The Transcendental Grounding of Muslim Political Thought

Louay Safi*

Abstract

The paper provides a window into the overall progress of Islamic thought and examines different ideas that shaped political thinking among Muslim scholars. While the work does not provide a complete catalogue of the prevailing political ideas across the long history of Muslim political thought, it offers examples that reveal the main thrust of Islamic writing of political issues. As the paper illustrates, the various examples reveal that the main concerns of Islamic writers on issues of politics and power has always been to explore ways and means to translate the transcendental values elaborated in Islamic reveled sources to sociopolitical relations and political institutions.

Keywords: political thought, Imamah and political leadership, shura and democracy, Asabiyyah and social solidarity, the state under Islam, political reform, pluralism, and religious freedom.

Introduction

The history of Muslim political thought span over fourteen centuries and has evolved in response to diverse theoretical and practical stimuli. Despite the many changes in the conception of political authority and organization, Muslim political thought maintained a remarkable affinity to the early prophetic ethos and remained concerned in reconciling the transcendental values of the Islamic revelation with political demands of an evolving social structure and culture.

Muslim political thought has always been subject to outside influences and ready to embrace the ideas from outside its political and cultural experience. This embrace was however done with unwavering adherence to its ethical traditions that were always grounded in its religious parameters. Therefore, political debate has always been concerned in subordinating political authority to a transcendental law rooted in an overarching conception of shari'ah (Islamic Law) and a free expression of religiosity.

The outstanding feature of Muslim political thought has been the relentless efforts to subjugate political action to moral evaluation and demands. This feature of Muslim thinking was not lost on the most profound philosopher of history, G.W.F. Hegel. Hegel qualified Islamic interest in reconciling the secular and the moral as the "Mohammedan principle" and the "enlightenment of the orient" and thought that Islamic historical precedent influenced the later efforts by the enlightenment philosophers to do the same:

> We must therefore regard [the reconciliation between the secular and spiritual] as commencing rather in the enormous contrast between the spiritual, religious principles, and the barbarian Real World. For spirit as the consciousness of an inner world is, at the commencement, itself still in an abstract form. All that is secular is consequently given over the rudeness and capricious violence. The Mohammeden principle, the

enlightenment of the oriental world, is the first to contravene this barbarism and caprice. We find it developing itself later and more rapidly than Christianity. for the latter needed eight centuries to grow up into a political form.[1]

The following essay is not intended to provide a complete catalogue of the prevailing political ideas across the long history of Muslim political thought, but to provide a glimpse into the overall progress of ideas and the prevailing ideas that shaped political thinking among Muslims.

Greek Influence and the Search for the Ideal State

Early political writings among Muslim philosophers and scholars emerged in the context of intellectual exchange with Greek philosophy. The extensive translation of Greek work under the Caliph al Ma'mun exposed Muslims to Greek political philosophy. This exposure stimulated political thinking in the quest of finding an ideal political arrangement. Al Farabi's political writings provide an important insight into the Greek influence on early Muslim political philosophy.

Abū Naṣr al Farabi (*c.*870-950) was a leading Muslim philosopher who devoted his most important philosophical work to addressing political issues. His *Al-Madina al-Fadila* remains one of most fascinating work in political writings of all times. His impact on later Muslim philosophers was so immense that he was often referred to as the "Second Teacher," the first being Aristotle. Al Farabi's philosophical writings represent a creative synthesis of the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle. He, however, "broke completely with Greek metaphysics in favor of philosophical approach rooted in methodology."[2]

Al Farabi's major work, *Al Madina al Fadila*, was undoubtedly inspired by Plato's *The Republic*. The similarity between the two works was, however, more in form than in substance. Like Plato, Al Farabi peruses in his work the "ideal state" and insists that such state must be governed by a ruler that combines the mental power of a visionary with the political strength of a king. Al Farabi, nonetheless, replaces the Philosopher-King of Plato with the Prophet-Imam, a person who combines the moral insight of a prophet with the leadership capacity of an imam. Al Farabi argues that the ideal state resembles the city-state of Medina as it was ruled by Prophet Muhammad.

