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CLOSING THE CHASM: AL-FĀRĀBI ON ISLAM AND POLITICS

By

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A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Middle Eastern Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in The City University of New

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Middle Eastern Studies
in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

Closing the Chasm: Al-Fārābī on Islam and Politics

by

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Much Islamic history evinces a separation between religious and political registers of thought and action. To be sure, these two registers always remained, to some extent, mutually intertwined since the origins of Islam. However, in about two hundred years into Islamic history, or, in other words, in the 9th century, the political register, based on coercion, began to mark itself off from the moral concerns associated with the religious register. Political authority acquired an increasingly absolute character. It focused more on ensuring the obedience of its subjects than the moral/religious purpose of creating a just society where even the weakest or most vulnerable Muslim could expect fair treatment. Religious authority, in turn, developed independently of political power and was vested, not in sultans or caliphs, but in scholars of Islamic law (*fuqahā'*). The bifurcation of authority into distinct political and religious registers continues to shape political development in the contemporary Islamic world, even though nation states have by now mostly supplanted the legislative authority of religious scholars. We observe the continuing impact of this bifurcation in the religious/secular divide in the Islamic world. We observe it in the bitter estrangement between religious and secular citizens of Muslim nation-states. This study turns to the political thought of Al-Fārābī (d. 870-950) in its search for intellectual foundations for remedying the problems caused by this estrangement. Al-Fārābī offers resources, I argue, through which Muslim publics can establish a common ground between Islam and politics. This common ground would be the welfare of Muslims, the key purpose of both religious law and political governance. Al-Fārābī's thought allows for the creation of this common ground as it tethers political authority to a fusion of theoretical and practical wisdom. Al-Fārābī knots together morality, the characteristic concern of religion, and expediency, the defining logic of politics. Further, he understands the category of religion as historically evolving and changing. It is the task of responsible political leadership, he argues, to steer the evolution of religious law in line with changing circumstances. All this prepares fertile intellectual ground for a common civic discourse between religious and secular citizens in the Muslim world.

CLOSING THE CHASM: AL-FĀRĀBI ON ISLAM AND POLITICS

Viewed from a sufficient distance, Islamic political history presents itself as marked by a persistent duality. We can articulate this duality around the opposition and, in fact, tension between religious and political registers of thought and action. This duality is never strict as religious and political registers have always been, to some degree, mutually intertwined in Islamic thought. The duality *does*, however, have a historical basis. In the 9th century, what the historian Karen Armstrong has described as an “absolutist monarchy” started to become the predominant form of political governance in the lands of Muslims, with the caliph occupying a formidable state of exception, a state of unaccountability.¹ The caliphs continued to make use of religious language in their quest for legitimacy. However, they, *in fact*, ruled predominantly by a political logic; they aimed, above all, to maintain the coercive structure of their agrarian empires. Religious authority, in turn, devolved upon scholars of Islamic law (*fuqahā*). The scholars of Islamic law, standing out by their piety and knowledge of religion, assumed the responsibility to guide Muslims in their daily conduct.

Contemporary discussions in the Islamic world about secularism and the proper role of Islam in politics recall aspects of this early bifurcation of authority into religious and political registers. Contemporary nation-states are organized differently than pre-modern empires, to be sure. However, they manifest a similar tension between religion and politics.² The citizens of these nation states hold different and opposing views in respect to the question how much weight religious (Islamic) considerations should have in political life. Some citizens want their rulers to give expression to their Islamic faith. Other citizens, in turn, expect the state to hold on to its

¹Karen Armstrong, *Fields of Blood: Religion and the History of Violence* (New York: Anchor Books, 2015), p.193.

²For the modern and contemporary manifestations of this tension, see Sari Nusseibeh, “Islam: Philosophy and Law-making,” in *Confluence: Journal of World Philosophies*, 4. Nov. 2016, 99-132.

secularist logic of governance and relegate Islam and the authority of scholars of Islamic law strictly to the private sphere.

One might be tempted to view the separation between religious and political registers of thought and action favorably. On this view, the religious sphere, independent from politics, would serve as the bulwark of the rule of law.³ Scholars of law would determine whether rulers exercise their mandate in accordance with the norms and goals set by Islam. This view would pass secularist muster too. Secularists would point to the historical separation between religion and politics in Islamic history as an Islamic and hence indigenous precursor to their social vision. Some contemporary Muslim secularists, in fact, do so.⁴ The historical separation between religion and politics would thus be made to bring forth an Islamically grounded secularism. This indigenous secularism would counter the Islamist attempt to revive in contemporary times Prophet Muhammad's early Islamic polity in which religion and politics were fused.

I want to take in this study an alternative approach in respect to the separation between religious and political registers of thought and action. I want to pursue my conviction that the separation between religion and politics is politically problematic. This separation may have some appealing and promising features as briefly sketched above. Ultimately, however, it does more harm than good to the intellectual and political horizons of Muslim publics. It deprives Muslim publics of a common civic discourse, shared by secularists and those citizens who take

³ For an endorsement of this view, see Noah Feldman, *The Fall and Rise of the Islamic State* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008).

⁴ For an example, see Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, *Islam and the Secular State: Negotiating the Future of Shari'a* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2008). An-Na'im argues that the historical evolution of Islamic law allows for the indigenization of secularism in the Muslim world. The state in Muslim countries, An-Na'im thinks, should enforce laws pertaining to fundamental human rights and leave the remaining part of legislation to scholars of Islamic law. In some respects, An-Na'im's proposal amounts to a moral refinement, in light of human rights, of the ongoing regime of hybrid law in many Muslim states where Islamic law continues to operate in some areas of life. An-Na'im believes that Islamic law can influence politics in productive ways granted that it is reformed to become harmonious with contemporary standards of human rights.

their political bearings from Islam. It conceals the unity between religion and politics which consists in an orientation toward common good. It reinforces the reduction of politics to the accumulation and enhancement of power. It reinforces the reduction of religion to piety and tradition. Consequently, the chasm between secularism and Islamic politics grows to such an extent that the possibility of a genuine civic dialogue moves out of reach.

In its attempt to discover intellectual foundations for closing this chasm, this study turns to the political thought of Abū Naṣr al- Fārābī (d. 870-950). Al-Fārābī offers resources through which Muslim publics can think anew about religion and politics and recognize their common purpose: the welfare of Muslims. Al- Fārābī sets boundaries around politics. Setting moral goals before politics, he discounts force as the fount of political authority. Al-Fārābī limits religion too, by prioritizing its historical roots and moral concerns over its claim to transcendence. Al-Fārābī's main purpose in all this is to tether political authority to a fusion of theoretical and practical wisdom. Under this fusion, theoretical wisdom cannot afford to remain indifferent to the seemingly mundane concerns regarding public welfare. Practical wisdom, in turn, cannot afford to sideline moral concerns in the name of expediency. Al-Fārābī's approach then knots together morality, the characteristic concern of religion, and expediency, the defining logic of politics. It allows us to theorize the question of religion and politics in the Muslim world from a fresh perspective. Or so this study will argue.

What motivates the turn of this study to a pre-modern thinker like al-Fārābī against the backdrop of rather modern or contemporary concerns in respect to religion, politics and secularism? There are other, more contemporary, resources to which one can turn for a critique of secularism, including resources from the West, the bastion of secularism. One can invoke, for example, the influential intervention of Jürgen Habermas into the debates on the role of religion

in a liberal democratic public sphere. Habermas, in a manner that is similar to the spirit of this study, seeks to overcome the estrangement between religious and secularist citizens. He calls for “joint ventures of translation” that can enrich the political public sphere: religious and secularist citizens, in this vision, would translate their public visions into a mutually intelligible language.⁵ One can easily imagine these joint ventures of translation taking place in Muslim publics. Scholars of Islamic law work are well situated to translate their values to a secular public as they have historically operated within a rich and secularly intelligible ethical tradition. However, I believe, the project of translation can take us only so far: one must adopt a more ambitious and historically deep perspective to bring about the dialogue this study, like the work of Habermas, calls for. The need for historical depth especially pertains to the Islamic context. Hence my turn to al-Fārābī. Let me elaborate.

Despite what the Euro-centric linear and developmental secularization narrative might suggest, a large section of the world’s population today inhabits countries where religious sensibilities and demands are accommodated, whether easily or uneasily. The secular/religious divide cuts across the national, ethnic and linguistic unity any given country may exhibit, proving to be a resilient marker of difference. Most countries address this divide through hybrid or accommodationist strategies: most European countries combine, for example, a weak form of religious establishment with a relatively diverse, multi-cultural or multi-religious public life. Habermas’ strategy, described above, is a remarkably thoughtful and subtle way of reconciling the liberal principle of state neutrality with a recognition of the normative contribution religion can make to public life. We observe a hybrid approach in many Muslim countries too. The

⁵Jürgen Habermas, “Religion in the Public Sphere,” in *Philosophia Africana*, Vol.8, No.2 (August 2005): 99-110, p.103.

constitutions of countries as diverse as Yemen, Egypt, Malaysia, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia declare Islam as the basis of their laws, while adopting a relatively secular approach to criminal and commercial legislation. Saudi Arabia, for example, has exempted the finance, banking and corporate capital sectors from the application of *sharī'a* rules. There is, furthermore, a trend in the Islamic world that emphasizes the mandate of Supreme Courts to declare secular values as harmonious with Islam, leading to the formation of what the scholar of comparative law Ran Hirschl calls “constitutional theocracy,” a hybrid regime type in which the state expresses its (secular) authority in Islamic terms.⁶ All this reveals the religious/secular divide to be a significant source of contention and conflict regarding political governance, making hybrid arrangements appealing for many countries.

