts the fact that al-Fārābī reached Schopenhauer's correction of Kant almost a millennium before Schopenhauer did.<sup>620</sup> Al-Fārābī lived from 870 to 950, while Schopenhauer lived from 1788 to 1860<sup>621</sup>. The two were worlds apart in time, space, and focus; but I will argue, below, that their projects had similar aims. Furthermore, in demonstrating the ease with which the aims of a philosopher as recent as Schopenhauer are confused and distorted, the outlines of the confusion surrounding al-Fārābī emerge with a bit more clarity. Schopenhauer has told us in his own words exactly how we should read his philosophy, and yet some of us still get it wrong by applying the wrong analytical lens. Al-Fārābī has also told us how we should read his philosophy, yet most of us get it wrong, and for the very same reasons. If we make these silly mistakes with the likes of Schopenhauer, a western philosopher who lived less than two hundred years ago, how much more likely are we to mischaracterize a thinker from a non-western culture who lived more than a thousand years ago?

In this chapter, we proffer a framework that demystifies al-Fārābī as clearly as it does Schopenhauer. With a brief look at some commentary on Schopenhauer, we will see

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<sup>620</sup> Ramon Harvey, *Transcendent God, Rational World: A Māturīdī Theology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), p. 77. Almost a thousand years before Schopenhauer, al-Fārābī argued that existence-in-actuality is nothing apart from a given thing. This is exactly Schopenhauer's major correction to Kant's theory of the thing-in-itself.

<sup>621</sup> M.A.R. Habib, *A History of Literary Criticism and Theory: From Plato to the Present* (Malden: Blackwell, 2008), p. 503.

that when an inapt framework is applied, it very easy to distort even the clearest message. By examining even just a few voices in the Schopenhauer commentary tradition, we can demonstrate how easy it is to misunderstand Schopenhauer by taking him out of context and looking through a faulty lens. Next, we will propose a framework which should solve this thorny problem rather nimbly. Then, having used Schopenhauer to illustrate both the problem and the solution, we will apply our interpretive framework to al-Fārābī, and all will become clear.

### ***Reading Schopenhauer***

We begin with a few questions concerning Schopenhauer’s position on religion. As we have been contending with the question of whether al-Fārābī was a “Muslim”, and the Walzerians’ clear contention that he was not, we pose the same question about Schopenhauer: Was Arthur Schopenhauer religious? Was he a Christian? Was he a religionist or a philosopher? Was his life’s work concerned with religion or with philosophy? With Jesus Christ or with Plato? The answer to this question, which is in reality no more than the same question asked in several different ways, will depend upon whom one asks and what their priorities are. It will depend upon how they define “religion” and “philosophy”, how they understand Schopenhauer’s definitions of “religion” and “philosophy”, what they want the answer to be, and why.

Anthony Kenny tells us that Schopenhauer’s philosophy “did not rest on any religious premisses [*sic*]”, that he chided the notion of religious sainthood, having believed most religious saints’ lives were “full of superstition”<sup>622</sup>. He says that,

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<sup>622</sup> Anthony Kenny, *A New History of Western Philosophy: In Four Parts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 767.

according to Schopenhauer, religious beliefs “were mythical clothings of truths unattainable by the uneducated”<sup>623</sup>. That sounds relatively cut and dry. It sounds definitive. No religious premises whatsoever. Religion is nothing more than superstition, mythical balderdash for uneducated fools. We find a similar characterization in M.A.R. Habib, who tells us that Schopenhauer believed religion had outlived its purpose, already, by his own time, some two hundred years ago.<sup>624</sup> These two commentators, M.A.R. Habib and Anthony Kenny, are no fringe figures. They are both prolifically published and well-respected professors and contributors in the field of the history of philosophy. When they say Schopenhauer was not religious, that he was, in fact, hostile to religion, we should take it as read that these positions are representative of, at least, a very large plurality of the field, if not a majority.

So, where do they get these ideas? Whence this notion of Schopenhauer’s vote of no-confidence in the entirety of religion? The answer is not immediately clear, and as anyone who has even dabbled in German philosophy can tell you, approaching an answer can become confusing. Scholarly opinions about Schopenhauer differ more than opinions about almost any other German philosopher.<sup>625</sup> So, where is the hang-up? Is Schopenhauer on record as having regularly spouted explicitly anti-Christian or anti-religious rhetoric? Did he deface religious icons, or vandalize churches? No, he did not.

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<sup>623</sup> Ibid.

<sup>624</sup> Habib, *Literary Criticism*, p. 507.

<sup>625</sup> Vittorio Hösle, *A Short History of German Philosophy*, trans. Steven Rendall (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), p. 129.

On the other hand, did he say anything explicitly favorable toward religion in general or toward Christianity in particular? Yes, he did, and with some regularity. He openly and clearly praised both Christian and Indian ascetic traditions of self-denial as paths to “salvation”<sup>626</sup>. He claims that an appreciation of art depicting beautiful scenes of Christ with his saints will lead us to “perfect resignation, which is the innermost spirit of Christianity as of Indian wisdom, the giving up of all willing, turning back, abolition of the will and with it of the whole inner being of this world, and hence salvation”<sup>627</sup>. He named Jesus Christ as “the savior”, and we should note that Christianity was then, and is still, the only religion whose followers claim Jesus as their savior<sup>628</sup>. These are clear, critical, meaningful declarations which we cannot with any honesty discard or take lightly.

Next, what other context should we include into our brief analysis? How have we come to gage a man who declares Jesus Christ the savior of humanity as a non-Christian enemy of religion? In a few words, Schopenhauer was a pessimist and a curmudgeon. He railed and revolted against Christian scholastic dogmatism and against what he assessed as a corrupt institution in the respective bodies of the Roman Catholic Church and the German Protestant Church. Schopenhauer felt nothing but contempt for the Christianity

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<sup>626</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation, Volume I*, trans. E.F.J. Payne (Garden City: Dover Publications, 1966), pp. 232-233.

<sup>627</sup> Ibid.

<sup>628</sup> Ibid. One might perhaps contend that the “Jews for Jesus” movement is not “Christian”, per se, but in terms of taking Jesus Christ as the savior, we argue that it is, in fact, a Christian movement within the broader scope of Judaism.