Al Farabi describes in platonic terms the qualities necessary for the ruler: he should possess innate virtues to rule with justice and fairness; he should be a good orator and should perfect himself until his soul unites with the active intellect; he should have both a strong physique and an astute mind; he should love learning and truth and be above the materialism of this world. Reviewing the various qualities enumerated by al-Farabi, and it is evident that the ideal ruler he describes is analogous to Plato's philosopher-king.[3]

Following in the footsteps of Plato, al Farabi distinguishes between perfect and corrupt states. He identifies three perfect states and qualifies them in accordance with their size into: uzma (the greatest), wusta (the medium), and sughra (the smallest). These states are then contrasted with four different types of corrupt city: the ignorant city (*al-madina al-jahiliyya*), the dissolute city (*al-madina al-fasiqa*), the hypocritical city (*al-madina al-mubaddala*) and the straying city (*al-madina al-dalla*). The above cities correspond closely to Plato's fourfold division of the

world to imperfect cities in the Republic, namely timarchy, oligarchy, democracy and monarchy.[4]

Al Farabi relates the quality of life of the city to the moral disposition of its inhabitants. The souls of the inhabitants of corrupt cities are lacking in the moral commitment, and are hence subject to internal conflict and torment that are manifested in the constant divisions and turmoil that distinguish these cities. Similarly, al Farabi's identify happiness (*sa'ada*) as the overarching value for explaining the quality of life in the various city types. He further entertain the possibility of moving from a virtuous community, through virtuous city, and ultimately to a virtuous world. The virtuous city (*al madina al fadila*) is distinguished from others in that its inhabitants cooperate to achieve happiness. The virtuous world (*al ma'mura al fadila*) is achieved when all cities collaborate to achieve happiness.[5]

Richard Walzer explores the themes of happiness in the writing of both Plato and al Farabi and finds an important difference in approach. He argues that Plato limited the experience of supreme happiness to philosophers who were able to achieve proper understanding of the world. Al Farabi, similarly, taught that supreme happiness was the lot of the ideal ruler whose intellect is united with the Active Intellect. Walzer, however, insists that al Farabi "does not confine his interest to the felicity of the first ruler: he is equally concerned with the felicity of all the five classes which make up the perfect state."[6]

Political Legitimacy and the Foundation of Political Authority

The influence of Greek political ideas on Muslim political philosophy was confined to a small circle of intellectual elites within Muslim society and was seen as irrelevant to the immediate concerns of a growing empire plagued by a fierce struggle among the various clans of Quraysh. The immediate concern for most Muslim scholars focused on the issue of political legitimacy as various political groups vied for political control of the state.

Early writings on the question of political legitimacy reflected the ongoing struggle between the Shi'ite and Sunni sects of Islam. Early Shi'ite scholars insisted that the question of political legitimacy was essentially a religious question to be decided by consulting Islamic traditions. They employed a number of traditions that confined political leadership to the House of the Prophet. The struggle between al Hussein, the grandson of the prophet, and Yazid the son of Muawiya, the founder of the Umayyad Dynasty, was taken as a reference point. Shi'ite scholars insisted that the Prophet designated Ali as his successor and that his descendant through al Hussein were the legitimate claimants to the *imamah* (the highest political leadership). Sunni scholars insisted, however, that political legitimacy of the leader (imam) is grounded in people's consent and that the leader is determined through the process of selection (*ikhtiyar*) and declaration of allegiance (*bay'ah*). The debate between the Shiite and Sunni branches of Islam has been very polemics, and each sought to vindicate its approach by citing scriptures and by referencing historical evidence and rational arguments. Much of the Sunni political literature that has reached us was compiled apparently as a reaction to Shiite claims.

Much of the Shiite claims of hereditary religious leadership were grounded in a metaphoric reading of the Islamic sources or on the basis of Prophetic statements that designated his

cousin Ali as the designated successor to the prophet. Sunni scholars rejected any religious or scriptural foundation to political legitimacy and invoked procedural conditions and personal criteria for the selection of political leaders.