Now, among the countries living through the tensions generated by the religious/secular divide, countries in the Muslim world stand out with a distinctive feature. Note well how so many Muslim countries continue to make room for Islamic concerns and sensibilities in their constitutional and legal practice, even while maintaining a general commitment to secularism. The problem of religion and politics is more closely related to the very constitution of polities and therefore more vexing in the Muslim world than it is in other places in the world. We can recognize this when we ponder the ongoing controversies in Muslim publics over the suitability of *sharī'a* to modern governance. Note well also the continuing appeal of the early Islamic polity to modern Islamic revivalists or Islamists, the fiercest opponents of contemporary secularist regimes. The early Islamic polity, the polity of Muhammad and the first four caliphs or, in other words, the Islamic polity as it formed before the bifurcation of authority into religious and political registers in the way sketched above, appeals to some contemporary Muslims because

⁶Ran Hirschl, *Constitutional Theocracy* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2010).

some features of this polity accord with modern and democratic sensibilities.⁷ This is the case because as a political form, the early Islamic polity exhibits an anti-patrimonial ethos. It rejects despotism and commits to rule of law. Due to its tribal origins in an agriculturally infertile territory, it showcases a relatively high degree of political participation in comparison to agrarian empires that succeeded it. It continues to remain ripe, therefore, for political revitalization in the modern context. All this renders politics in the Muslim world more riveted to past than much politics elsewhere.⁸ This carries implications for the religious/secular divide in the Muslim world, rendering a search for historical depth imperative. In addressing this divide, we must open the lens of time sufficiently widely, seeking, in Muslim past, intellectually rigorous resources that can help us religion and politics in different and more productive ways. The terms of contemporary liberal democracy would not adequately meet the demands of this intellectual exercise. Hence the turn in this study to al-Fārābī, a thinker from the 9th century.

In critically addressing the religious/secular divide through al-Fārābī, then, this study seeks to emphasize the ideas of common good and welfare as the common denominator of Islam and politics. One may deem this effort republican or democratic as the concepts of common good and welfare are essential to republicanism and democracy. Being a pre-modern thinker, Al-Fārābī perhaps cannot help us fully embed democratic values and institutions in the Islamic world. Al-Fārābī did not know about parliaments, civil rights and separation of powers. As it will become clear in due course, Al-Fārābī meant something very different from modern democracy when he wrote about the “democratic city.” He was, furthermore, far removed from modern egalitarianism; he believed in the naturally grounded supremacy of the intellectually more

⁷Michael Cook, *Ancient Religions and Modern Politics: The Islamic Case in Comparative Perspective* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014), p. 319.

⁸Michael Cook, *Ancient Religions and Modern Politics*, p. xi.

competent over intellectually less competent. However, Al-Fārābī *can* help us, I will insist, think about the relationship between Islam and politics beyond the religious/secular divide. He can help us, to state the matter differently, to close the chasm, exploited by contemporary anti-democratic secularist and Islamist parties alike, between Islam and politics.

The study is organized into four sections. Section I explores, from a conceptual point of view, al-Fārābī's overall philosophical and political vision. It introduces al-Fārābī's understanding of philosophy, religion and political science. It prepares the ground for Section II which develops the key argument of the study. The key argument is that al-Fārābī fuses, in his concept of political leadership, theoretical wisdom and practical wisdom. The fusion of theoretical wisdom and practical wisdom brings about the fusion of truth and expediency as well as the fusion of morality and political power. Section II further elaborates this key argument by discussing al-Fārābī's classification of "ignorant cities." Among the ignorant cities, I pay the most attention to the democratic city, as this city would garner the most interest from contemporary readers. I explore the reason why al-Fārābī thinks that the democratic city is unstable. The democratic city is unstable according to al-Fārābī, I find, because it fails to secure responsible political leadership. This implies that we should tread carefully while pursuing a contemporary appropriation of al-Fārābī as a democratic resource.

Section III attends to al-Fārābī's historical derivation of the concepts of *umma* and *milla*. The words denoting these concepts can be translated as nation and religion, respectively. However, throughout Section III and a few times when it is appropriate in Section IV and conclusion, unlike in earlier sections and most of Section IV and the conclusion, I refrain from using English translations for these words. This is especially important for the word *milla*. In using the Arabic *milla* and not "religion," I intend to highlight al-Fārābī's understanding of

religion as a historical phenomenon. The argument in Section III is that *milla*, as al-Fārābī understood it, comes into being through time as history advances, language develops, and lawgivers articulate their prescriptions through imaginative representations and analogies. Since the English word “religion” is deeply entrenched in contemporary debates in Anglophone social and political theory, I have decided to use it to set up my overall argument, in sections prior to section III, and mostly in section IV and the conclusion. However, I do ask my readers to think of religion as *milla* throughout the presentation of al-Fārābī in this study. Or, at least, I ask my readers to set aside, when they read “religion” in al-Fārābī, the commonly established associations of the word, associations which relate religion to transcendence, a-historicity and a Protestant conception of belief as an internal state. All this is important for the overall argument of the study. If religion or, better, *milla* is historical, it is subject to change as demanded by civic concerns or the common good.

Section IV engages in comparisons between al-Fārābī’s political theory and other influential traditions and genres in Islamic and Western political thought. It compares al-Fārābī’s political vision to the classical/medieval theory of caliphate and the “mirror for princes” literature in the Islamic world. It also briefly points to a comparison between al-Fārābī and the civil religion tradition in Western political thinking. Al-Fārābī’s political thought emerges from these comparisons in a more favorable light, this section will suggest. Finally, I pursue in Section IV the continuing influence of al-Fārābī’s political thinking in the Islamic world. I do so by focusing on Nasir al-Din al-Tusi's reception of al-Fārābī’s key political categories. We would be wrong, this shows us, to cast al-Fārābī as a marginal figure and underestimate the (promise of) his legacy.

SECTION I: AL-FĀRĀBĪ ON PHILOSOPHY, RELIGION, POLITICAL SCIENCE

Al-Fārābī's political thought is marked by a distinctive blend of ancient Greek and Islamic traditions of thought. Al-Fārābī drew on Plato and Aristotle to reflect on the best political constitution. This required attention to human nature and human condition; the best political constitution would be the one with the highest capacity to promote human perfection. This entailed a grand political philosophy; simple manuals of statecraft and advice to rulers would not adequately address al-Fārābī's political and philosophical concerns. However, unlike Plato and Aristotle, al-Fārābī lived and thought in a milieu shaped by Islam, a monotheistic religion that had begun to put down roots in a large territory. This made it imperative to create a new political science appropriate to a world shaped by divine revelation.

It is often the case that a blend of two traditions illuminates otherwise neglected dimensions of either or each tradition. Al-Fārābī offers a remarkable example of this phenomenon. Standing on the bridge between ancient Greece and Islam, al-Fārābī discovered a new way of interpreting Islamic history. As Patricia Crone explains, reading Plato enabled al-Fārābī to interpret “the Prophet as the law-giver, the *Sharī‘a* as the law (*nāmus*) or constitution (*sīra*, *siyāsa*), the Muslim community as his polity (*madīna*), and, not least, of the philosophers as the true legatees of its founder.”⁹ Stated otherwise, Al-Fārābī came to regard Prophet Muhammad's activity in Medina as comparable to the ancient Greek practice of founding a colony. Like the ancient Greek founder of a colony, al-Fārābī thought, the Prophet had established a new polity and a new set of laws. To be sure, by al-Fārābī's time, the Prophet's early polity had expanded into a large agrarian empire that had mostly abandoned the goal of *Sharī‘a* to create a just society where even the weakest or most vulnerable Muslim could expect

⁹Patricia Crone, *God's Rule, Government and Islam: Six Centuries of Medieval Islamic Political Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), p. 172.

fair treatment. Nevertheless, it remained the duty of philosophically inclined Muslims to study the ideal and strive to establish norms and institutions that constitute an approximation to it. Or so thought al-Fārābī.

From ancient Greek political philosophy, especially Plato, al-Fārābī adopted a distinct vision. Following political theorist Sheldon Wolin, I want to refer to this mode as an “architectonic vision.” As explained by Wolin, “an architectonic vision is one wherein the political imagination attempts to mold the totality of political phenomena to accord with some vision of the Good that lies outside the political order.”¹⁰ In the architectonic vision, political imagination places the entirety of the political order within a larger overriding whole untainted by any corruption, disorder and defect. Stated otherwise, in the architectonic vision, political imagination overcomes the limits of ordinary political analysis. It refuses to rest content with direct observation of existing power dynamics. It reaches beyond direct observation to fashion a graceful and beautiful whole. Al-Fārābī’s treatises range from metaphysics to politics and describe the entire human and natural edifice as one such graceful and beautiful whole.

Al-Fārābī’s architectonic vision brings forth a functionalist approach to political life. It presents political life as a system of differentiated roles and functions. Here again Al-Fārābī borrows from ancient Greek thought, especially from Plato. As it is well-known, in Plato’s ideal city, philosopher-statesmen, auxiliaries and producers form distinct classes with specialized rights, duties and contributions to the whole city. Al-Fārābī follows this Platonic thread in thinking of political society as the organization of specialized skills—of leadership, guardianship

¹⁰Sheldon S. Wolin, *Politics and Vision: Expanded Edition* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 19.

of tradition, military arts and production of goods. This culminates in a functioning system.¹¹

The point, however, is not only to meet the demands of a system. It is to replicate in society in the divinely established and secured Good that exists beyond it.