*of his time* and for the academic philosophy so well adapted to the Church *of his time*.<sup>629</sup>

He saw in the religious traditions of India the possibility for a revival of the ascetic ideals once prevalent in Christian Europe but in his time losing ground to the promises of material prosperity ushered in by the industrial revolution and the Protestant Work Ethic.<sup>630</sup> None of this very clearly spells out, “anti-Christian” or “anti-religion” in any defensible sense. So, what are we missing here?

### ***The Problem***

Our problem began with the framing of the very first question: was Schopenhauer religious *or* philosophical? To put it quite frankly, this is a stupid way to frame the question. It is a false dichotomy which amounts to question-begging, to requiring the reader’s acceptance of the conclusion before he can even begin to examine the first premise. Framing the heart of the question as a religion-philosophy binary, such that never the twain shall meet, sets false limits upon all possible answers to the question. One may engage in both religion and philosophy at the same time. The two are not antithetical or mutually exclusive.

Next, just because Schopenhauer was unhappy with the Church of his time does not mean that he was unhappy with the core principles of Christianity as he understood them. Just because he hated the corrupt institutions of the Churches of his time does not mean that he would not happily embrace a Church from some other time. In his use of philosophy to critique the Church, he found the latter wanting, which suggests the

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<sup>629</sup> Hösle, p. 130.

<sup>630</sup> Ibid., p. 134.

possibility of repair or reform. He found in Indian ascetic traditions the best of what he believed the Christianity of his time and place to be lacking. He held up Jesus as the model of ultimate self-denial, claiming that the European institutions and practices of Christianity had lost something that was once present in them. He was unsatisfied with the Church, the Christianity, the religion of Germany and the rest of Europe, but he found hope in other potential models of Church, Christianity, religion. If a parish priest says he does not like acapella hymns, should the choir director assume that no hymns may be sung? If the same priest does say that he would prefer no hymns be sung, does that mean the organ player should take the day off? In both cases, certainly not. If a restaurant patron says she dislikes hot tea, should the waitstaff assume she dislikes all manner of hot beverages? If this patron does in fact say she hates to drink hot beverages, should the waitstaff assume that she would prefer to have no beverage at all? Again, the answer in both cases must be no.

Willingly, I cede that these analogies might at first seem a bit silly and overly simplistic, but I maintain that the whole problem really is this simple. Scholars of both Arthur Schopenhauer and al-Fārābī have been applying a framework which makes use of rigidly limiting definitions of “religion” and “philosophy”, and they have been bracketing critically important questions of historical context. All we need to solve this quandary is a workable definition of “religion”, one which does not set religion and philosophy at odds, and to renew the focus on historical context. In the following section, we will discuss working definitions to establish some parameters before applying our framework to Schopenhauer as a brief illustration. Having thus demonstrated the framework’s facility,

we will conclude the paper by applying it to our problem with western al-Fārābī interpretation.

### ***Definitions and Parameters***

As I have argued that al-Fārābī was a Muslim *and* a religionist, and that Schopenhauer was at least no enemy to religion, it seems reasonable first to define “religion”. Scholars have attempted to define this universally human phenomenon since the history of academic thought, so, there is certainly a lot of discourse to choose from. The definition we have chosen to adopt comes not from some dusty, old tome, nor from some shiny, new article in an online journal, but from a conversation I had with Dr. Marcus Bingenheimer at Temple University in the Fall of 2017. It is a serving of Marcus Aurelius’ Stoic philosophy with a touch of Rudolf Otto, a bit of Mircea Eliade, a sprinkling of Clifford Geertz, a dash of Max Weber, a twist of Emile Durkheim, and a helping of Bingenheimer’s own innovation. According to this definition, “a religion is any set of beliefs, practices, and symbols which organizes life around the pursuit of value construed as a transcendent, Ultimate Good, a *Summum Bonum*”<sup>631</sup>. Put a bit more simply, religion is what gets us from unhappy mundanity to the felicitous transcendent. The dichotomy between immanent and transcendent is a necessary one, but it need not represent anything supernatural or otherworldly, although it can. Likewise, the Ultimate Good need not represent a supernatural afterlife, merely that which is prized above all, the ideal held above everything else as the thing of highest value, the standard for emulation, that which we spend our lives seeking and pursuing. Most attempts to define

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<sup>631</sup> Marcus Bingenheimer, in conversation, Temple University, 2017; with a small modification.

religion tend to have loopholes, exclusions, exceptions, but I do not think this one has any. My career in the field is yet very young – in fact, the tentative success of this dissertation represents the very start of it – but I have never yet come across any example of a religion which falls outside of this definition. So, this is the definition we will use here.

Before moving on, we must also stipulate that our definition of religion allows for no false equivalencies, such as equating one characteristic or phenomenon of a religion with the concept of “religion” *in toto*. There shall be no synecdoche here; the part may never be taken to represent the whole, or vice versa. Though this may seem something of a nitpick, it has serious bearing. Many of those we criticize make the fundamental mistake of equating “revelation” with the whole category of “religion” and the reverse. They claim that because al-Fārābī values “philosophy” over “religion” he is somehow made un-Muslim. Indeed, in terms of creedal commitments and confessional theology, if one were to declare mere human reason more valuable than the revealed Word of *Allah*, it would constitute a serious breach of orthodoxy. But herein lies the problem: al-Fārābī never makes any such claim! He says that “religion” is a bit murkier a mode of expression than “clear proof”, by which he refers to sentential logic. This is no crime among the faithful of the *Ummah*. More on this to follow.

The next thing we should define is “philosophy”. As our definition of religion can be stated in other words as a way of life, which in turn can be restated as a “philosophy” in common parlance, how should we tell them apart? What is the difference between a religion and a philosophy? Religion is about standards of value and how to spend one’s

life pursuing things of ultimate value, while philosophy refers to “applying processes of reason to observations and utterances in order to assess their truthfulness or falsehood and their logical validity”<sup>632</sup>. In short, we might say that philosophy is scientific a way of getting to the truth or untruth of things we can see and say. We may also stipulate that philosophy encompasses the body of literature which has been, and is still, produced as a result of these endeavors. This last point tends to become a bone of contention, however, as one can *do* philosophy (i.e., philosophize) *about* anything, including religion, e.g., Philosophy of Religion, Philosophy of History, Philosophy of Philosophy (i.e., Metaphilosophy), etc. So, there will always be overlap in any Venn diagram which includes both religion and philosophy among its substrata.