The conventional Sunni attitude towards the Shiite claim of imamah can be found in the refutation of Abu Bakr al Baqilani in his book *Al Tamheed Fi al Rad Ala al Mulhidah, Muttilah, Rafidhah, al khawarij and al Mutazilah,* which later became the standard argument on political legitimacy. The refutation of al Baqillani depends mainly on demonstrating the speculative nature and contradictions of the sources adopted by the Shiite scholars. He insists that if the Prophet has designated Ali, his command must have become obligatory for all Muslims, and he would have done that publicly in front of a large number of his companions instead of secretly informing one person or two as the Shiite scholars insist. Had he declared his successor, he exclaimed, the knowledge would have been spread and became known to every companion, in the same manner Salah (prayer), Zakah (alms), fasting and other religious obligations are known. The act of designating a successor would have become known to the entire Muslim community in the same fashion that important judges, army commanders, and governors appointed by the Prophet.[7]

Al Baqilani arguments open the way to the majority of Muslim scholars within the Sunni tradition to treat political authority as temporal, lacking any religious significance or consequence. While the majority of Muslim writers would avoid referring to the political authority in Islamic history as secular, they would readily describe it as "civil" (madaniya).

Abu al Maali al Juwaini in his book *Ghiyath al umam fi al tiyath al zulam* makes a similar argument to refute the claims of designation. He contends that such a claim can be sustained on the basis of three types of evidence: irrevocable text of the Book, preponderance of prophetic statement (hadith *mutawatir*), or established consensus among companions. Since none of the above is available, the claims of designation are unfounded.[8]

The Shiite theory of *imamah* posits a divinely ordained and guided political authority that resembles theocracy. The imam in the Shiite tradition is an infallible human being with direct access to divine guidance similar to the one claimed by the prophet of Islam. Indeed, Shia scholars initially argued that the need for continuous divine guidance necessitate the presence of the guided imam. This argument, based on the principle of divine favor, insists that the Muslim community is in a constant need of a "referential authority" that can clarifies the divine will on the new issues it confront. Because human beings are fallible it is necessary, the argument goes, for an imam to be appointed by God as an expression of his favor to his slaves. The presence of imam in every age to guide and direct the believers is inevitable. Al Kulaini quotes imam al Sadiq as saying "the earth cannot be without an imam so that if the believers misinterpreted the divine command he would correct them and if they neglect a duty he would guide them."[9] Similarly al Kulaini attributes to al Sadiq that statement "should the imam be taken away for a moment it would have set the earth in turmoil."[10]

The disappearance of the imam prevented the creation of a theocratic authority and tuned Shi'ism for many centuries into political quietism, until the Khomeini succeeded in reengaging Shi'ism with politics in the middle of the twentieth century through the theory of the "*wilayat al faqih*" [guardianship of the jurist]. The theory of *wilayat al faqih*, which Khomeini articulated

in his book *Al Hukumah al Islamiyah*, a book by Aayatollah Khomaini, attaches political legitimacy to the election by the community of the political leadership represented by Muslim jurists (faqihs). Though the theory insists on that the *wilayat-e faqih* is decided partially by the election of the Ummah and partially by an appointment by God who determines the qualities to be found necessarily in the faqih, the election of the *faqih* from the procedural aspect, is not different from that of *Ahl al Aqd wa al Hal* (notables) as in the classical theory.[11]

Classical Theory of Government

The classical political theory is the one that the jurists of the Sunni majority developed under the title of the law of *imamah* or the Sultanic rules. This theory was jointly developed by several Islamic jurists led by Abu Bakr al Baqillani, Abu Yaala al Farr, Abu al Maali al Juwaini and others.[12] But the integrated and developed formulation of this theory was crystallized in the book, *Kitab al AhKam al Sultaniah wa al Wilayah al Diniyah* by Muhammad B. Ali al Mawardi (AH 370-450). The classical theory of *imamah* is based on the following five principles.