Al-Fārābī's functionalism, one must emphasize, is not mechanical; it instead refers to a genuine social harmony obtained among willful agents. Al-Fārābī does not expect from the citizens of an ideal political association a soulless performance of prescribed duties. Instead, he envisages a political association permeated by love. Consider the following excerpt from al-Fārābī:

Some of the parts and ranks of the parts of the city are in concert with others. They are bound by love, and they hold together and stay preserved through justice and the actions of justice... In this city, love first comes about for the sake of sharing in virtue, and that is connected with sharing in opinions and actions. The opinions they ought to share in are about three things: the beginning, the end, and what is between the two... [This is] followed by the love of some for others... by love that comes about for the sake of the useful...by the love that comes about for the sake of pleasure. So by this they are in concert and bound.¹²

Al-Fārābī speaks here of multiple layers of love: love for the sake of the virtuous, the useful and the pleasurable. Notably, al-Fārābī finds the origin of love in the sharing of virtue. The sharing of virtue “is connected with the sharing in opinions and actions.” Since al-Fārābī refers to opinions “about the beginning, the end, and what is between the two,” he likely has in mind the love that follows from an agreement on the overriding purpose of life, presumably the purpose that is explained in the message of Islam. Finally, al-Fārābī does not discount the importance of what is

¹¹Dimitri Gutas writes: “In al-Farabi every member of a society is by nature predisposed, that is, teleologically pre-determined, to occupy a particular niche in the social edifice, just as every element in the universe at large is pre-determined to occupy its niche and perform its function for which it was created. It is for this reason that al-Farabi can equate the social unit, the city, to a natural being” (p.278) in Dimitri Gutas, “The Meaning of Madani in al-Farabi's Political Philosophy,” in *Melanges de l'Universite Saint-Joseph*, 57 (2004): 259-282.

¹²Alfarabi, *Selected Aphorisms* in Alfarabi, *The Political Writings: Selected Aphorisms and Other Texts*, (trans.) and (ann.) Charles Butterworth (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2001), p.40.

“useful” and “pleasurable.” Once citizens agree on the Good, he suggests, they can pursue what is useful and what is pleasurable with a good conscience.

How can human beings discover and realize the Good and the love and social harmony to which it leads? What, if anything, establishes reliable access to the Good: philosophy or religion? On what kind of knowledge does the Lawgiver rest his prescriptions and proscriptions? As an initial point of entry into these questions, it is worthwhile to consider al-Fārābī’s definitions of philosophy, religion and political science. Consider, first, the distinction al-Fārābī makes between philosophy and religion:

Philosophy gives an account of the ultimate principles (that is, the essence of the first principle and the essences of the incorporeal second principles), as they are perceived by the intellect. Religion sets forth their images by means of similitudes of them taken from corporeal principles and imitates them by their likeness among political offices. It imitates the divine acts by means of the function of political offices.¹³

Religion, then, presents abstract and remote ultimate principles by invoking images and likenesses taken from the corporeal realm and political world. One may think in this regard of the Quran’s portrayal of God as a king, angels as His deputies, unbelief as rebellion, the state of the unbeliever as darkness and so on. There is, to be sure, an affinity between religion and philosophy: the two modes of inquiry converge upon the same set of truths. Religion, however, lacks the certainty and precision of philosophy. It lacks certainty and precision because it accommodates the limits of human cognition. This lies in the structure of religion; religion essentially renders the philosophical truths grasped by a philosophical intellect in a form in which less philosophically proficient individuals can comprehend them.

¹³Alfarabi, *Attainment of Happiness* in Alfarabi, *Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*, (trans.) and (int.) Muhsin Mahdi, (fore.) Charles Butterworth and Thomas Pangle (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), p. 45.

Religion and philosophy differ in al-Fārābī's thought in respect to the degree of their universality as much as they differ in the manner in which they present the truth. Religion has a much more limited purview than philosophy. Al-Fārābī writes that "religion is opinions and actions, determined and restricted with stipulations and prescribed for a community by their first ruler, who seeks to obtain through their practicing it a specific purpose with respect to them or by means of them."¹⁴ Religion is tightly bound, therefore, with the purpose prescribed for a *specific* community. The size of that community varies. Al-Fārābī writes that "[the community] could be a tribe, a city or district, a great nation, or many nations."¹⁵ One wonders in response to this remark about the kind of community Prophet Muhammad, in al-Fārābī's judgment, intended to (trans)form at different points in his career. One can consider a progression or expansion from the tribe of Quraysh to the confederation of tribes in the city of Madina, and then to Arabs or the Arab nation(s) in the Hijaz region, and then possibly a future or imagined association of many nations, Arab and non-Arab, and, finally, all nations or the entire humanity. Al-Fārābī might have recognized limits to this progression. The variety of languages and customs among human populations would limit the expansion toward a universal community. However, al-Fārābī *does* seem to allow the possibility of a religion encompassing many nations. One can imagine the international reach of religion taking place through conquest, cultural assimilation and political deliberation. One can also imagine some divine purpose enabling this reach.

Where does political science stand in relation to philosophy and religion in al-Fārābī's scheme? Like religion and practical philosophy, political science focuses on actions and ways of life through which human beings can flourish. Al-Fārābī writes of political science as follows:

¹⁴ Alfarabi, *Book of Religion* in Alfarabi, *Political Writings*, p. 93.

¹⁵ Alfarabi, *Book of Religion* in Alfarabi, *Political Writings*, p. 93.

Political science investigates the sorts of voluntary actions and ways of life; the dispositions, moral habits, inclinations, and states of character from which those actions and ways of life come about; the goals for the sake of which they are performed; how they ought to exist in a human being; how to order them in him according to the manner they ought to exist in him; and the way to preserve them for him.¹⁶

Compared to religion, political science appears to be more investigative: political science is principally a science of investigation. Political science provides an account of how the human soul or, in more modern terms, human psyche operates, how human action originates, what purposes motivate human conduct, and how the character of citizens can be molded to fit the goals of a given regime. One can productively view religion as a subject matter of political science. A prudent statesman would make use of religion in realizing his goals for a given community. As for the relationship between political science and philosophy, one could think of the political science in al-Fārābī's framework as a branch of (practical) philosophy. Political philosophy would investigate the norms of action by which citizens can acquire the necessary virtues and live together in a functioning whole.

SECTION II: AL-FĀRĀBĪ ON POLITICAL LEADERSHIP: FUSING MORALITY AND POWER

The key to understanding the differences and affinities between philosophy, religion and political science and hence unraveling al-Fārābī's overall scheme lies in the concept of leadership. Al-Fārābī envisages most humans as in need of guidance to live properly and achieve perfection as a collectivity. He writes that "the innate character of every human being does not on its own know happiness or the things that ought to be done; rather, for that, there is need for an instructor and a guide."¹⁷ For al-Fārābī, rulers possess the power that establishes and preserves the equilibrium of a polity. Prophets and *imams* possess the *same* kind of power; the

¹⁶ Alfarabi, *Enumeration of Sciences* in Alfarabi, *Political Writings*, p. 76.

¹⁷ Alfarabi, *Political Regime* in Alfarabi, *The Political Writings, Volume II: "Political Regime" and "Summary of Plato's Laws,"* (trans.) and (int.) Charles Butterworth (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2015), p. 68.

religion they establish presupposes the ability to rule. At its base, rulership consists in making and enforcing laws that articulate the norms of social organization. Consider, in this regard, the following words of al-Fārābī:

It follows, then, that the idea of *Imam*, Philosopher, and Legislator is a single idea. However, the name philosopher signifies primarily theoretical virtue. But if it be determined that the theoretical virtue reach its ultimate perfection in every respect, it follows necessarily that he must possess all the other faculties as well. Legislator signifies excellence of knowledge concerning the conditions of practical intelligibles, the faculty for finding them, and the faculty for bringing them about in nations and cities.¹⁸

In the person of the *imam*, philosopher and legislator, theoretical and practical virtues come together to form a single set of abilities.¹⁹ There might be differences of emphasis among the philosopher, *imam* and legislator in respect to the degree they exemplify each of the constituent parts of that single set; theoretical virtue distinguishes the philosopher, while imagination and practical deliberation mark, respectively, the *imam* and the legislator. However, the ultimate perfection of theoretical virtue presupposes a simultaneous excellence in practical reasoning. Al-Fārābī offers a robust account of leadership then; the true leader, in this account, unites theoretical and practical excellence and shows mastery of religion and law alongside philosophy.

Why is leadership or rulership so central to al-Fārābī's thought? What special characteristics of a good leader make him indispensable to a polity? Al-Fārābī suggests that a

¹⁸Alfarabi, *Attainment of Happiness* in Alfarabi, *Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*, p. 46.

¹⁹Alfarabi's commitment to the idea of the prophet-philosopher has been taken by many as an indicator of his Shiite identity. Henry Corbin suggests, for example, that Alfarabi was a crypto-Shiite who clothed his Shiite views in philosophical language. For a discussion of Corbin's view, see Joseph Kechichian, "The Second Teacher," in *Gulf News*, April 18 2013, <https://gulfnews.com/general/the-second-teacher-1.1172151>. For an alternative to Corbin's view, Kechichian refers to the work of Charles Butterworth. We can also consider here Hans Daiber's argument that Alfarabi was inspired by the writings of Ismaili *da'i* Abu Hatim al-Razi, especially his *Kitab al-Islah (Book of Correction)*, in developing his main thesis that religion is an imitation of philosophy. See Hans Daiber, "The Ismaili Background of Fārābī's Political Philosophy" in *Gottes ist der Orient, Gottes is der Okzident*, (ed.) Udo Tworuschka, 143-150 (Koeln: 1991).

good leader models exemplary character and a natural inclination toward virtue. Consider the distinction al-Fārābī makes between an ordinary virtuous citizen and the ruler:

... the self-restrained person and the one who adheres to the *nomos* lay claim to the virtue of struggle. If he lapses as a citizen rather than as ruler, the rulers will set him straight; his crime and corruption do not go beyond him. The righteousness of the ruler, however, is shared by the inhabitants of his kingdom. So, if he lapses at all, his corruption extends to many besides him. His virtues must be natural and be states of character, and a sufficient reward for him is what he erects in those whom he sets straight.²⁰

The virtue of the ruler is critical in this account for three reasons. First, since the ruler is the sovereign, there exists no higher authority to “set him straight” if he lapses. Secondly, al-Fārābī understands the ruler as the fount of virtue. A political association ruled by a corrupt leader is bound to fail. Finally, on a related point, for al-Fārābī, the ruler must regard the moral impact of rulership as his reward. The true ruler does not rule for the sake of external rewards. His soul possesses a natural, internal momentum that propels him to righteous conduct; there is a “sufficient reward for him [in] what he erects in those whom he sets straight.” The ruler, in other words, must exemplify the right motivation for virtuous conduct for the entire political association.