One might observe that these two realms of human endeavor seem to be rather interdependent, that one would do well to value both at the same time, and this would be a very reasonable observation to make. Indeed, one could do a lot worse than to spend time with both religion and philosophy, using the one to enhance the other and vice versa. Why, then, are we even here having this conversation? We are here because nearly an entire century of discourse concerning Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī has failed to put into perspective three relative terms, to wit, religion, philosophy, and revelation<sup>633</sup>. By confusing al-Fārābī’s prioritization of religion, philosophy, and revelation, respectively, almost a hundred years of scholarship has entirely missed the point. As we have shown

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<sup>632</sup> My definition. I cede the fact that this definition would benefit from further discussion. An article soon to be published will clear this up.

<sup>633</sup> More on the importance of revelation to come, below. For now, suffice it to say that “revelation” refers to the phenomenon which occurs when a deity reveals something to one of its creatures. Here, we take al-Fārābī’s description of revelation as read, as his *description/definition* of revelation is not in contention. What is in contention is his prioritization of revelation over philosophy.

above, particularly in the case of A.R. Booth,<sup>634</sup> al-Fārābī never subordinates revelation (*wahīyy*) to philosophy (*falsafah*) or reason (*'aql*). He does find demonstrative language (*burhān*) less likely to be confused or misunderstood than verse or prose, two modes of speech frequently employed in the language of religion (*millah*), and this is the reason why nearly ten decades of scholarship has gone wrong.

Al-Fārābī does say that philosophical language (symbolic logic/sentential logic) is less likely to be confused than the metaphorical modes of verse, homiletics, and scripture. Fine! We cede that point, without reservation. However, the proposition that symbolic logic is a less confusing and more efficient mode of speech than religious allegory *does not* commit one ontologically to a further proposition that the revealed Word of God is subordinate to philosophy and that, thus, mere human reason is to be prized over divine revelation.

Remember, as we discuss above, that al-Fārābī was the protégé of the famous logician, Abū Bishr Mattā, who believed that demonstrative logic was somehow free of the symbolic-referential encumbrances of other linguistic modes; he maintained that the content of the knowledge passed down by the Greeks is free from all locality, from its inherent “Greekness,” that it is a translatable commodity amounting to universal knowledge.<sup>635</sup> Al-Fārābī believed that the meaning-full content of language could be distilled and expressed via the symbols of sentential logic which are nigh-impossible to

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<sup>634</sup> Booth, *Analytic Islamic Philosophy*, as cited above.

<sup>635</sup> Al-Musawī, *Medieval Republic*, p. 211.

confuse.<sup>636</sup> So, of course he would prefer to express and communicate the content of revelation in sentential logic instead of a series of aphorisms, sermons, and flowery allegories. Symbolic logic involves a pre-set, agreed-upon system of symbols which are supposed to have a 1:1 correspondence between words and meaning for those versed in its use. We disagree, as, ultimately, those symbols still can only indicate referents which are in themselves words or verbal concepts, which are in turn only stand-in symbols for ideas. However, if one has a very important message to convey, say, the words of a deity, it makes perfect sense that one might want to use the very least-confusing mode of communication to get that message across. If one is incredibly skilled in sentential logic, one could do worse than to transmit important propositions in this mode. With most religions' preference for the divine word's continued transmission according to the exact linguistic form in which it was revealed, and Islam is a real stickler for this rule, one might be inclined forgive al-Fārābī for wanting the transmitters to get it right.

We have all played the childhood game of “Telephone”, in which some phrase is uttered into the ear of a child and then passed down a line of some thirty children, whispered by each successive child into the ear of the next, until the utterance reaches the end of the line and arrives fundamentally transformed, unrecognizable, irreconcilable. For a student of Abū Bishr Mattā, who believed that the entire import of any given utterance could be reduced to a set of incorruptible, unmistakable symbols, then of course

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<sup>636</sup> Anyone who has read an introduction to logic would naturally disagree. Consider the following: “ $\{(x)(fx \supset gx) \cdot (x)(gx \supset hx)\} \supset (x)(fx \supset hx)$ ” David Mitchell, *An Introduction to Logic* (London: Routledge, 1962, 2020), p. 97. What, pray tell, does any of that mean? Those versed in the use of symbolic logic will have some idea what is intended to be expressed here. One can see how al-Fārābī believed that the capacity to understand this mode of language must be endowed by the Creator, that it can never be learned by those not born with the innate ability.

sentential logic would be the only conceivable method of transmitting a message of such importance as a message from a deity. In a way, we are inclined to agree. We disagree with al-Fārābī's contention that converting language from one set of symbols to still another is a foolproof, failsafe method of communication – indeed, all language is symbolic, and translation is always involved in any form of linguistic communication, anywhere, ever, for all time – but we do agree that sentential logic is rather efficient, and that it could be a good idea to use it betimes, to express propositions of utmost importance. Is it perfect? No. Do we love it as much as Abū Bishr Mattā and his student al-Fārābī? No. There is never, ever a 1:1 correspondence between words (i.e., symbols) and meaning, or even between the symbols of sentential logic and meaning. But it is eminently clearer than many of the modes of language frequently employed in religious discourse, such as rhetoric, homiletics, allegory, parable, metaphor, etc.

And this should serve to dispel yet another silly but, unfortunately, all too common contention which somehow still abounds amongst scholars of al-Fārābī: How do we know al-Fārābī isn't being metaphorical? How do we know he means what he says? How do we know he isn't saying one thing, but that his intent is for us to understand something seemingly other than what he says? How do you justify taking him literally? My dear fellows, al-Fārābī *hated* metaphor with a passion. He chided all manner of linguistic trickery. He scoffed at allegory. He maligned indirectness. When he says that Allah vouchsafes revelation to the Prophet by means of his Angel of Revelation, we have exactly zero reasons to interpret him metaphorically. If the argument is that every single one of al-Fārābī's scribes and his students and each one of their successors collectively

conspired to Islamize his work, toiling in secret to ensure that his manuscripts met posterity with the requisite Muslim pedigree intact, then please, show me the evidence. I am willing to consider that argument, if someone can bring forth a scintilla of evidence that it is a reasonable theory which deserves our attention and ought to be investigated. But, so far, nobody can.