First, the election of the imam is a collective duty assigned to the Ummah (the community). According to Islamic law, the Ummah is responsible for the establishment of the *imamah*. However, the duty of the Ummah in this respect is collective one. If some people perform this duty, it is no more a duty for the rest of the community. "The *imamah* is succession to the prophethood for protecting religion and managing earthly affairs. The contract of the *imamah* for the one who would fulfill it from among the Ummah is necessary by consensus though the dumb is excluded.[19] Al Mawardi adds explaining that "If it is established that the *imamah* is a duty then it is a collective duty like *Jihad* and acquisition of knowledge. If it is performed by the qualified persons, the duty will be discharged collectively.[20]

Secondly, the task of electing the *imam* is restricted to two groups: electors, or the *ahl-al-aqd wa hall* [the movers and shakers of the community] and *ahl-al-imamah* [community leaders]. Al-Mawardi says "If it is discharged by someone qualified for the same, the duty will be discharged collectively. If it is not discharged by any, there remain two groups of people namely *ahl-ikhliyar* [the people of selection] who have to elect an imam for the ummah, and *ahl-al-imamah,* one of whom has to stand for the imamah. The people other than these two groups are not to be blamed or charged if the imamah is delayed."[21]

Thirdly, *Ahl-al-ikhteyar* are appointed according to three conditions: "One is extensive probity of its requirements; knowledge of the requirements of the position and .. wisdom which enables them to elect the most capable person for the post."[22]

Fourthly, *ahl-al-imamah* are designated on the basis of seven conditions. "One, the propensity to knowledge that enables him to do make *ijtihad* for new developments and situations; healthy senses including that of ears, eyes and tongue so that he can do whatever he realizes by them; freedom of organs and limbs from defects, affecting his ability to act; fifth, wisdom to rule the subjects and manage the interests; sixth, bravery and courage to protect the Shariah and fight with the enemies; [and] seventh, lineage, that is he should be a quarayshi [member of the tribe of Quraysh], because of the text and ijma."[22]

Fifthly, the selection of the imam can be lawful by one of two ways. *Mubaya'ah* (pledge of allegiance) of *ahl-al-hall wa al-aqd* for the one whom they elect for *imamah*, or nomination by the former imam of the latter.[24]

The Popular Foundation of Political Authority

In the history of Islamic thought, the question of popular basis of political authority and the procedural requirements of legitimacy was hotly debated three centuries after the demise of Rashidi rule. Perhaps, the first serious political study we find while going through the history of political thought in Islam are those opinions, put down by Abu Bakr al-Baqillani in his book *Al-Tamheed* under the title of "*imamah*". In this book written towards the end of the fourth century of Islam, we come across the fundamentals of the classical theory which reach its advanced stage in Mawardi's *Al ahkam al sultaniya,* as discussed above. The classical theory deals with the questions relating to those responsible for electing the caliph (*Khalifah*) under the title "*ahl al aqd wa al-hall"* [people who tie and loosen] or "*ahl al-ikhtiyar*" [people of selection]. For them three qualifications, as we discussed above, are stipulated, namely the requirements for sound opinion and wisdom, the competence to manage the public interests, and the popular support.[26] Classical theory was ambiguous as how popular support to be decided. It often equivocates with regard to the method of selecting the group assigned with the task of electing the imam. Mawardi does not tell us, for instance, whether the distinction is defined and a regulated process or it is a spontaneous one? If it is spontaneous, then *ahl al ikhteyr* [people who tie and loosen] may constitute the majority of population, particularly if the decision regarding the meeting of the three requirements just mentioned, is left to the personal judgment of the individuals concerned. On the other hand, if the distinction of *ahl al ikhteyar* is a regulated process then it will be necessary for the Ummah as a whole to participate in the process of electing *ahl al-ikhteyar*. Thus, the participation in the election process becomes an individual duty.