Al-Fārābī describes the true ruler, the ruler of the excellent city, in idealized terms. Stated otherwise, true rulership in his thought resembles an ideal type. In developing that ideal type, al-Fārābī likely had in mind remarkable human beings in history. However, he characteristically refrains from giving historical examples. At times, in describing the ruler of the excellent city, al-Fārābī makes use of a religious language invoking a philosophized account of divine revelation. He writes that the ruler of the excellent city is “through the emanation from the Active Intellect to his Passive Intellect, a wise man and a philosopher and an accomplished thinker who employs

²⁰Alfarabi, *Selected Aphorisms* in Alfarabi, *Political Writings*, p.19.

an intellect of divine quality, and through the emanation from the Active Intellect to his faculty of representation a visionary prophet.”²¹ From the Active Intellect, the representative faculty of the excellent ruler receives either an actual glimpse or an imitation of forms or key principles of the universe. The reception of such knowledge endows the ruler with prophetic abilities. Al-Fārābī, further, imputes to the ruler of the excellent city the additional abilities of oratory and war-making: “He should be a good orator and able to rouse [other people’s] imagination by well-chosen words...He should in addition be of tough physique in order to shoulder the tasks of war.”²² Oratory and the art of waging war assure the ruler’s efficacy in the world. Having all these abilities, he becomes “the sovereign of the excellent nation, and the sovereign of the universal state.”²³ Al-Fārābī’s discussion takes place in obviously theoretical terms as no such excellent nation, let alone any universal state, ever existed. Al-Fārābī likely intends to present the form or ideal of excellent rulership to which cities and nations should aspire.

The excellent city may be a remote ideal but Al-Fārābī indicates the ways in which its main features can take hold in any given society to a reasonable degree. The ruler of the excellent city undertakes the task of fashioning the souls of citizens. The fulfillment of this task requires the creation of right influences and a salutary environment through and in which citizens can internalize right opinions and virtues. Al-Fārābī refers to two primary methods by which the ruler of the excellent city and rulers who follow in his footsteps can pursue this exercise in soul-craft: instruction and the formation of character. Instruction is a fundamentally theoretical enterprise: “to instruct is to introduce the theoretical virtues in nation and cities.”²⁴ The

²¹Abū Naṣr al- Fārābī, *On the Perfect State*, (int.), (trans.) and (comm.) by Richard Walzer (Chicago: Great Books of the Islamic World and Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 245.

²² Abū Naṣr al- Fārābī, *On the Perfect State*, p. 246.

²³ Abū Naṣr al- Fārābī, *On the Perfect State*, p. 246.

²⁴ Alfarabi, *Attainment of Happiness* in Alfarabi, *Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*, p. 35.

formation of character, in turn, refers to the “method of introducing the moral virtues and practical arts in nation.”²⁵ While instruction proceeds by speech alone, the formation of character may proceed by “speech and deed.” In forming the character of citizens, the key is to arouse in them “the resolution to do the [right] acts [so that] the states of character and the acts issuing from them ... come to possess their souls... and [they become] enraptured by them.”²⁶ In the formation of character, the emphasis falls upon resolution, affect and action.

Al-Fārābī mentions persuasion and compulsion as part of instruction and character building. Persuasion refers to the attempt to secure, through speech, the assent of citizens to norms of righteous conduct. It also refers to the attempt to train some of these citizens in the art of practical deliberation and prepare them for rulership in the future. Compulsion, in turn, is “to be used with the recalcitrant and the obstinate among those citizens of cities and nations who do not rise in favor of what is right willingly and of their own accord or by means of arguments.”²⁷ All this indicates an expansive realm of public concern in al-Fārābī’s thought; the fundamental opinions citizens hold and the states of character they exhibit acquire considerable public significance.

Considering al-Fārābī’s description of the ruler as a legislator, the primary instrument through which the ruler inculcates the necessary virtues in the souls of the citizens appears to be law. Laws and virtues form a bundle in al-Fārābī’s thought, as they do in ancient Greek thought. Ferial Bouhafa argues that Al-Fārābī’s account of laws is beholden to Aristotle’s conception of virtue as lying in the mean between two extremes: “Aristotle’s conception of the mean is given

²⁵ Alfarabi, *Attainment of Happiness* in Alfarabi, *Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*, p. 35.

²⁶ Alfarabi, *Attainment of Happiness* in Alfarabi, *Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*, p. 35.

²⁷ Alfarabi, *Attainment of Happiness* in Alfarabi, *Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*, p.36.

concrete ethical content [in Al-Fārābī] by laws understood as measures.”²⁸ Al-Fārābī indeed writes that “virtues are traits of the soul and states intermediate between two traits both of which are vices, one of which is greater and the other lesser.”²⁹ Those who enact and enforce laws must strive to reach a determination of the mean or intermediate that fits the contingent aspects of time, place, person, quality and quantity. They must identify liberality, for example, as distinct from and in the mean between the extremes of stinginess and wastefulness. They must identify respectfulness as distinct from and in the mean between vainglory and self-abasement. Laws are best understood as reminders and reinforcers of the virtues that citizens should aim to internalize, in accordance with their circumstances. The leader shows his competence through his ability to determine and enforce legal measures.

I have mentioned that al-Fārābī discusses the excellent city in idealized terms. The same idealizing thrust manifest itself, it should be evident from my earlier remarks, in al-Fārābī’s account of the true ruler or legislator. One wonders then: How does al-Fārābī view actual or non-ideal political associations? What can we learn from al-Fārābī’s discussion of “ignorant cities” with regard to political leadership and the kind of knowledge, whether theoretical or practical, political or religious, that political leadership depends upon?

Al-Fārābī rests his classification of ignorant cities upon the flawed goals around which they are organized. Ignorant cities lack wisdom, the principal element of theoretical knowledge. Charles Butterworth writes that al-Fārābī’s fundamental political teaching is that wisdom “allows

²⁸Feriel Bouhafa, “Ethics and Fiqh in al-Fārābī’s Philosophy,” in *Philosophy and Jurisprudence in the Islamic World*, (ed.) Peter Adamson (Berlin, De Gruyter, 2019), 11-27, p. 27.

²⁹Alfarabi, *Selected Aphorisms* in Alfarabi, *Political Writings*, p. 20.

us to discern the unity in all things and eventually to gain an inkling of what must allow for it.”³⁰ Knowledge of this essential unity allows thoughtful individuals to “discern the flaws in the goals pursued by the citizens of ignorant cities.”³¹ Ignorant cities substitute a part for the whole, mistakenly making that part the organizing principle of the whole and thus creating destructive pathologies.

Al-Fārābī mentions six categories of the ignorant city: the necessary city, the plutocratic city, the hedonistic city, the timocratic city, the city of domination and the democratic city. This classification rests on the goals that the inhabitants of each kind of city pursue. The necessary city seeks the essential means of bodily well-being. The plutocratic city pursues wealth. The hedonistic city seeks to obtain sensual and imaginary pleasures. The timocratic city organizes itself around honor. The city of domination consists of parties that want to conquer and humiliate one another. The democratic city puts above all else the equal right of citizens to do what they like. It brings together multiple passions and ways of life.

There are notable interrelations and overlaps among the different kinds of ignorant city. The timocratic city especially brings together elements of other kinds of ignorant city. This is the case because honor, the organizing principle of the timocratic city, may originate from other motives than a simple desire for honor. One may seek honor through claiming wealth and distinguished ancestry. When a city takes wealth as the measure of honor, the timocratic city shows aspects of plutocracy. There might be another case in which the ruler seeks honor alone for himself but *does* assist other inhabitants of the city in securing for themselves wealth and

³⁰Charles Butterworth, “Alfarabi’s Plato: A Tale of Two Cities,” in *The Political Identity of the West: Platonism in the Dialogue of Cultures*, (ed.) Marcel Van Ekeren and Orrin Finn Summerell, Berlin, 55-76, p. 74.

³¹Charles Butterworth, “Alfarabi’s Plato: A Tale of Two Cities,” in *The Political Identity of the West: Platonism in the Dialogue of Cultures*, (ed.) Marcel Van Ekeren and Orrin Finn Summerell, Berlin, 55-76, p. 74.

pleasure; plutocratic and hedonistic elements would again be subsumed under timocracy in this case. If the ruler is honored for serving others, then al-Fārābī calls the city of that ruler “the best among the ignorant cities.”³² On the other hand, “if the love of honor in [the timocratic city] becomes very excessive, it becomes a city of tyrants and is fit for being transformed into becoming a city of domination.”³³ The timocratic city occupies, therefore, a critical transitional niche. It may stand relatively close to the virtuous city. It may, on the other hand, tend toward excess and degenerate into a city of domination.

The city of domination is a power *agon*. Its members see the world through the lens of raw power. Domination may proceed from various motives according to al-Fārābī: the sheer pleasure of physical domination, desire to gain wealth and desire to enslave others. Al-Fārābī understands human beings’ desire to deprive their fellow humans of a will or self. He also understands the political consequences of this desire. The ruler of the city of domination, the most capable dominator, as it were, may be driven to take all social goods to himself or his faction at the expense of other factions in the city or his city at the expense of other cities. Al-Fārābī takes this observation further and emphasizes enslavement as the definitive feature of the city of domination. In the city ruled by a tyrant, “the rest of the inhabitants of the city are slaves serving that single person in whatever he has a passion for; humiliated and submissive, they possess nothing of their own at all.”³⁴ Al-Fārābī’s description of the city of domination is remarkably perceptive; it illuminates the possessive and destructive dynamic in political life. In writing critically about the city of domination, al-Fārābī reveals his commitment to the value of moderation, sharing and mutual respect among the members of a political association.

