

Islamic political philosophy: prophecy, revelation, and the divine law

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Abstract

This paper examines the issue of Islamic political philosophy in terms of prophecy, revelation and divine law. It is important to note that philosophy, and Islamic politics are in a good relation with religion. In the present study I have developed this connection through the philosophical theories of the medieval philosopher Al-Farabi. What are the differences and similarities between philosophy and divine law, or between a philosopher and prophet? What are Al-Farabi's most important political theories and what are the concepts of virtuous city and democratic city? What is the philosophy of the Quran? Our study seeks to answer all these questions. The divine law sets the beliefs and actions of the Islamic community, while the theoretical aspects which relate to it are entrusted to the philosophers. Theology is a discipline which protects divine law and establishes the truth of a special revelation, political theology being complementary to political philosophy. Theology tries to develop a rational and coherent understanding of the divine law, to find out what is the prophecy and to differentiate the true prophets from the false ones.

Keywords: *Islamic political philosophy, prophecy, revelation, divine law, Quran, Al-Farabi, theology.*

Since always, Islamic philosophy had to be careful not to step over traditions and Islamic beliefs. Islamic philosophy was born mainly due to translations from the Greek philosophers. Al-Kindi (d. 866), Al-Farabi (d. 950) and Ibn Sina (Avicenna) have achieved the most important translations of Plato and Aristotle. Islamic philosophy presented itself in general as a synthesis of Aristotelianism, Platonism and Neoplatonism.

Al-Farabi was one of the greatest philosophers of Medieval Ages, as well as Avicenna and Averroes. Even if sometimes in their shadow, he is known as the greatest political philosopher of his time. He was the first important philosopher

who instituted a new political-religious order that questioned the Greek philosophical tradition and made more sense of a political-religious order based on prophecy, revelation and divine law. Due to his Nestorian Christian professors and due to the lectures of the works of his Neoplatonic professors as well as to the commentators from the Athenian and Alexandrian schools, Al-Farabi was a follower of the Neoplatonism and Neoplatonism-Christian philosophical traditions. Al-Farabi introduced to the Islamic philosophy the tradition of returning to the two primary sources of philosophical investigations: Plato and Aristotle. Al-Farabi especially presented a Plato mostly from the political not from the mystical or metaphysical point of view. For example, *Timaeus* being considered a political work meant to instruct the citizens in the direction of correct opinions, not a cosmological work as it was believed. The interpretation of Aristotle follows that of Plato's and is again void of metaphysics.

Al-Farabi considered important the agreement between the Islamic religion and the Greek philosophy, those two having to constitute as one, for the philosophy of the Islamic religion to be a harmonious and not a contradictory one. Both philosophy and religion express the same thing, the same truth, philosophy addressing to the elites – for it works with abstract concepts – , and religion - that is the Quran – being more precise and specific as it addresses the public who most of the times is not educated enough. To those, the prophet will talk in a simpler way using a symbolical language, at the same time, the philosophers being free not to follow the teachings of the prophet. The person is the subject of interest both for philosophy as well as for the divine law. Philosophy is a human activity and the divine law does address to the people. However, neither is in the service of the man, but the man is in their service:

“In addition, both call on man to reach for something higher than himself, to become divine, to relate to what is above and beyond himself. Man is confronted with a demand, a duty, to open himself to the whole or the highest principle of the whole.”¹

Philosophy asks from man that he may know the visible universe and its principles helping himself of his reasoning and intelligence, while the divine law asks from him to bow faithfully to the laws of God. Both divine law and philosophy emphasize the social and political principles of life, as both politics and social life are formed out of the duty to act in a righteous way. Such a righteous activity does not consist of desires and passions but of the demands of goodness as

¹ Muhsin S. Mahdi, *Al-Farabi and the Foundation of Islamic Political Philosophy*, The University of Chicago Press, Ltd., London, 2001, p. 18.