Second: The distinction made by Mawardi between *ahl al ikhtiyar* and *ahl al imamah* is problematic keeping in mind that the characteristics of *ahl al ikhtiyar* also include in it the characteristics of *ahl al imamah*. Therefore, the membership of *ahl al imamah* cannot be fully separated from the membership of *ahl al ikhteyar* in the sense that the member of the *imamah* group will have the right to participate in deliberation, of the `ikhteyar' group. Accordingly, the separation of *ahl al imamah* from *ahl al ikhteyar* is an arbitrary and haphazard action.

The differentiation between the Muslim community into *ahl al imamah* and *ahlal ikktiyr* espoused by Mawdardi is untenable, as it reveals disconnect between the general theory of government among pre-modern Muslim scholars and actual political processes and practices. The theory hence serves to disguise the political reality of Muslim society and give legitimacy to the rampant usurpation of political authority. It also provided a confused conceptualization of the political structure of the Muslim society. It effect, the theory reduced the political representation in the selection process into a single person empowered to choose the head of state on his own. The artificial reduction of the category of *ahl-al-Hall wa al-Aqd* to single individual was effectively an abdication of the principle of majority. It justified this reduction by insisting that any attempt to located a defensible number between the entire community and one person is futile. This assumption would later be considered invalid as it is examined below.

Despite the fact that al Juwaini succeeded in finding a defensible middle between "all" and "one", the classical theory has not taken this solution into consideration. Rather it has overlooked it to stick to the theorization of al Baqillani mentioned earlier. Abu al-Maali al-Juwaini has been successful in solving the problem that confronted his teacher Abu Bakr al-Baqillani through induction of the power variable in the quantitative equation of *ahl al hall wa al aqd*. Al-Jywaini maintains.

 Al Juwaini's analysis of political power is reflective of profound understanding of the sources of stability and instability of the state. He links the number required to select the imam to social force and interprets the quantitative determination of the Shura council as the power to implement the decision and affirm the authority in the face of the opposition of rivals and the rise of the rebels. Accordingly, al Juwaini the necessary number must be determined in a way that the council members muster an effective support by the different forces and various population groups. Determining the number of *ahl-al-ikhtiyar* in few individuals, or tens or hundreds of persons without considering the public base and the political forces these people represent, is an error arising from a disastrous ignorance of the structure of reality and patterns of the political mobilization in society.

This thorough analysis of the determinants of the number of persons required for participation in election is repeated in the writings of Abu Hamid al-Ghazali who contends the number of the selection people is simple decided by the number of the majority in society. So the required number is that number which is necessary and sufficient to represent the public base of the state. Al-Ghazali says:

> What we prefer is that one person pledging the Bay'ah to the imam can be sufficient if that one person has a following large enough to overcome opposition, and if the support as such that if he turns to a direction, all the public would turn to the same direction with him. Nobody goes against him except those who do not care for his opposition. Therefore, if one person who is followed and obeyed as described above, pledges the Bay'ah, it will be sufficient because his agreement entails the agreement of the public. If this purpose cannot be realized but by two or three persons, their agreement will be necessary. The target is not the dignitaries and important personalities of the people but acquisition of strength of the imam by the followers and supporters. This is achieved by exercising influence and inducing obedience. We maintain that when Umar pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr, the imamah was not confirmed[31] merely due to his Bay'ah but rather due to the fact that hands came in succession to the Bay'ah because of his initiative. Had the persons other than Umar not pledged, and all the people remained opposed or divided equally, the *imamah* would not have been concluded. The reasons being that the prerequisite of the agreement is the existence of power and might, and inclination of the hearts to obedience and correspondence of manifest to the hidden on the Bay'ah. The objective for which we require the imam is to bring together all the different opinions amidst of fusion of likes and dislikes. All these depend on the might and power and the power is achieved only through agreement of the majority of noteworthy persons of all the ages.[32]