³² Alfarabi, *Political Regime* in Alfarabi, *Political Writings Vol. II*, p.81.

³³ Alfarabi, *Political Regime* in Alfarabi, *Political Writings Vol. II*, p.81.

³⁴ Alfarabi, *Political Regime* in Alfarabi, *Political Writings Vol. II*, p.83.

Al-Fārābī's democratic city bears a striking resemblance to the description of democratic city that is found in Plato. As Plato, al-Fārābī emphasizes the diversity and permissiveness of the democratic city: "thus there arise [among the inhabitants of the democratic city] many moral habits, many endeavors, many desires, and taking pleasure in countless things."³⁵ The democratic city, further, attracts desires and energies that other cities have blocked: "Everyone loves it and loves to dwell in it, because every human being who has a passion or desire for anything is able to gain it in this city. The nations repair to it and dwell in it, so it becomes great beyond measure."³⁶ Attracting residents from every nation, the democratic city tends to expand into a multi-national empire; it "comes to be many cities, not distinguished from one another but interwoven with another, the parts of one interspersed among the parts of another."³⁷ This appears to be a loosely governed association; citizens of the democratic city refuse to grant superiority and authority to one another and their rulers. Ability and virtue, al-Fārābī grants, can exist in the democratic city; "there may chance to exist in [the democratic city] wise men, rhetoricians, and poets concerned with every type of object. It is possible to glean from it parts of the virtuous city, and this is the best that emerges in this city."³⁸ However, the democratic city can generate "the most evil" as much as "the most good."³⁹ Democratic freedom amplifies dangers as much as benefits.

Al-Fārābī thinks that responsible political leadership is unlikely to establish itself firmly in the democratic city. If "the one virtuous in truth" ever "chances to rule" the members of a democratic city, "he is soon deposed or killed, or his rulership is disturbed and challenged."⁴⁰

³⁵ Alfarabi, *Political Regime* in Alfarabi, *Political Writings Vol. II*, p.86.

³⁶ Alfarabi, *Political Regime* in Alfarabi, *Political Writings Vol. II*, p.87.

³⁷ Alfarabi, *Political Regime* in Alfarabi, *Political Writings Vol. II*, p.87.

³⁸ Alfarabi, *Political Regime* in Alfarabi, *Political Writings Vol. II*, p.87.

³⁹ Alfarabi, *Political Regime* in Alfarabi, *Political Writings Vol. II*, p.87.

⁴⁰ Alfarabi, *Political Regime* in Alfarabi, *Political Writings Vol. II*, p.88.

The ruler in a democratic city must give the population what it wants to secure his rule. He must set before them *their* choices and desires. If he does otherwise, popular riots bring his rule to an end. The democratic city is, in other words, susceptible to disruption by way of popular riots. On the other hand, al-Fārābī does allow for the possibility of a virtuous city emerging from a democratic city. Indeed, he argues that “it is more possible and easier for the virtuous cities and the rulership of the virtuous to emerge from the necessary and democratic cities than from the other [ignorant] cities.”⁴¹ The democratic city can give rise to divergent outcomes then. It may bring forth virtue inasmuch as instability.

It is possible that al-Fārābī thought of the city of Baghdad at his time as an example of the democratic city.⁴² Built as an imperial capital by the Abbasid Caliphate, Baghdad had enjoyed a diverse, multi-national population, with many citizens, like al-Fārābī himself, flocking to it from far-flung lands. However, by the time al-Fārābī developed his political thought, the Abbasid Baghdad, despite its intellectual vibrancy, fell into political decline. It began to be split into rival factions and overtaken by Turkish and Daylami mercenaries. The Abbasid Baghdad, therefore, epitomizes the democratic city which al-Fārābī describes as a weak and permissive form of monarchy.⁴³ The contrast with ancient political thought is striking, in this regard. Unlike Plato and Aristotle, Al-Fārābī did not experience elections or assemblies of any sort; he only knew rule by caliphs, sultans and armies. He thus came to associate democracy with a permissive social life, frequent riots and weak military power. Al-Fārābī ultimately disfavored democracy,

⁴¹Alfarabi, *Political Regime* in Alfarabi, *Political Writings Vol. II*, p.88. The fact that a community of virtuous individuals can thrive in Alfarabi’s democratic city can be taken as evidence that Alfarabi’s thought is sympathetic to democracy. For this position, see Muhammad Ali Khalidi, “Al-Fārābī on the Democratic City.” In *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 11, 3 (2003): 379-394.

⁴²Alexander I. Orwin, “Democracy under the Caliphs: Alfarabi’s Unusual Understanding of Popular Rule,” in *The Review of Politics*, Volume 77, Issue 2 (Spring 2015): 171-190, p.184.

⁴³Alexander I. Orwin, “Democracy under the Caliphs,” p.178.

then, even if, as we saw, he did allow for the possibility of virtue emerging from the midst of democratic freedom.

SECTION III: AL-FĀRĀBĪ ON THE *UMMA* AND *MILLA*

Al-Fārābī's political thought evinces a keen historical sensibility. Al-Fārābī understands social formations as products of historical evolution. This becomes evident in the way Al-Fārābī develops two key concepts: the *umma* and *milla*. Al-Fārābī conceives the *umma* as an association based on territory and language, like the modern nation: any given *umma* occupies a specific geographical space where a specific language has come into being.⁴⁴ The origins of the *umma* are found in the use of language, in other words. As humans communicate their intentions and opinions to each other through signs and sounds, al-Fārābī thinks, they form a language community. As the scope of signification expands, this community develops the arts of oratory, poetry, syllogistic reasoning, writing, grammar and natural science.

These arts are followed by the science of political affairs. The science of political affairs investigates matters based on volition and choice. The investigation initially proceeds through dialectical methods. Dialectical methods explore diverse opinions and beliefs. Subsequently, demonstrative methods which belong to philosophy and admit of greater certainty are established. "After all this," writes al-Fārābī, "there will be a need for lawgiving to teach the multitude those theoretical methods that have been inferred, concluded, and verified using demonstration, and those practical matters that have been inferred using the capacity for practical

⁴⁴ For the centrality of the *umma* to Alfarabi's political thought, see Alexander Orwin, *Redefining the Muslim Community* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017) and Alexander Orwin, "Can Humankind Deliberate on a Global Scale?" in *American Political Science Review*, 108,4,830-839. In the latter, Orwin writes: "Alfarabi rightly foresaw that political deliberation in his era and beyond would take place among the nations, a shifting and unstable domain somewhere between the city and the inhabited world" (p.837). For Alfarabi's historical narrative regarding the formation of the *umma*, see Alfarabi, *Book of Letters in Medieval Islamic Philosophical Writings*, (ed.) Muhammad Ali Khalidi (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

wisdom.”⁴⁵ The lawgiver, however, does not rely on demonstrative methods; those methods would perhaps convince some elite citizens but alienate most human beings. Rather, the lawgiver uses imaginative representations. This is the point in the social evolution at which *milla* comes into existence. As I have briefly mentioned above, *milla* can be roughly translated as religion, even though it means much more than belief or faith.⁴⁶ It refers to lawgiving, a system of belief and a set of rules that guide conduct. *Milla* induces moral behavior by expressing philosophical truths in accessible language. *Milla* refers, then, to the emergence, *in history*, of a particular approximation to fundamental philosophical truths.

In the progression described by al-Fārābī, then, the *umma* and its arts and sciences set the stage for the emergence, initially, of philosophy and, subsequently, of *milla*. The importance of the *umma*, however, does not vanish once philosophy and *milla* come into being a particular *umma*. The *umma*, in fact, remains as the unifying thread of the entire progression. As Alexander Orwin explains, “having ascended from the *Umma* to philosophy, [al-Fārābī] proceeds to gradually return to the *umma*.”⁴⁷ The return to the *umma* is imperative because the philosopher “must choose to express his most universal thoughts in the particular language of a given *umma*.”⁴⁸ The political efficacy of the philosopher presupposes familiarity with the particularity of the *umma*. Philosophy can transcend the *umma* only in speech, one must always remember.

⁴⁵Alfarabi, *Book of Letters in Medieval Islamic Philosophical Writings*, (ed.) Khalidi, p. 19.

⁴⁶*Milla* is, of course, a Quranic term, appearing as *milla Ibrāhīm*, the ideal and pure ur-religion to which Muhammad traced his movement. Jacques Waardenburg suggests that the concept of *milla* conceives of universality in terms of common origins: the universal monotheistic religion is the original religion, from which some religions might then deviate and to which other religions, like *dīn al-islām* in the eyes of Muslims, remain loyal. See Jacques Waardenburg, *Muslims and Others: Relations in Context* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2003), p.106. Alfarabi’s use of the *milla* appears to be different than from this universal notion. For Alfarabi, *milla* is historical and particular or beholden to a particular language.

⁴⁷Alexander Orwin, *Redefining the Muslim Community*, p.78.

⁴⁸Alexander Orwin, *Redefining the Muslim Community*, p.79.

There are limits to such transcendence in political life, in a world where speech and action are knotted together.

Al-Fārābī further complicates this progression by mentioning three possibilities for the historical origin of any given *milla*.⁴⁹ These possibilities center on the relationship between philosophy and *milla*. First, a *milla* may be based on a false philosophy, for example a philosophy with Egyptian or Babylonian roots. There might be a second lawgiver, in the same or a nearby *umma* where this *milla* based on a false philosophy has come into being, in whose time true philosophy, meaning Greek philosophy, exists. However, this second lawgiver may disregard this true philosophy and choose to rest his religion on the opinions and images of the old *milla* based on a false philosophy. This further corrupts the *milla*. A third lawgiver, who has no access to true philosophy, takes up this existing corrupt religion. This lawgiver addresses a new community that lacks even the rudimentary steps toward the demonstrative method of philosophy, meaning the steps of sophistry and dialectic. He adapts the already corrupt second *milla* to the needs of this intellectually deficient community, generating a further corrupt *milla*, far removed from true philosophy. The first possibility then appears to be notably bleak. Philosophy antedates *milla*, al-Fārābī had argued in describing the progression from the *umma* to *milla* through philosophy. However, he demonstrates by invoking this first possibility, that history may disrupt and fully cover the close relationship between religion and true philosophy.