Islamic political philosophy: prophecy, revelation, and the divine law

established by human intelligence or by the divine law. The most important of virtues in the virtual city built by the philosophers and in the city established by divine law, is justice:

“...and justice means obedience to the law, which in both cases is comprehensive law, covering what we now call civil and penal law, public and private law, moral and religious law, or the law relating to both deeds and beliefs.”²

Islamic theology has always been associated with politics usually because the main problem of the leadership of the Islamic community has been that which lead the development of Islamic theology, the former being rather more preoccupied with ethics than with politics in the strict sense. There are some beliefs, attitudes of the Islamic community which have always remained the same along the centuries, those being: the gratification for divine revelation, the desire to follow the way of life and the sayings of the prophet and the belief that the straining from the ways of the ancestors is a mistake.

Philosopher or prophet?

Al-Farabi identifies the philosopher with the prophet, both being supreme rulers and both having absolute authority to what concerns legislating beliefs and actions. Because of Al-Farabi, the relation between Islamic theology and philosophy was somewhat controversial, as, mainly to what concerns knowledge, philosophy becomes superior to religion. In order to bring to a common nominator religion and philosophy, Al-Farabi brought to attention the theory of prophecy, but none dared to try it except for Avicenna, for it was a purely new theory. The prophecy as such, is no more than a phenomenon like any other, but the prophet is a man who reached perfection and has imaginative power. With the help of **revelation** he can learn eternal truths, the theory of Al-Farabi being that the revelation and reason do not mutually exclude each other. Mashhad Al-Allaf illustrates some of the distinctions between the philosopher and prophet identified by Al-Farabi:

“1. The prophet receives his knowledge, as a whole, from the active intellect in one shot, without a personal effort in logical reasoning or philosophical reflections. 2. The prophet legislates things through the Sunnah and the Divine law that regulates the benefits of people through regulation of right and duties. 3. The prophet leads the people to apply the divine law in their lives in order to achieve their happiness. 4. His method is practical by mentioning the absolute justice of

² *Ibidem*, p. 19.

God, Who reward goodness and punishes evil. 5. The prophet does not demand from the public any knowledge that they are incapable of.”³

Al-Farabi believed that philosophers want to imitate God, to be closer to Him, to His perfection, for this is the purpose of philosophy as the science of sciences: to purify our soul, to help us know and understand the universe, ourselves and our own existence. There is no doubt that in his political philosophy Al-Farabi followed the footsteps of Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, most of all to what concerns the concepts of well being, happiness, justice, social life but there are several important differences between the Republic of Plato and the city of Al-Farabi, both containing some philosophies. In Plato’s Republic there is an idealistic political system created by a leader who is a philosopher and a council of philosophers. In the city of Al-Farabi the leader is both a philosopher as well as a prophet. There is a leading council but for the most part it is formed out of philosophers. There is a more idealistic philosophical system for human beings.

Al-Farabi believed in the existence of a single school of philosophy, a school of Truth. Thus, the philosophers have to agree, so that their only purpose to be that of seeking the truth. The religious truth and the philosophical one are objectively considered identical, though they differ at a formal level. Actually, both the religious truth and the philosophical truth are irradiations of divine lighting through contemplation or imagination. The basis for all revealed religions is made of revelation and inspiration. The prophet is a man gifted with communion with God and with the ability to express His will. In fact, Al-Farabi shows philosophy from a religious point of view and grants religion a philosophical dimension, pushing them in converging directions as to reach a mutual understanding and co-existence. His theory, through the gift of prophecy theme can be considered one of the most significant attempts to reconcile philosophy and religion. It can also be considered the most important part of his system. Its fundamentals can be found both in psychology as in metaphysics. Its implications are both political and ethical. The farabian theory of prophecy had an obvious impact not only on the East and West but also in the medieval and modern history. Ibn Sina adopted it entirely. His particularizations on the ground of this theory are similar to those of Al-Farabi.