Charles Butterworth, in a conversation we had in a coffee shop in 2018, informed me that Muhsin Mahdi had been working on re-editing the entire corpus of extant al-Fārābī manuscripts – an endeavor aimed at revolutionizing the very foundations of al-Fārābī research and discourse – but that upon his death Mahdi’s laptop disappeared along with all his working papers. Butterworth seemed to imply that were the fruit of Mahdi’s most recent labors ever to come to light, we would all believe that al-Fārābī was not the slightest bit interested in Islam, but, rather, in pure philosophy of the very Greekest provenance and character. Again, if someone shows me the evidence, I am open to considering this argument and revising my position. For the time being, however, as the extant manuscripts and the texts derived therefrom are all we have, I see no evidence for this claim whatsoever.

***The Framework Applied: Schopenhauer***

Anthony Kenny aptly summarizes Schopenhauer’s moral philosophy as a prescription for escape from enslavement to one’s own appetitive nature, writing,

The first way of escape is through art, through the pure, disinterested contemplation of beauty. The second way of escape is through renunciation. Only by renouncing the will to live can we be totally freed from the tyranny of the will. The will to live is to be renounced not by suicide, but by asceticism. To make real moral progress we must leave behind not just wickedness (delighting in the suffering of others) and

badness (using others as a means to our ends) but also mere justice (treating others on equal terms with ourselves) and even goodness (willingness to sacrifice oneself for others). We must go beyond virtue to asceticism. I must come to have such a horror of this miserable world that I will no longer thing it enough to love others as myself or to give up my own pleasures when they stand in the way of others' good. To reach the ideal I must adopt chastity, poverty, and abstinence, and welcome death when it comes as a deliverance from evil.<sup>637</sup>

In building our analysis, we must read Schopenhauer as having held out Christ as the example to be emulated in this regard. Every Christian program of austerity advocating the virtues of chastity, poverty, abstinence, and the joyful acceptance of death as a liberation from the sinful predilections of embodied, physical life takes Christ as its archetype. It is for their emulation of Christ that we name them "Christians". Jesus Christ is, for them, the epitome of perfection, the *Summum Bonum*. Why must we read Schopenhauer as having looked to Christ as the supreme exemplar or lived moral philosophy? Because Schopenhauer says so: he names Jesus Christ as "the saviour"<sup>638</sup>.

Now, it is reasonable to ask how we might differentiate between specifically Christian monastic austerity and, say, any other form of religious austerity. It is true that in addition to Christian monastic practices, Schopenhauer professed admiration for several Indian programs of renunciation, after all. Why, then, should we label him or his project as "Christian" instead of "Buddhist" or "Hindu" or "Jainist"? The answer to this question is rather simple, and it follows on the answer to our last question: Schopenhauer never named Vishnu or Shiva or Krishna or any Buddha or Bodhisattva or Tirthankara or Yogi as "*the savior*". We must take his declaration that Christ is the savior as all-

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<sup>637</sup> Kenny, *A New History*, pp. 766-767.

<sup>638</sup> Schopenhauer, *World as Will Vol. I*, p. 232, *op. cit.*

encompassing. Remember, as we apply our framework to reading Schopenhauer, religion is any set of beliefs, practices, and symbols which organize life around the pursuit of value construed as a transcendent, ultimate good, a *Summum Bonum*. Thus, until Schopenhauer himself contradicts his declaration, then from the History of Religions perspective, “Christ is the savior” is arguably the most important lens through which we must read Schopenhauer’s body of work.

And what about that body of work? There is rather a lot of it, and we will certainly not attempt to give it anything even approaching the full treatment here. But it is not necessary to make an exhaustive review of his *oeuvre* in order to achieve a fruitful and informative application of our framework. All we need to understand is that, because Schopenhauer did have ontological and cosmological commitments of a specifically Christian nature, we should never bracket or exclude questions of Schopenhauer’s religion from our analysis. And because we understand religion to be concerned with the pursuit of transcendent, Ultimate Good, in determining whether Schopenhauer was “religious” or “Christian”, we should ask which transcendent, ultimate Good, which *Summum Bonum* Schopenhauer was pursuing. Thus, we must look through the lens that Schopenhauer himself has laid out for us, with the figure of Christ as the ultimate self-sacrificing renunciant at its very center. And this is not because we foist upon him the label of “Christian” from the outside, but because he has taken it upon himself in his own words, right in the middle of his most seminal philosophical treatise<sup>639</sup>.

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<sup>639</sup> Just like al-Fārābī, he names his deity, and he does so in his most seminal philosophical treatise. Thus, the use of Schopenhauer as illustrative model begins to show its relevance.

***Conclusion: The Framework Applied in Al-Fārābī***

Our framework is just as easily and fruitfully applied to a reading of al-Fārābī. To do so, we need not recapitulate our entire argument again, here. Let us but remember that al-Fārābī advocated for a polity (*Ummah*) which lived in a city (*Madīnah*), who followed a religious law (*sharī'ah*), revealed (*waḥiyy*) by the one God (*Allah*) through his angel of revelation to a Prophet (*nabiyy or nabī*) who is also endowed with the capacity for philosophy. According to al-Fārābī, this is the most virtuous and desirable polity, whose citizens have the very best chance of reaching salvation, better than any other possible organization of human community. It seems eminently clear to me that we have just described Islam. Al-Fārābī's prescription for the perfect polity go beyond the basic creedal commitments all Muslims must avow: There is no God but Allah, and Muḥammad is His Messenger. Why, then, are we not taking al-Fārābī seriously when he names his deity and describes the religion revealed specifically to the Prophet of Islam and carried on by the community that that Prophet established? How is it possible that anyone familiar with al-Fārābī's most seminal work could say, with a straight face, that al-Fārābī was somehow an enemy to religion, somehow not a Muslim engaged in work very pertinent to other Muslims? It should not be possible, and yet it is, because it has happened, and it is still happening.