The solution to the size of the popular basis of political authority lies in the notion of the Shura council, developed in modern Muslim political thought, which draws its authority and power. This notion, introduced leading modern Muslim scholars, including Afghani and Abduh which we examine below, does not only enables us to solve the problem of number but also helps us determine the identity of the Shura members and the task assigned to them. The membership of the Shura council cannot be determined on the basis of purely theoretical qualifications such as testimonial acceptability, knowledge, and wisdom as was perceived by many of the early political jurists[33] but rather on the basis of understanding of the relationship between the political forces of the Ummah which constitute the base from which the authority of the Shura members is derived, and the Shura council which represent the Ummah in political decision making. It is so in the sense that the access affiliation of the individuals to the Shura council of the Ummah does not take place automatically just on the fulfillment of the requirements stipulated by the classical theory and majority of the political jurists. Rather, it depends on the position of the individuals fulfilling the requirements of the Shura in the population groups and the political forces which collectively constitute the Ummah, and on the extent of public support and cooperation enjoyed by all these people. To look at the membership of vital political institutions such as the Shura and executive machinery in the frame work of purely theoretical qualification, or the logic of preference for the sovereignty of better to that of good one, arises from our ignorance of a very important fact that the ability of the participant in these institutions to translate the decision into an action, depends on the political forces and public support he enjoys and thus on the confidence of the population groups and sections which he represents, and on their commitment to supporting and backing up his stands. The act of resolving problems and settling disputes as a matter of fact is not for the one who possesses judgment only rather but also for those who possesses the power of implementing the opinion and translating the decision into a concrete action. Possession of opinion and knowledge qualifies the individual to be a counsel whose opinion is sought because of his authority in knowledge, not to be a Shuri (the member of Shura) whose opinion is needed because of his political authority.

It should be evident that the equation between ahl al-Shura and the jurists as mentioned in the writings of the classical and modern scholars has arisen from confusing the function of juristic ijtihad with that of the political Shura. The function of juristic ijtihad is related to deducing general precepts and rulings from the texts of the Shariah and the developments of social or political reality on the one hand and application of these rulings to the events of day-to-day life on the other whereas the function of the political Shura is connected with the interaction with the aspirations and problems of the people, determining the priorities of political action evaluating the balance of power to determine the parameters of possible and impossible to mobilize the energies and unite the ranks. A scholar can perform the function of the Shura provided that he possesses the qualities of leadership and aptitudes and could win the support and cooperation of the political forces playing on the ground.

By the same token, the member of Shura requires the minimum degree or standard of knowledge in order to carry out his duties and functions in a proper fashion. This however does not make any difference to the fundamental fact which we endeavor to elaborate that the qualification necessary for performing the juristic ijtihad and the qualification required for performing the Shura function do not correspond necessarily to each other. Ibn Khaldun took cognizance of the vast

difference between the academic authority of jurists and judges and the political authority of *ahl al-hall wa al-Aqd* and explained this difference very precisely and thoroughly. Ibn Khaldun says*: Al Hall and Aqd* is indeed for those who are capable are doing it. The person who does not have power, can neither resolve problems nor settle disputes nor only shariah rulings and decrees can be sought from him. Some may think that the reality is otherwise and that the exclusion the jurists and judges by kings from the Shura is not desirable. The prophet has already said: the scholars are inheritors of the prophets. This must be known that the case is not as is thought to be. The rule of the king and sultan in carried on according to the requirement of the nature and temperament of the population and society, otherwise it will be away from the politics. The civilizational nature of these people does not require anything of that kind, because the Shura, and *al hall wa al aqd* are only for the one who possesses group feeling tribalism on the strength of which he can manage affairs, resolve disputes, act or leave. As for one who does not enjoy group feeling and possesses protection, and is dependent on others, what does he have to do with the Shura and what does his inclusion in the Shura means, except the consultation with him in the Shariah rulings which is found in "*istefta*". As for his consultation in political matters he is far away from it due to absence of group feeling."[34]

Ibn Khaldun and the Sociology of the State

Ibn Khaldun's efforts to identify the patterns of historical change and social collaboration moved the study of society and the state from relying on textual evidence and analysis to setting the foundation of social analysis. He call the new approach to understanding historical he introduced the "science of social building" *['ilm al 'umran]*. The new science consisted in observation he registered in his Muqadimah in the form of general rules he derived from observing historical communities. These observations gave rise to a new conception of political organization, or the state, the markedly departed from the normative conception elaborated by early Muslim historical and scholars.[13]