The second possibility assumes a *milla* based on true philosophy. However, this *milla* spreads into another *umma* that lacks any cognition of the philosophical origins and underpinnings of their newly imported *milla*. Philosophy may subsequently reach this *umma*.

⁴⁹Alfarabi, *Book of Letters in Medieval Islamic Philosophical Writings*, (ed.) Khalidi, p.21-25. Alexander Orwin, *Redefining the Muslim Community*, pp.101-103.

This allows the philosophically inclined members of the *umma* to discover the origins of their *milla* in true philosophy. However, these members are likely to be opposed by the conventional interpreters of *milla*. This opposition renders difficult the prospect of cooperation between *milla* and philosophy.

The third possibility involves an even more disastrous clash between the partisans of *milla* and philosophy. The clash takes place when true philosophy reaches an *umma* that already has a *milla* based on false philosophy—the philosophy, for example, of Egyptians, Indians, Syrians and other neighboring *ummas*. Proponents of philosophy and *milla* share no common ground in this case; they end up at loggerheads with each other. The fate of the *umma* depends upon the outcome of this struggle between philosophy and *milla*.

It is not clear which of the three possibilities applies to Arabs and Islam. Al-Fārābī could have taken Islam to be based on true philosophy. This would call to mind the second possibility. However, it is not clear how Greek philosophy, which al-Fārābī deemed true philosophy, could enter the horizon of Muhammad; Greeks were not among the immediate neighbors of Arabs at the birth of Islam. Could al-Fārābī have thought that true, or Greek, philosophy has been channeled into Islam through Christianity? That might be the case, though we lack any evidence that could justify attributing this view to al-Fārābī with complete confidence. Alternatively, could al-Fārābī have thought that Islam is based on a false philosophy, in accordance with the first and third possibilities? That would be a rebellious intellectual position. It would invite the accusation of heresy. It seems unlikely to me that al-Fārābī held this position; al-Fārābī's entire corpus shows reverence toward Islam. In any case, al-Fārābī offers multiple and mutually incompatible accounts regarding the origin of *milla*. Further, the historical paths al-Fārābī envisages involve transfers of *millas* across *ummas* as well as significant clashes between

philosophy and *milla* in most *ummas*. The overall message al-Fārābī forwards, in my view, is that *milla* is a *historical* phenomenon, even if it may issue from or be assisted by true philosophy and divine revelation.

Whether the origins of any given *milla* lie in true or false philosophy, *milla* shapes the *umma* in which it has arisen to a significant degree. It gives birth to the arts of jurisprudence and dialectical theology. “The art of jurisprudence,” al-Fārābī writes, “is that by which a human being is able to infer, from the things the lawgiver declared specifically and determinately, the determination of each of the things he did not specifically declare.”⁵⁰ The jurist verifies his determination “on the basis of the purpose of the lawgiver in the religion he legislated with respect to the nation for which it was legislated.”⁵¹ The art of jurisprudence ascertains the purpose of the lawgiver and makes new laws. “The art of dialectical theology,” on the other hand, “is a disposition by which a human being is able to defend the specific opinions and actions that the founder of the religion declared and to refute by arguments whatever opposes it.”⁵² The art of dialectical theology sets out to preserve, in other words, the essential opinions and actions of a *milla*.

Al-Fārābī mentions some dangers that issue from certain ways in which the art of dialectical theology may be practiced. Stated otherwise, he subtly alerts his readers to the problems posed by an overzealous attachment to a given *milla*. Some dialectical theologians, al-Fārābī writes, were so assured of the validity of their *milla* that “they were of the opinion that they would defend it before others, make it attractive, remove suspicion from it, and ward their

⁵⁰Alfarabi, *Enumeration of Sciences* in Alfarabi, *Political Writings*, p.80.

⁵¹Alfarabi, *Enumeration of Sciences* in Alfarabi, *Political Writings*, p.80.

⁵²Alfarabi, *Enumeration of Sciences* in Alfarabi, *Political Writings*, p.80.

adversaries away from it by any chance thing.”⁵³ These “did not care whether they used falsehood, deceit, slander, or disdain.”⁵⁴ They justified the use of these immoral means in the following way: Only two kinds of men, they thought, could oppose them: an enemy or someone who is ignorant. It was permissible to use falsehood and deceit to defeat an enemy, they believed. As for someone who is ignorant, “[they thought it] permissible to bring a human being to his good fortune by means of falsehood and deceit, just as that is done with women and children.”⁵⁵ Al-Fārābī appears to be merely reporting the worldview and morality of these dialectical theologians; however, he does make it known that he disapproves their worldview and morality. In my view, al-Fārābī takes issue with the displacement of moral concerns by a logic that divides the world into friends and enemies. He takes issue, furthermore, with the way partisans of a *milla* often cast people who do not share their system of belief as ignorant. A *milla* can exert a pernicious influence in an *umma*, Al-Fārābī recognizes. Fanatical attachment to a *milla* can lead some to operate by an impoverished political logic. It can lead them to adopt immoral maxims of action like “one may treat the enemy or the ignorant as one sees fit” and “good ends justify any means that work toward it, good or bad.”

Al-Fārābī is intent upon securing the primacy and prestige of philosophy in an *umma* in which a *milla* has come into being. He writes that “the select without qualification are those who are philosophers without qualification.”⁵⁶ Others become select to the degree to which their activity bears resemblance to philosophy. A political leader renders himself among the select because his art, the practical art, constitutes a part of philosophy. “Only philosophers should be taken to be select in the first instance, in point of excellence... followed by dialecticians and the

⁵³Alfarabi, *Enumeration of Sciences* in Alfarabi, *Political Writings*, p.84.

⁵⁴Alfarabi, *Enumeration of Sciences* in Alfarabi, *Political Writings*, p.84.

⁵⁵Alfarabi, *Enumeration of Sciences* in Alfarabi, *Political Writings*, p.84.

⁵⁶Alfarabi, *Book of Letters* in *Medieval Islamic Philosophical Writings*, (ed.) Khalidi, p.3.

sophists, then the [religious] lawgivers, and finally the theologians and jurists,” al-Fārābī insists.⁵⁷ Al-Fārābī considers lawgivers, theologians and jurists among the select. However, he considers them among the select only after philosophers, dialecticians and sophists. Moreover, one must remember, for al-Fārābī, the practitioners of the arts and sciences of *milla* render themselves among the select on the condition that they practice their art in a way that resembles philosophy. This means that they must demonstrate an ability to think independently, relatively free of dogma, to be accounted among the select.

What does the emergence of a *milla* imply for political leadership? Do the arts and sciences of *milla* serve to prop up and steer the exercise of political authority? Al-Fārābī does not answer these questions directly. There are hints in his texts, however, toward a possible answer. In my view, *milla* assumes considerable political importance when the true king or the ruler of the excellent city passes away. Now, it is likely that the true king or the ruler of the excellent city is at the same time a prophet. His imaginative evocations give rise to a *milla*. However, this stage corresponds to only the beginnings of a *milla*. *Milla* develops further upon the death of its founder, the founding prophet or true king. As it develops further, moreover, it helps the *umma* preserve its laws prescribed by the true king. Al-Fārābī, as far as I can tell, understands the congealment of the laws of a *milla* as dependent upon political succession. The process occurs in the following way: The successor to the true king, writes al-Fārābī, “will proceed according to the way of life of the first.”⁵⁸ It is permissible, furthermore, for the successor to “change a Law [the first ruler] legislated at one moment if he [the successor] is of the opinion that it is more fitting to change it at another moment.”⁵⁹ The succession to the deceased true king gives birth to

⁵⁷Alfarabi, *Book of Letters in Medieval Islamic Philosophical Writings*, (ed.) Khalidi, p.4.

⁵⁸Alfarabi, *Political Regime in Alfarabi, Political Writings Vol II*, p. 70.

⁵⁹Alfarabi, *Political Regime in Alfarabi, Political Writings Vol II*, p. 70.

a new regime then. This regime refers to rule based on the transmission of Laws prescribed or ordained by the true king. Al-Fārābī calls the ruler of this regime type “the king of traditional law (*sunna*)”: “So the ruler who governs the city by means of written Laws adopted from past leaders is the king of traditional law (*sunna*).”⁶⁰ The term *sunna* (tradition), al-Fārābī declares elsewhere, is “almost synonymous” with *sharī‘a*.⁶¹ We are led to the conclusion that the regime ruled by the king of traditional law, the regime that succeeds the regime of the excellent ruler or the first ruler, is organized around *milla*. The king of traditional law oversees and enforces the written laws of *milla*. He, furthermore, changes some of these laws if new conditions so demand.

If the regime succeeding the excellent city is governed by traditional law, we can imagine jurists and scholars of *sharī‘a* (law) coming to possess greater political authority in that regime. The making of new laws in that regime would depend on the art of jurisprudence: the art by which humans discern the purposes of the original lawgiver and make new legal determinations for newly emerging cases and conditions that accord with these purposes. The art of jurisprudence would thus become critical, to be sure. However, al-Fārābī clearly posits the primacy of political science over (Islamic) jurisprudence. He writes that “jurisprudence about the practical matters of religion comprises only things that are particulars of the universals encompassed by political science; it is, therefore, a part of political science and subordinate to practical philosophy.”⁶² Jurisprudence is subordinate to political science; it applies the universal principles discovered by political science to particular cases. Al-Fārābī attributes therefore the authority to oversee legislation to the king of traditional law rather than to jurists. The king of traditional law possesses, al-Fārābī must have thought, a keener understanding of how the

⁶⁰Alfarabi, *Political Regime* in Alfarabi, *Political Writings Vol II*, p. 70.