A perusal of a short article by Paul Heck neatly illustrates and encapsulates the entire problem, which, again, stems from not much more than a simple category error. In his article comparing al-Fārābī with the Brethren of Purity, Heck makes some very

misleading, and perhaps misled, commentary.<sup>640</sup> True to Walzerian form, Heck would have us believe that al-Fārābī subordinates divine revelation to mere human reason. But, as we shall demonstrate, he believes this because he has fallen victim to one or more of the category errors we mention above. Citing al-Fārābī's *Tahsīl al-sa'ādah*, he summarizes al-Fārābī as saying that “*milla* [religion] is thus truth represented in words – mediated by imagery and brought about by persuasion. Its share in truth depends on the extent to which it corresponds to what philosophy can demonstrably prove”<sup>641</sup>. Here, he colors al-Fārābī's words with his own agenda. He intends us to understand that al-Fārābī is comparing “philosophy” with “revelation”, but al-Fārābī is obviously not doing that. Instead, what al-Fārābī means is that the metaphorical imagery of rhetoric and homiletics is not as reliable a mode of expression as sentential logic. Heck tells us that, according to al-Fārābī, the “attainment of certainty thus requires recognition of a hierarchy of method” always and everywhere placing philosophy at the top of the hierarchy with revelation somewhere beneath it.<sup>642</sup>

He remarks that the Brethren of Purity divide knowledge into three kinds: “that obtained by human efforts and devices, i.e., professional occupations; that revealed by prophecy [i.e., revelation, *waḥīyy*]; and that demonstrable by proof. As with al-Fārābī, only the third category is free of disagreement and doubt”<sup>643</sup>. Heck could not be more

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<sup>640</sup> Paul L. Heck, “Doubts about the Religious Community (*Milla*) in al-Fārābī and the Brethren of Purity”, in Peter Adamson (Ed.), *In the Age of al-Fārābī: Arabic Philosophy in the Fourth/Tenth Century* (London-Turin: The Warburg Institute, 2008), pp. 195-213.

<sup>641</sup> Heck, p. 200.

<sup>642</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>643</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 208.

wrong here. He wants us to believe that for al-Fārābī, philosophy is a source of greater wisdom than revelation. But al-Fārābī never says this, not anywhere. According to al-Fārābī's cosmology, the only real knowledge comes from revelation. The problem arises in the question of how best to communicate the content of revelation to those not endowed with the capacity to receive and/or understand it. Only the prophet may receive revelation, and the prophet is endowed with philosophy; philosophers are endowed with the capacity to understand revelation as expressed by demonstrative proof (sentential logic); but those not endowed with either prophecy or philosophy need another avenue by which to approach knowledge. According to al-Fārābī, what the non-endowed, unwashed masses require is religion. Religion is a lesser vehicle when conceived of in terms of linguistic efficiency and compared to the certainty (*yaqīn*) al-Fārābī believes attends upon the use of sentential logic, but those not endowed with philosophy have no capacity for sentential logic, so they need another method of expression by which to comprehend the content of the divine revelation. Accordingly, the looser linguistic tolerances of "religion" constitute the very best vehicle for truth that this poor lot will ever be capable of accessing.<sup>644</sup>

At the conclusion of his article, Paul Heck takes a turn for the worse by citing and agreeing with Christopher Colmo, whom we discuss in previous chapters in some detail. Taking up Colmo's rephrasing of Walzer, Heck praises al-Fārābī for breaking with tradition, for being more philosophical and less religious, and bringing the rest of the

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<sup>644</sup> Al-Fārābī, *al-Madīnah*, pp. 116-119, 122-123ff, 278; al-Fārābī, *Tahṣīl al-Sa`ādah*, 45-47.

Muslim *Ummah* along with him on this flight into reason and away from revelation. He writes that “the Age of al-Fārābī embraced a spectrum of intellectuals who turned to the heritage of ancient philosophy for insight and material to respond to the critical issues of the day”, which, so far echoes my own thesis: al-Fārābī’s project is not just a rehashing of old, Greek ideas, nuked in the microwave of History and served as leftovers to a new audience. He was breaking fresh ground in a rather heroic attempt to address issues of monumental importance to his own people in his own time. But my agreement with Heck breaks down when Heck claims that it was not al-Fārābī’s intent to engage in philosophy as a Muslim *qua* Muslim.<sup>645</sup> The implication is that al-Fārābī was a maverick questioning the wisdom of his people’s commitment to Islam, rather than a Muslim working to bring about positive change within the troubled Muslim community, made by and for Muslims.

The trend with historians of philosophy is to construct a romantic past in which philosophy and its followers have always been better than religion and its proponents, which is the fallacy of presentism. These historians define the antecedent in terms of the consequent, thereby falsifying the former.<sup>646</sup> Dimitri Gutas, Peter Adamson, Miriam Galston, Christopher Colmo, Anthony Kenny, and so many other members of the camp descending from Walzer and his paradigm genuinely want to accept al-Fārābī as a philosopher-among-philosophers; but to accomplish that it seems necessary to them to put ever increasing distance between al-Fārābī and “Islam”, which latter they disdain

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<sup>645</sup> Heck, p. 212. See note 51, in which Heck cites Colmo’s book, *Breaking with Athens, op. cit.*, which characterizes al-Fārābī as a renegade.

<sup>646</sup> David Hackett Fischer, *Historians’ Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1970), pp. 140-141.

utterly. Were it necessary to recognize fully al-Fārābī's identity as a Muslim-among-Muslims, they would pitch him from the top of the ivory tower like a reeking goatherder ejected from a London opera house. The Walzerian paradigm admits only to a rigidly constructed ideal of what "philosophy" means today, such that were it tasked with encompassing their dated conception of "Islam", that construct would surely burst. And then what would they be left with? So, the better option to them is to pare away all the most significant evidence of al-Fārābī's having been a "Muslim", per se, and to construct for him a set of forged identity papers, creating for him the opportunity to leave behind his unfortunate beginnings as a non-European and "pass" among the real people.