The democratic city and the virtuous city

In *The Virtuous City* Al-Farabi distinguishes between two types of social life: complete and incomplete. The complete social life is in turn split in three

³ Mashhad Al-Allāf, *The Essence of Islamic Philosophy*, St. Louis 2003, p. 104.

other categories: great, medium and small. In a great society there is only one organization to which everyone is part. A medium society is a national society and last, small society includes the community, a city that is part of a nation. Incomplete social life refers to the social life of inhabitants of a smaller area, a village, district or street.

The best of all cities is the virtuous city, here the purpose of social life being that of reaching happiness and well being. The leader of the city must be an ideal person, a unique model. Someone else is not entitled to rule or to guide. The leader is as important as God, being at the same time king, philosopher and prophet. This level of perfection can be reached through the accumulation of twelve attributes, among which can be found: excellent condition such as whatever he wants to do he can do easily; good understanding, good memory for whatever he sees, hears or learns; clever; acumen; expressive style; to be able to speak eloquently and clearly; not be gluttonous over food, drink or sex; be in love with the truth and with honest people; justice and just people, shunning inequity, injustice and unfair people; a strong will etc. However, Al-Farabi admits that to find such person is impossible, thus he comprises them in six qualities:

“1. He should be wise 2. He should be learned and a protector of the laws, rules and codes of conduct laid down for the city. 3. He should be able to deduce things not already known. His process of deduction should follow the examples of previous Imams (leaders) 4. He should excel in deliberating matters and dealing with emergencies. He should be an investigator able to deduce what will be best for the city. 5. He should excel in giving verbal guidance, explaining the rules of the forefathers and the ways in which he has used their example to reach his own deductions. 6. He should be physically fit in readiness for war.”⁴

Both in Plato and in Al-Farabi we find a description of the imperfect or non-ideal city. In *The Republic*, Plato describes how a virtuous city can be disintegrated in non-ideal cities: first into a tyrannical city, this in turn into an oligarchic city, ultimately appearing a democracy, at the end everything turning into tyranny. Democracy is by no means the perfect regime, all the more is the fourth step right before tyranny. In Plato's democratic city freedom is mostly emphasized, especially the freedom of expression and of action. As well, the concept of equality has a distinct importance, because for Plato, equality does not distinguish between citizens: they are all equals, no one can impose something to any one, thus the laws can not be imposed, there is no authority, unlike the virtuous city which admitted that different people have different talents and are

⁴ I.M.N. Al-Jubouri, *History of Islamic Philosophy. With View of Greek philosophy and early history of Islam*, 2004.

capable of different tasks. Even if it presents itself as attractive, democracy is superficial, for the liberty and equalitarianism ultimately can lead to the down size of authority and eventually to lawlessness and anarchy.

Al-Farabi as describes the imperfect city in *The Book of the Political Regime*. Even if it is not a degenerative process as that of Plato's, Al-Farabi was mainly influenced by Plato. Al-Farabi distinguishes three categories of cities, opposed to the model of the virtuous city: ignorant city, immoral city and erring city⁵. The citizens of the first type of city have been deprived of happiness and virtue, while those from the second one believed in happiness, were directed towards it but did not adhere, instead preferring one of the non-virtuous desires (honor, domination, pleasure, etc.) The first did not have the possibility to know good, unlike those that knew it but did not follow. The citizens of the erring city have representations of happiness and virtue, but different from the real ones.

The ignorant cities are split as well in other categories: indispensable city, vile city, base city, tymocratic city, despotic city and democratic city. Unlike Plato, Al-Farabi introduced an entirely new city, the "indispensable city" in which people live by limiting themselves to the basic needs, at a subsistence level. The democratic city corresponds to Plato's typology as well, having in common superficiality, diversity and the life style: "The democratic city is the one in which each one of the citizens is given free reign and left alone to do whatever he likes"⁶. Al-Farabi's democratic city can be corrupted by means of money. You can, however, have a virtuous way of life within a democratic city. Virtuous individuals can develop nicely within it.