⁶¹Alfarabi, *Book of Religion* in Alfarabi, *Political Writings*, p.96.

⁶²Alfarabi, *Book of Religion* in Alfarabi, *Political Writings*, p.101.

various purposes of the original lawgiver form a coherent principled ethical system that makes for human happiness and perfection. To be sure, jurists and scholars of law make specific contributions to the preservation and implementation of this system by mastering the key texts and reports in the tradition. Their art and practice, however, are subservient to the art and practice of the ruler.

SECTION IV: AL-FĀRĀBĪ IN COMPARISON TO OTHER TRADITIONS OF POLITICAL THOUGHT

What comparisons can we draw between al-Fārābī's political thought and other major strands in Islamic political thinking? In particular, how does al-Fārābī's account of political association and leadership stand in relation to the classical theory of caliphate/imamate as it historically evolved? As it was theorized by al-Mawardi (d. 972-1058) in the 11th century, the classical theory of caliphate/imamate posited a caliph descended from the Quraysh tribe who was tasked with the mission of protecting the community of Muslims and administering its affairs on the foundation afforded by Islam.⁶³ The caliph, al-Mawardi thought, could delegate his power, either in a particular province or the entire territory, to a *wazir* and *emir* who held *de facto* power. However, this delegation could only take place in the terms set by the caliph in accordance with the *sharī'a*.

By the 14th century, this classical theory evolved in a different direction than the direction al-Mawardi intended it to follow. To obtain a sense of this evolution, I suggest turning to Ibn Khaldun's discussion of the subject. Ibn Khaldun (d. 1332-1406), like al-Mawardi, conceives the caliphate/imamate as a "substitute for Muhammad inasmuch as it serves, like him, to preserve

⁶³Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples*, (aftwrtd.) Malise Ruthven (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), pp.142-143

the religion and to exercise political leadership of the world.”⁶⁴ He notes, however, that in later times, the caliph or the imam has been called ‘the sultan’ and *anybody* who seized power extracted the oath of allegiance from the people. The historical evolution of the classical theory of caliphate came to privilege, then, *de facto* authority over *de jure* authority. In fact, in hindsight, al-Mawardi’s development of the theory in the 11th century appears to be an ultimately unsuccessful effort to forestall the trend in the Islamic world toward absolutist monarchy, a trend that had begun in the 9th century. Al-Mawardi acknowledged and sought to legally contain that trend through his concept of delegation. He was, however, unsuccessful in that effort. Or so it seems from Ibn Khaldun’s account.

In his further discussion of the subject, Ibn Khaldun argues that the institution of caliphate/imamate is necessary for rational reasons. In the absence of a ruler who can exert a restraining influence, mankind falls into ruin, he suggests. The restraining influence of the ruler need not come into existence from religious law; the sheer power of the mighty ruler suffices to supply such an influence. Religious law, however, does provide benefits for political rule, argues Ibn Khaldun. It reinforces the duty of Muslim political subjects to obey the ruler who is tasked with overseeing the imposition of religious law.

Ibn Khaldun insists that the religious law is not opposed to the authority of kings. He writes that “the religious law does not censure royal authority as such and does not forbid its exercise.”⁶⁵ Religious law, he further writes, “merely censures the evils resulting from it, such as tyranny, injustice, and pleasure-seeking.”⁶⁶ The institution of the caliphate/imamate, Ibn Khaldun

⁶⁴Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 155.

⁶⁵Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, p. 157.

⁶⁶Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, p. 157.

suggests, is indeed governed by essential prerequisites: “knowledge, probity, competence, freedom of the senses and limbs from any defect that might affect judgment and action.”⁶⁷ Not everyone deserves to become the caliph. However, Ibn Khaldun fails to indicate any mechanism in the religious law by which people can decide that a given ruler has shown himself to be lacking these prerequisites, committed injustice and hence forfeited his right to rule. Rather, he consistently describes royal authority as the natural consequence of group feeling that is set upon conquest. Further, religious law approves, or at least does not censure, this aggressive and expansionist group feeling according to Ibn Khaldun.

How does Al-Fārābī’s political thought differ from the classical theory of caliphate as its outline and historical evolution is presented by Ibn Khaldun? Al-Fārābī, as we have seen, refuses to confer moral legitimacy on political power obtained through expansionist group-feeling. More generally, Al-Fārābī, as we have also seen, refuses to evaluate human affairs through any political logic grounded in friend/enemy distinction and violence. For Al-Fārābī, political rule finds its origin in and draws its legitimacy from its mandate to regulate human affairs by way of laws. It is true that the classical theory of caliphate allows the moral or non-political sphere of divine law to restrain political power. However, it posits no reliable mechanism to enforce this restraining power. Furthermore, it offers no foundational challenge to the effort to seize political power through group-feeling and power. Al-Fārābī’s approach, in contrast, binds political power tightly to morality and truth, allowing it no independent claim to authority.

For another comparison, we can consider the “mirror for princes” literature in the Islamicate world. This literature brings into focus an attempt on the part of medieval Muslims to

⁶⁷Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, p. 158.

formulate the essentials of statecraft in a time of political unease.⁶⁸ This literature puts forth a public enunciation of power and authority. It puts forth, alongside this enunciation, a political ethics rooted in the concept of justice (*adl*), the antonym of which is oppression and tyranny. The idea of justice articulated in the “mirror for princes” literature finds succinct expression in the idea of the “circle of justice.” The “circle of justice” reads as follows:

The world is a garden, and the fence of it is the dynasty.
The dynasty is authority, and through it customs are kept alive;
The customs are a way of governing, which is implemented by the sovereign;
The sovereign is a shepherd, and the soldiers help him;
The soldiers are helpers, and money provides for them;
Money is livelihood, that the flock gather;
The flock are slaves, devoted to the service of justice;
Justice is a norm; and it is alive in the world;
The world is a garden...⁶⁹

In this vision, justice is propped up by political authority, military power and money. Laws and customs make up the essence of justice. However, the sphere of justice requires support from other spheres: army and economy. Stated otherwise, the enforcement of laws and customs depends on a well-functioning army and economy.

The emphasis in the “mirror for princes” literature falls upon the prudence of the ruler. This emphasis on leadership may at first sight make this literature appear close to al-Fārābī’s political thinking. This appearance, however, would be misleading, in my view. The “mirror for princes” literature places the premium on the efficacy of the ruler in securing obedience. The ruler, this literature suggests, must ensure the devotion of his subjects to their essential tasks—

⁶⁸Erik Ohlander, “Enacting Justice, Ensuring Salvation: The Trope of the ‘Just Ruler’ in Some Medieval Islamic Mirrors for Princes,” in *The Muslim World*, Volume 99 Issue 2 (2009): 237-252, p. 250.

⁶⁹In the 9th century Arab world, this saying has been attributed to Aristotle and traced to a letter Aristotle wrote to Alexander. In the medieval Islamic context, there are many similar iterations of the same concept of a circle of justice. For this saying in particular and the more general discussion of the ‘circle of justice,’ see Jennifer London, “The ‘Circle of Justice,’” in *History of Political Thought*. Vol. XXXII., No. 3. (Autumn 2011): 425-447, especially pp. 425, 427-428.

war-making for the soldiers and money-making for the subjects or the “flock.” Customs and laws are described as a “way of governing.” Little attention is paid to what are some key concerns in Al-Fārābī: moral education, character-building and the internalization of laws by the people. The key political task appears to be social control, not virtue.

For a final comparison, let us consider how Al-Fārābī’s views on religion and politics stand in respect to the tradition of civil religion in Western political thought. In Section III, we have seen that al-Fārābī asserts the preeminence of political science over religious jurisprudence. One may take this to resemble the approach of civil religion. Developed in early modern Europe amid religious wars, civil religion refers to the attempt to harness the energies and sensibilities generated and unleashed by religion toward socially beneficial purposes.⁷⁰ Civil religionists are aware of the dangers posed by religious enthusiasm. However, they understand that religion is too deeply entrenched in human psychology and culture to be simply dismissed. Consequently, they choose to seize the politico-theological initiative to shape religion to a philosophically and civically desirable form. Does al-Fārābī adopt a similar approach when he envisages a regime ruled by the king of traditional law? Is the king of traditional law in al-Fārābī’s system tasked with the domestication of *milla*, to use again the concept of al-Fārābī, and the creation, thereby, of what we can deem a civil religion in the terms of Western political thought?

Much scholarship on al-Fārābī, in fact, is divided along this set of questions. Many interpreters of al-Fārābī argue that al-Fārābī pursues the strategy of accommodation with respect to Islam. Al-Fārābī accommodates Islam to his philosophical system, these interpreters argue, to

⁷⁰Ronald Beiner, *Civil Religion: A Dialogue in the History of Political Philosophy* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

be able to communicate with the masses that lack philosophical skills.⁷¹ It does so also to preserve philosophical inquiry from the charge of heresy. Other interpreters argue for the logic of convergence instead of the logic of accommodation.⁷² They suggest that philosophy and Islam represent for al-Fārābī two different ways of arriving at the same set of truths. These two ways converge on the same system, in other words. The logic of accommodation resembles the approach of civil religion. The logic of convergence, in turn, finds the harmony between religion and philosophy within easy reach, rendering the need for an aggressive domestication of religion relatively redundant.

I want to approach this set of questions somewhat differently. I want to suggest that the logic of accommodation/civil religion fails to capture al-Fārābī's approach. As for the logic of convergence, while it is closer to my position, it too does not quite allow us to appreciate the complexity of the matter. Let me elaborate.