This is a rather unfortunate holdover from Hegelianism, one which still plagues many of our academic disciplines today.<sup>647</sup> Though he certainly did not originate the idea, it was he who did the most work to fully flesh out, articulate, and popularize the paradigm which would go on to be named for him. Arguably, it is Hegel who most effectively and enduringly wrote the Arabs and the Muslims out of history, characterizing them as little more than the foil against which the "Christian" Holy Spirit writhed and honed itself in its birth pains, stepping through them on its journey toward the manifestation of its self-realization, naught but the cocoon out of which slithered Hegel's idea of freedom, liberty, democracy, Christendom. Hegel's assessment of Arabic philosophy declared that the role of Muslims in the history of philosophy was to fetch

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<sup>647</sup> The natural choice of interlocutory partner here would seem to be Edward Said, surely. We agree with Said on orientalism's widespread and enduring impact. However, we diverge significantly on the perceived motivations of orientalists and what should be done about the ideology. On this subject, I always recommend at least the following three books: Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1994); Wael B. Hallaq, *Restating Orientalism: A Critique of Modern Knowledge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018); and Ibn Warraq, *Defending the West: A Critique of Edward Said's Orientalism* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2007).

Greek tradition out of the well of history and schlep it through a few hundred years of time until real people came along to reclaim it, after which the ghosts of the Hijaz, the Middle East, and North Africa could settle quietly back into the dustbin of obscurity, where they belonged.

Lorella Ventura sums up Hegel's position admirably, writing,

Hegel describes a 'progressive' movement in which protagonists are peoples and especially states. For Hegel, the course of history shows a progressive development of the consciousness of freedom starting from the East, the beginning of proper history, and ending in the German world, which (thanks to Christian religion) is characterized by the consciousness that man, as man, is free. Africa is excluded from the course of history, and America is a probable protagonist of future history, about which however, philosophy cannot yet say anything.<sup>648</sup>

For Hegel, history is a sort of theodicy, in which the development of "reason" (the Good, the "Spirit", i.e., God) manifests itself in material reality. Accordingly, "Spirit is at war with itself; it has to overcome itself as its most formidable obstacle. That development which in the sphere of nature is a peaceful growth, is in that of spirit, a severe, a mighty conflict with itself".<sup>649</sup> This is a very convenient justification for Hegel's hierarchy, placing Europeans at the top of the world. It was God's plan that Germany dominate, don't you see?

Richard Walzer, though not alone in doing so, is a champion of this worldview, having blazed Hegel's path and carried his torch into the discourses of the twentieth

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<sup>648</sup> Lorella Ventura, *Hegel in the Arab World: Modernity, Colonialism, and Freedom* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 19.

<sup>649</sup> G.W.F Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (Mineola: Dover Thrift Editions, 2004) p. 55. Original italics.

century. His analysis of the Greek sources from which al-Fārābī took influence is painstakingly thorough and exhaustively comprehensive. Walzer claims that *every single word*, bar none, is traceable to origins within classical Greek texts. Though this seems impossible, it is what Walzer asserts, as do his followers and intellectual heirs. They claim that al-Fārābī “prefers... to avoid specifically Muslim terms”<sup>650</sup> in his work, but it is they who prefer to elide everything characteristically-Muslim within al-Fārābī’s writings. This is their preference, because it aids in their mission to strip him of his identity, purifying him of the malodorous remnants of his rural heritage. If they can just prove that some worthy Greek was actually the first one to say everything al-Fārābī says, then they do not have to admit that they let one of those “Muslims” sneak into the party amongst polite company.

But we must also ask how much of the problem stems from methodological commitments. We know that the philology itself begins from a point of suspicion, of mistrust, of assuming the author is a liar before ever reading the first word. According to Schleiermacher, philological criticism, concerning itself with texts of classical antiquity, begins with “the question whether a text is really by an author to whom it is attributed”<sup>651</sup>. Gadamer believed that hermeneutics was “supposed to liberate history from Hegel”<sup>652</sup> by allowing history to be read in its own context and understood in its

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<sup>650</sup> Walzer, *Perfect State*, 436.

<sup>651</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics and Criticism: And Other Writings*, trans. and ed. by Andrew Bowie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 159.

<sup>652</sup> Georgia Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition, and Reason* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), pp. 15.

own terms, but all it did was add fuel to the fire. Its purpose was to allow historical periods “to be understood as having their own internal meaning as opposed to a meaning deduced from Hegelian teleology”<sup>653</sup>, but it served instead to further entrench Hegel and his teleological reading of history.

How else do we account for the seeming cognitive dissonance among scholars who claim, in full-throated agreement with Walzer, that al-Fārābī’s entire body of work is virtually plagiarized from the Greeks, while glossing over and diminishing any Islamic origins for al-Fārābī’s thought? Once again, we turn to Peter Adamson. First, he tells us that al-Fārābī’s chief and most important sources for his description of God are Greek. He writes that “al-Fārābī draws above all on two Aristotelian texts, both from the *Metaphysics*: books Alpha Elatton and Lambda”<sup>654</sup>. Next, just a single page later, he says that al-Fārābī’s cosmology “yields a philosophical version of the key Islamic doctrine of *tawḥīd*, the oneness of God”<sup>655</sup>. The agenda could not be clearer. Owing to his methodological commitments and the influence of Hegel’s ideology, Adamson, like Walzer before him, wants us to believe that the most important thing to know about al-Fārābī’s work is that it reproduces ancient Greek sources, and that his success in articulating Greek ideas in such a way as to comport with Muslim theological creed is an unimportant coincidence? I do not buy it. If we were not married to the notion that Arabs’ and Muslims’ only role in world history was to save the Europeans’ place in line, on the

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<sup>653</sup> Ibid., pp. 15-16.

<sup>654</sup> Peter Adamson, “Philosophical Theology” in Sabine Schmidtke, *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 297-312, here, p. 303.