Ibn Khaldun explains the basis of political power by introducing the concept of "group solidarity" (*asabiyah*). He locates political power in group dynamics, namely the willingness of the members of the group to render full support the wellbeing of the entire group. Any group in which members identify their wellbeing and survival with their group enjoy higher level of social solidarity and is better position to overcome other groups under the right historical conditions. Ibn Khaldun believes that groups that are physically challenged, such as the Arab tribes who live in the desert and rely on the strength of the member of their tribes for defense and sustenance. He anchors group solidarity in both human nature and group dynamics and notes the differences in the mechanisms of self-defense between the city and the desert. [14]

Living under tough conditions that require every tribesman to assume responsibility for the collected security of the tribe toughens people as they develop the mental ability required to live under constant risk. This is combined with the uncertainty of food supply and the need to endure occasional shortage of provision raise the level of endurance among Arab tribesmen, giving them an advantage in any power confrontation with people who grow up in protected cities. For this reason, Ibn Khaldun concluded, powerful states and dynasty were established by strong tribes. The demise of the state is, therefore, connected with the decline of mental

toughness, along with tribal ties, with the development of the state and the successions of new generations of statesmen who were born under conditions for of safety and plenty. They founder of the established state lose control over their political power in the course of the struggle with a new claimants to power who come from strong tribes who are still living under adverse conditions away from the comforts of protected and prosperous cities.

Ibn Khaldun does not dismiss religion from his historical analysis but sees it as a source of moral certitude and strength. Religion is an element of political power in so far as it provides an additional moral grounding to the groups (or dynasties) that seek political dominance, and as arching moral principles that bring people of different tribal and ethnic solidarities into a similar normative order. The social foundation of power, he insisted, is always central, even with Prophetic missions. He therefore concluded that religious movements that are incognizant of the social foundation of political power are incapable of founding states by the sheer charisma of their leaders.[15]

Ibn Khaldun was among handful Muslim historian who married empirical analysis in developing political ideas and theories around the 15th century. Several centuries will pass before Muslim scholars would employ his newly founded methodology. The Khaldunian thinking will eventually reach Muslim scholars through the writings of modern Western thinkers who were the first to advance empirical analysis of society and the state into a more advance of political reasoning.

Modern Islamic Thought and Political Reform

Jamaluddin Afghani (1838- 97) studied Islamic sciences in Najaf, Iraq, and developed his early thought in Afghanistan and Iran.[16] His familiarity with European thought was achieved in India, where he spent time assessing the impact of English colonialism. His early exposure to the British colonial model help him anticipate the danger Britain poses to other Muslim countries, and he spent the rest of his life traveling throughout the Muslim world. He developed his reformist ideas during his long stay in Egypt where he made his greatest impact. He arrived in Cairo in March 1871 and stayed until his expulsion by Khedive Tawfiq in September 1879. His ideas were matured and expounded through his frequent interaction with young Egyptian intellectuals. His ideas were natured later by his prominent associate and collaborator, Muhammad Abduh.

Afghani and Abduh were particularly alarmed by the state fatalism among Muslim scholarship and society and spent a big chunk of their efforts to combat it. He was extremely alarmed that most Muslim intellectuals and scholars have, by the turn of the nineteenth century, accepted that the state of decadence that befallen Muslim society was a fate accompli, reflecting an advanced stage in Muslim social development since the time of the Prophet, and that such a state will continue till the end of days. Muslim scholars around his time became convinced that such decline was inevitable and beyond human control.[17] Afghani rejected widely accepted interpretation of history and instead advocated a forward looking outlook. Muslim decadence, he argued, was the result of moral decadence and intellectual decline. Western military superiority emanates, he argued, from Western scientific advancement. The French and English had been able to conquer Muslim lands, he insisted, not by virtue of being French or

English but because they were able to develop more advanced scientific capabilities.[18] Afghani saw a positive aspect of the rivalry between the East and the West, as he believed that Western invasion of Muslim societies had a stimulating effect and would help awaken them from the state of slumber that continue to dominate their thinking.[19]

Afghani was aware that scholarly and scientific development could not be achieved merely by single-handedly focusing on learning Western technology. Technology and scientific innovations are not the cause but the consequence of intellectual and social development, as they reflect the ethos of a people and their philosophical outlook. What was needed for societal development and progress, he proclaimed, was a new spirit and direction.