In asserting the primacy of politics over (religious) jurisprudence, al-Fārābī, in my view, draws attention to the Context of *milla* or divine revelation. My use of the word "Context" with a capital C is inspired by Shahab Ahmed's articulation of the hermeneutics of Islam around the concepts of the Text, Pre-Text and Con-Text.⁷³ The Con-Text of Revelation comprises the

⁷¹For an example of the logic of accommodation as an interpretative lens, see Daniel E. Burns, "Alfarabi and the Creation of an Islamic Political Science," in *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 78, Issue 3, 365-389. Another example for this approach is: Joel Kramer, "Jihad of the Falasifa," in *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, Vol.10, (1987): 372-90. Kraemer argues that Alfarabi's conception of the philosopher-king is so fundamentally at odds with the Islamic view of the world that Alfarabi could do no more than just accommodate Islam or appropriate Islamic terms to his philosophy.

⁷²For an example of the logic of convergence as an interpretative approach, see Massimo Campanini, "Alfarabi and the Foundation of Political Theology in Islam" in *Islam, the State, and Political Authority*, (ed.) Asma Afsaruddin (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 35-52. For Campanini, Islam and religion converge through the medium of political science in Alfarabi's thought: "religion is a part of philosophy through political science, and philosophy employs religion in the government of cities and nations" (p.48). The same edited volume contains a critical response from Charles Butterworth to Campanini: Charles Butterworth, "Alfarabi's Goal: Political Philosophy, not Political Theology," in *Islam, the State and Political Authority*, (ed.) Asma Afsaruddin, 53-74.

⁷³Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam?: The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016), Chapter5, especially p. 357.

conditions and meanings which render the Text of Revelation intelligible and potent, not only at the time of its origin but through all time. The Pre-Text refers to non-textual or natural manifestations of the same Divine Intelligence that generates the Text. Jurists or scholars of law infer God's purposes from the Text. This, however, is not the only interpretative strategy available to Muslims. Rulers, in much Islamic philosophical-political theory including the philosophical-political theory of al-Fārābī, can reverse the interpretative trajectory of jurists when they make law, Ahmed suggests: "the ruler's law-making operation proceeds in a trajectory of reading God's purposes out of the world (including the Unseen world) into Textual sources."⁷⁴ The ruler proceeds from the Pre-Text to the Text, in contrast to the jurists or scholars of Islamic law. The Con-Text forms the bridge that takes the ruler from the world/Pre-Text to the Text. Ahmed articulates this as follows:

The discourse of philosophical-political theory that is present as part of the Con-text of Revelation—that is, as part of the apparatus of meanings with which the concept of Revelation is historically engaged, and from which Revelation is made meaningful—charges the ruler with the responsibility to make new law in the interests of the welfare/*maslalah* of the time: that is, in the interest of the welfare of the people of the time.⁷⁵

Ahmed thus posits the welfare of people/*maslalah* as part of the Con-text of Revelation in Islamic philosophical-political theory. When the ruler makes a law in the interest of the people, that law engages and confers meaning to the Text/Revelation. When the ruler intervenes into the world by legislation, he discloses and contributes to the understanding of the (spirit of the) Text.

Note well that Al-Fārābī attributes, in the manner suggested by Ahmed, to the king of the traditional law the authority and responsibility to change the existing law/make new law in the

⁷⁴Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam?*, p.484.

⁷⁵Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam?*, p.484.

interest of the welfare/*maslalah* of his time and people. The interpretive authority al-Fārābī attributes to the ruler as part of his political philosophy centered on the concept of welfare/*maslalah* resembles the bridge—the Con-Text— which, Ahmed thinks, allows the interpreter to move across the Pre-Text and Text. The most compelling evidence of this commitment to welfare/*maslalah* is found in the analogy al-Fārābī often makes between the statesman and the physician. Consider the following passage as one example of many instances in which this analogy is made:

Just as the health of the body is an equilibrium of its temperament and its sickness is a deviation from equilibrium, so too, are the health of the city and its uprightness an equilibrium of the moral habits of its inhabitants and its sickness a disparity found in their moral habits. When the body deviates from equilibrium in its temperament, the one who brings it back to equilibrium and preserves it there is the physician. So, too, when the city deviates from equilibrium with respect to the moral habits of its inhabitants, the one who brings it back to uprightness and preserves it there is the statesman.⁷⁶

As there is an equilibrium that obtains in the healthy human body, in this vision, there is an equilibrium in a well-functioning city, to recall once again the functionalism of al-Fārābī that I elaborated in Section I. The equilibrium of a well-functioning city refers to the overall welfare of its inhabitants: one can speak of the welfare of a city as comparable to a sound and healthy body with all its parts in order. Civic equilibrium is sustained by the moral habits of upright citizens. To preserve civic equilibrium for a regime organized around traditional law (the *sunna* of a given *milla*), the statesman or the king would need to reach beyond Text toward Con-Text. He would need to identify the problems that beset his polity and menace the welfare of his people. Only after this identification would he return to the textual sources. The prescription of the statesman would determine and rectify the specific predicament upsetting civic equilibrium.

⁷⁶Alfarabi, *Selected Aphorisms* in Alfarabi, *Political Writings*, p. 12.

In knitting together the concepts of equilibrium/welfare and law-making/rulership, Al-Fārābī initiates in Islamic philosophical political theory a fertile tradition of thought. Notably, the 13th century Persian polymath, political thinker and advisor to the Abbasid court Nasir al-Din Tusi (d. 1201-1274) cites al-Fārābī as the main inspiration for his influential political theory.⁷⁷ Tusi defines politics succinctly: “politics is the study of universal laws producing the best interest of the generality in as much as they are directed, through cooperation, to true perfection.”⁷⁸ This definition posits “the best interest of the generality” as the purpose of universal laws. Further, it emphasizes cooperation between humans, induced and secured through laws, as essential to human perfection. These universal laws are given by someone “distinguished from others by divine support,” Tusi writes.⁷⁹ “In the terminology of the ancients,” he adds, “[this person] was called the Possessor of the Law, and his enactments the Divine Law; the Moderns refer to him as the Religious Lawgiver, and to his enactments as the Religious Law.” Tusi, like al-Fārābī, stresses the affinity between ancient and Islamic approaches to political thinking, casting the difference between them as a matter of terminology. The common denominator between the two approaches becomes the desire to ensure the welfare of human associations through the enactment of laws.

Like al-Fārābī, Tusi recognizes that lawgivers do not emerge in every historical epoch. He writes that “not every age and generation has need of a Possessor of the Law, for one enactment suffices for the people of many periods.”⁸⁰ However, “the world does require a Regulator in every age, for if management ceases, order is taken away likewise, and the survival

⁷⁷Nasir al-Din Tusi, *The Nasirean Ethics*, (trans.) G.M. Wickens (New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 187.

⁷⁸Nasir al-Din Tusi, *The Nasirean Ethics*, p.192.

⁷⁹Nasir al-Din Tusi, *The Nasirean Ethics*, p. 192.

⁸⁰Nasir al-Din Tusi, *The Nasirean Ethics*, p.192.

of the species in the most perfect manner cannot be realized,” he notes.⁸¹ The “Regulator” here corresponds to al-Fārābī’s “king of the traditional law.” The Regulator ensures that enacted laws and social order are preserved. Note well that Tusi, like al-Fārābī, sets before the lawgiver or the ruler goals of the survival and perfection of the human species. Laws originate from divine inspiration, to be sure. However, the instrumental value of laws is not to be dismissed, Tusi, like al-Fārābī, believes. Laws ultimately prove their worth by the benefits they confer on the human species.

CONCLUSION: CHARTING A PATH FORWARD

What is, in conclusion, al-Fārābī’s political teaching? What is, furthermore, al-Fārābī’s way of navigating the conflict between religion and politics? Al-Fārābī primarily seeks to secure the welfare and stability of the *umma*. In the absence of the “true king” or the ruler of the excellent city, traditional laws (*sharī‘a*) become the key instruments through which welfare and stability may be pursued. The statesman or the king of traditional law, then, must situate himself in the terms set by the *milla* that he inherits. However, given the dangers posed by misguided zealous appropriations of *milla*, the statesman must adopt the universal laws of political science and organize the *umma* around these laws. Traditional laws should be modified as demanded by the changing times and circumstances. Al-Fārābī explains the origin of *milla* in naturalized terms, in my view, partly because he endorses the malleability of religious laws. Religious laws emerge in time. They emerge in history, out of suitable conditions. They can change, therefore, as history unfolds. All this points to a common civic realm in which both religion/*milla* and politics take part in a historically dynamic fashion. This common civic realm is anchored in truth

⁸¹Nasir al-Din Tusi, *The Nasirean Ethics*, p.192.

or philosophical knowledge, of which religion/*milla* is an expression or imitation. It is a mistake to understand the political realm as a realm severed from truth and marked by the claims of group-feeling, honor or domination. It is also a mistake to deprive the political realm of potential contributions from religion, provided that these contributions are philosophically guided and imaginatively potent.

If we read Al-Fārābī carefully, then, we become better situated to avoid these mistakes and chart an appealing path forward for the Islamic world. We become better situated to avoid the secularist fallacy to think one can protect the state from the religion of its own citizens without alienating those citizens. At the same time, we become better situated to avoid the Islamist fallacy to think of religious laws as resolutely static and immune from civic questioning and critique. Responsible and prudent political leadership, we can appreciate, can bring about legislation addressing both the concerns of traditional (Islamic) law and public welfare. In the contemporary world, responsible and prudent political leadership takes a democratic form: inclusive citizenship, political representation and judicial oversight accompany executive power. Lacking the terms of this contemporary language, Al-Fārābī's political thought should perhaps be modified and expanded in the light of these modern developments. However, even as it is, it remains a fertile resource for fashioning the future governance of Muslim countries, especially with regard to the religious/secular divide that besets them.

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