<sup>655</sup> Ibid., p. 304.

one hand, and that the best way to approach textual interpretation is to assume that the author is lying or plagiarizing, on the other, I believe that almost nobody would agree with Adamson or Walzer or any of their ilk.<sup>656</sup>

To say that the sole source of al-Fārābī's thought is the library of ancient Greek sources and that his only intention was to make Greek learning available to Arabs and anyone else who could read Arabic is pure nonsense. Not only is it grounded in leftover Hegelianism, but it also ignores the entire historical context of eighth-, ninth-, and tenth-century Islam and Muslim thought. In Chapter Five, we established al-Fārābī as a participant, an agent, in the Islam which emerged as the product of a successful attempt at achieving a middle ground between two extreme positions, allowing a role for reason, while yet still maintaining the primacy of revelation. Reza Davari al-Ardakani reminds us to read al-Fārābī within this crucial context. He points to the fact that al-Fārābī was neither the first Muslim philosopher nor the first philosopher in general to strive for a conciliation between seemingly opposing views. He reminds us that by the late Alexandrian period of Greek philosophy, already students of Plotinus, including Porphyry, had begun to trace a rapprochement between the diverging views of Plato and Aristotle.<sup>657</sup> And because al-Fārābī knew Plato and Aristotle well, indeed, as he penned a treatise reconciling their views himself, he would have seen himself as participating in an ongoing tradition of seeking the best of Wisdom. The Greeks aimed for a middle ground

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<sup>656</sup> For a masterful study on reading al-Fārābī in light of the enduring influence of Hegelianism, delving into which here would render the length of the current project unmanageable, see Rateb Hourani, *Hegel and al-Fārābī: A Comparative Study on Philosophical Mysticism* (Beirut: Dar al-Farabi, 2012). This book was originally a doctoral dissertation presented at the Sorbonne. This is an Arabic language source (Rātib al-Hūrānī, *Hīghel wa al-Fārābī: Dirāsah muqārinah al-taṣawwuf al-falsafīyy*).

<sup>657</sup> Reza Davari al-Ardakani, *al-Fārābī: faylasūf al-thiqāfah* (Beirut: Dar al-Hādiyy, 2007), p. 45.

between extremes, as did al-Fārābī, as did many other Muslim thinkers of his time, which we have shown in previous chapters. Al-Fārābī would not have seen himself as merely preserving ancient knowledge for later Europeans to recover; he would have seen himself as having taken part in a Great and ongoing effort to pursue transcendent things of the highest value, the *Summum Bonum*.

Lenn Goodman points to al-Fārābī's project as having opened Islamic discourse to what we today would call critical thinking. He tells us that Muslims owe it to al-Fārābī that "one can ask about the meaning of Qur'ānic symbols and their adequacy in representing what they portend. One can ask about the legitimacy of any campaign that purports to strive in the path of God".<sup>658</sup> He recommends that Muslims read al-Fārābī because his work brings familiarity to the foreign and foreignness to the very familiar. Like Ardakani, Goodman places al-Fārābī within the genealogy of an intellectual heritage which includes Arabic-speaking and -writing Muslim philosophers and their Greek forefathers within the same continuum, but not because the Muslims merely retrieved and saved Greek learning, transmitting it for Europeans to pick up again later. He points to the fact that great thinkers all write commentaries, critique, pirate, and continue each other's works, pursuing a dialogue that transcends the boundaries of language and creed and even time.

Characterizing Islamic philosophy's glory days, Goodman writes that,

the rise of great literature, science, and scholarship, the invention of new disciplines and genres, were the days when Islamic civilization and culture were challenged by new ideas. Thinkers pushed themselves to originality,

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<sup>658</sup> Lenn E. Goodman, *Islamic Humanism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 12.

because they were so eagerly assimilating new and often alien materials.<sup>659</sup>

He points to a conversation between al-Fārābī, al-Kindī, Ibn Rushd, Ibn Sīnā, and Plato, Aristotle, Socrates, Porphyry, Galen, and all the philosophers who have come before or since. This is a far better way to read the Muslim philosophers than the one Walzer and his camp have put forward. The *ḥaylasūfs* participated in a conversation with the ancients and their Muslim contemporaries at one and the same time, and the most important question to ask about that conversation is not “let’s see if the Muslims cribbed from the Greeks, I bet they cheated!” Instead, we should ask what use they made of the results of their conversation.

Mohammed ‘Abed al-Jabri points to the folly of those scholars “looking at Islamic philosophy with the same eye as they would Greek philosophy or European philosophy,” declaring that such thinkers are doomed to the most impoverished interpretations of the history of Muslim philosophers and their philosophy.<sup>660</sup> He tells us that in searching for Islamic philosophers’ contributions to the wider conversation of Philosophy, instead of looking for cognitive gains, we should look for the ideological function that each philosopher assigns to his philosophy. “It is there,” says al-Jabri, “that we will find a meaning and a history to Islamic philosophy”.<sup>661</sup> We are inclined to agree.

And what did al-Fārābī do with his philosophy? Richard Walzer and Peter Adamson and Christopher Colmo would have us believe that he used it *against* Islam.

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<sup>659</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>660</sup> Mohammed ‘Abed al-Jabri, *Arab-Islamic Philosophy: A Contemporary Critique*, trans. Aziz Abbassi (Austin: University of Texas, 1999), p. 42.

<sup>661</sup> Ibid.

Walzer even goes so far as to say that he used it to exit the religion. But we say this is nonsense. We must always remember that interpretations are only valid within limited frameworks and categorical schemas.<sup>662</sup> Did al-Fārābī say that religion is not as efficient a mode of communication as other linguistic modes, such as sentential logic? Yes, he did say that. He said it quite a few times, over and over. It was one of his favorite things to say, apparently. But this is not where the period goes. It is not the end of the analysis.

Yes, many a medieval Muslim cleric would have been miffed that al-Fārābī had placed that newfangled philosophy higher than religion in the hierarchy of meaningful and important human engagements. But those same clerics would have been mollified when al-Fārābī reminded them that he subordinated *everything* to divine revelation. According to our proposed framework, seeking truth in the pursuit of the *Summum Bonum*, the felicity of the soul, i.e., doing philosophy, is a religious endeavor. Pursuing the highest transcendent, ultimate good is definitionally a phenomenon which, on balance, we subsume under the aegis of “religion”. And at the beginning of this section, we established that al-Fārābī’s model of the ideal society meets all the necessary commitments of orthodox Muslim creed. More than that, al-Fārābī’s al-Madīnah serves as a learned commentary (*tafsīr*) on certain crucially important themes from the Qur’ān.<sup>663</sup>

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<sup>662</sup> Thomas A. Tweed, *Crossings and Dwellings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 17.