The Philosophy of Quran

The Quran has always been present in the life of Arabs, no matter that it regarded political, economical or cultural aspect. Even if it is not a philosophical book per se, the Quran has influenced Islamic philosophy and thinking:

"The Quran was not a philosophical book. It did not intend to address basically to the themes of philosophy. But it set free human mind and thought and lifted all the fetters and chain in front of it."⁷

⁵ Muhammad Ali Khalidi, "Al - Farabi on the democratic city," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 11(3), 2003, pp. 379-394.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷ Hamid Naseem, *Muslim philosophy: science and mysticism*, Sarup&Sons, New Delphi, 2001.

The Quran offers a metaphysical vision of the Universe, inviting people to think and observe, to seek the mysteries of life, to discover signs of God, in other words to look beyond reality. The Quran does not propose ethical and historical theories, rather it presents itself as a book of the Universe. The Quran brought into discussion many of the philosophical issues, such as divinity, the power of God, the creation of the world, the prophecy, the liberty and the will. The Quran made out of the study of universe a religious obligation. The mystics and the philosophers emphasized on the mystical elements of the Quran, marked by allegoric and esoteric clues, which however require the power to see and understand:

“God is the Light of the Heaven and the Earth, the likeness of His light is as a niche wherein is a lamp, the lamp is a glass, the glass as it were a glittering star kindled from a blessed tree, an olive that is neither of the East nor of the West, whose oil well-night would shine, even if no fire touched it; light upon lights; God guides to His light whom He will. And God strikes similarities for man, and God has knowledge of everything.” (Qu’ran 24:35)

Sufism has its roots in the presentation in double aspect of God in the Quran: on one hand the idea of the Almighty Creator, Lord and judge, on the other hand identifies as being closer to man as part of His body. Sufism desires a more direct knowing of God, an evolution beyond the intellectual understanding of mystical experience and makes use of the allegoric method in order to decipher senses and symbols of Quran. Like any other Muslim, Al-Farabi says that God is one, without rival. He persists on the simplicity of God, saying that He is absolutely indivisible, especially his essence is at the same time an intelligent being which understands and is being understood. For Al-Farabi, creation is the effect of God’s existence, and the existence of any creature comes from Him through emanation. Al-Farabi emphasizes that God is all-sufficient, He has no need of His creatures and does not want to obtain anything from them. Concerning the issue of creation, Ibn-Sina maintains Al-Farabi’s idea: the One and the First can directly create only one thing. The first creature who is the intellect, emanates other intellects, the souls of the heavenly bodies and the rest of material creation. In this context, God is the indirect Creator of everything outside the first intellect.

“Hadith”- “sunnah” is the second doctrinaire source of Islam and represents the oral revelation transmitted through tradition. Even since the first century after hegira, circulated the following saying: “Sunna can part from the Quran, but the Quran can not stay without Sunna” even being said that “in controversial matters Sunna has decisive value even if it places itself in contradiction with the Quran, and not the other way around”. In the end it was decided to consider the Quran and

Sunna as two factors of equal importance, meant to establish the rules of religious life. Ijma is the consensus of Muslim erudites from one era for newer matters, for which they could not find references in the Quran and in Hadith.

In the Quran, the Prophet has a revelation which does not allow a dialogue. Unlike that, the Hadith is a constant conversation addressed and in reference to certain people. In Hadith are narrated the actions of the Prophet. Even though Quran is the ultimate revelation, without equal in Islam, the tradition acknowledges as well a second form of scripture named as previously mentioned: Hadith. The relation between the Quran and the Hadith is well defined: Hadith either underlines what is the Quran, explains the way in which something should be done, either introduces preaches based on certain Quranic verses or principles. The second category, especially, was to become a source of prime time material for theologians.

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