<sup>663</sup> Creation, cosmology, cosmogony, the soul, the nature of God, morality, ethics, etc., etc. See W. Montgomery Watt, *The Influence of Islam on Medieval Europe* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), see esp. pp.40-43.

Al-Fārābī's project is definitionally both religious and philosophical. The treatise of his masterwork uses philosophical learning to probe questions of enduring importance for the Islamic community. It declares that Allah is the one and only God. It declares that Allah speaks to his Prophet through revelation, and that a thinker of great learning and endowed mental capacity is required to fully explicate the contents of divine revelation for those people for whom God's message is intended. It says that people should live together in communities following the laws established by the Prophet according to principles sent down in revelation. It says that we should ask questions about what our religious symbols mean, and who gets to say what they mean, and why. It says we should use reason to aid us in understanding our religious principles and symbols in the pursuit of the transcendent, Ultimate Good, the *Summum Bonum*, the felicity of the soul. Some of the Muslim clerisy would have taken umbrage at the call to apply critical thinking to the interpretation of scriptural dictates, but that was already coming long before al-Fārābī's time. The *Miḥnah* of the early 'Abbāsīd Caliphate already witnessed the efforts of the religious institutions to squash independent thinking, and the proponents of the *Miḥnah* lost. What emerged in 848 was a conciliation between the Traditionalists and the Rationalists, both camps having ceded ground, meeting somewhere in the middle.

Thus, this trend towards a thinking-man's Islam was already well underway more than twenty years before al-Fārābī was even born. He was not some renegade enemy to Islam, as some would have us believe. Instead, he used his incredible gifts to elevate a conversation that was already ongoing, a conversation in which Muslims took full

advantage of the achievements of their intellectual forebears, to learn to live in the world as better Muslims.

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## APPENDIX I: LIST OF RELEVANT DATES<sup>664</sup>

DATE	EVENT
568/9.....	Birth of the Prophet Muḥammad
608/9.....	First Revelation of the Qur'ān
622.....	Emigration ( <i>al-Ḥijrah</i> ) from Makkah to Madīnah <sup>665</sup>
632.....	Death of Muḥammad
632-661.....	Reign of first four ( <i>Rāshidūn</i> ) caliphs of Islam <sup>666</sup>
634-642.....	Muslim Conquests of Syria, Iraq, and Egypt <sup>667</sup>
c. 650.....	Compilation of Qur'ān (during caliphate of `Uthmān)
661.....	Establishment of Umayyad Dynasty <sup>668</sup>
699.....	Birth of Wāṣil b. `Aṭa in Madīnah: founder of the <i>Mu`tazilah</i> <sup>669</sup>
748.....	Death of Wāṣil b. `Aṭa <sup>670</sup>

<sup>664</sup> All dates in this paper, unless otherwise indicated, are C.E.

<sup>665</sup> David Waines, *An Introduction to Islam 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 18.

<sup>666</sup> Muhammad Ali Khalidi (ed.), *Medieval Islamic Philosophical Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), xli.

<sup>667</sup> Ibid.

<sup>668</sup> Khalidi, xli.

<sup>669</sup> Mir Valiuddin, "Mu`tazilism," in *A History of Muslim Philosophy Vol. 1*, ed. M. M. Sharif (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1963), pp. 199-220, here, p. 200.

<sup>670</sup> Valiuddin, 200.

750.....	Establishment of `Abbāsīd Caliphate, end of Umayyad Caliphate <sup>671</sup>
754-775.....	Reign of Caliph al-Mansūr: patron of early translations of Greek texts <sup>672</sup>
762.....	Founding of Baghdad <sup>673</sup>
801.....	Birth of al-Kindī <sup>674</sup>
c. 813-848.....	Flourishing of rationalist <i>kalām</i> of the <i>Mu`tazilah</i> <sup>675</sup>
832.....	Establishment of <i>Bayt al-Ḥikmah</i> library in Baghdad by Caliph al-Ma`mūn <sup>676</sup>
c. 870.....	Birth of al-Fārābī in Wasij, Fārāb <sup>677</sup>
873.....	Death of al-Kindī: first of the <i>Falāsifah</i> (Islamic philosophers) <sup>678</sup>
c. 874.....	Birth of al-Ash`arī: founder of traditionalist <i>kalām</i> in response to <i>Mu`tazilah kalām</i>

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<sup>671</sup> Khalidi, xli.

<sup>672</sup> Ibid.

<sup>673</sup> Cristina D'Ancona, "Greek into Arabic: Neoplatonism in Translation," in *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy*, eds. Peter Adamson and Richard C. Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 10-31, here, p. 20.

<sup>674</sup> Ahmed Fouad El-Ehwany, "Al-Kindi," in *A History of Muslim Philosophy Vol. 1*, ed. M. M. Sharif (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1963), pp. 421-434, here, p. 421.

<sup>675</sup> Khalidi, xli.

<sup>676</sup> Ibid.

<sup>677</sup> Walzer, *On the Perfect State*, 2. Osman Bakar, *Classification of Knowledge in Islam* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1998), 10.

<sup>678</sup> Khalidi, xli.

c. 936..... Death of al-Ash`arī<sup>679</sup>

c. 950..... Death of al-Fārābī in Syria<sup>680</sup>

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<sup>679</sup> Ibid.

<sup>680</sup> Ibid. Also, see Walzer, *On the Perfect State*, 2.

## APPENDIX II: TRANSLITERATION KEY

'a	أ
'i	إ
'u	ؤ
'	ء
'ā	آ
ā	ا
b	ب
t	ت
th	ث
j	ج
h	ح
kh	خ
d	د
dh	ذ
r	ر
z	ز
s	س
sh	ش
ṣ	ص
ḍ	ض
ṭ	ط
ḍh	ظ
'	ع
gh	غ
f	ف
q	ق
k	ك
l	ل
m	م
n	ن
h	ه
w: consonant/ū: vowel	و
y: consonant/ī: vowel	ي
i	ى
ah	ة