> If a community did not have a philosophy, and all the individuals of that community were learned in the sciences with particular subjects, those sciences could not last in that community for a century... The Ottoman government and the Khedivate of Egypt have been opening schools for the teaching of the new sciences of a period of sixty years, and they are yet to receive any benefit from those sciences.[20]

For Afghani, Muslim failure to compete in modern science and technology is the outcome of their deficient outlook. Islam had created in the early Muslims the desire to acquire knowledge. They quickly became leaders in scientific research, first by appropriating the sciences of the Greeks, Persians, and Indians, and later by taking these sciences to new height.[21] He criticized Muslim scholars (*'ulama*) for wasting time and energy on trivial matters instead of addressing the important questions of the day. He called on Islamic scholars to examine the grounds of Muslim decline, rather than occupying themselves with subtleties.[22] "Ignorance has no alternative but to prostrate itself humbly before science and to acknowledge its submission," he argued.[23]

To overcome current challenges, Afghani in visaged a governmental structure based on Islamic law. Under such a structure, rulers are required to consult the ummah and to work toward promoting the common good.[24] The ruler's principal task was to safeguard the Islamic law.

> . . . the ruler of the Muslims will be their religious, holy, and divine law that makes no distinction among people. This will also be the summary of the ideas of the nation. A Muslim ruler has no other privilege than that of being the most ardent of all in safeguarding the sacred law and defending it.[25]

Despite his political focus, Afghani's believed that political cannot be achieved without educational reform as a prerequisite for any sociopolitical change. Most of those he inspired were, however, interested in political reform and paid little attention to reforming the ideas and practices, with the exception Muhammad Abduh.

Abduh focused primarily on reforming religious ideas and practices and saw education as the principal approach to social change. He was by far the most influential Egyptian scholar in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Echoing his teacher, he became critical of traditionalist *'ulama* who depicted "European" sciences as perverted, and admonished Muslims to refrain from learning them. "The truth is where there is proof," Abduh argued, "and those who forbid science and knowledge to protect religion are really the enemies of religion."[26] Abduh blamed Muslim decline on the deficiency of the educational system. The education system, he argued,

discouraged critical thinking and suppressed intellectual and scientific discovery. He further claimed that the education was incompatible with Islamic learning that honors rational curiosity.[27]

Abduh was not only critical of the *'ulama* but was equally critical of Muslim rulers who were also complacent in the decline of the ummah, for they placed their self-interests before that of the general public. By so doing, they and contributed to Muslim division and decline. It is their moral and religious duties to work for political unity and join forces to meet the challenge of imperialism. Like Afghani, Abduh contended that the division of the Muslim world into small units was contrary to Islamic teaching, and thus not be allowed by the public.[28] For him, Muslim decline originates from the failure of rulers who deviate from the principles on which the Islamic faith is built and stray from the path followed by their early ancestors.[29]

The political division of the Muslim world into was artificial, induced by the struggle for power among various rulers. This division did not reflect the real sentiments of the Muslim masses that had been, on the contrary, united from the very beginning only by the bonds of Islam, disregarding any other type of bonds such as race or ethnicity.[30]

Founding Democratic Tradition within Islamic Normative Framework

There are increasingly dominant views among mainstream Muslim scholars and intellectuals that strongly believe in the importance of setting a pluralist and democratic foundation for modern Muslim society, and the need to root this foundation in Islamic worldview and ethics. Leading Muslim intellectuals and scholars insist, for the total bewilderment to their modernist counterparts, that Islam is not only compatible with a scientific, pluralist, and democratic society, but that it is reform is a prerequisite for such a society.

The views of contemporary Muslim intellectuals and scholars continue to mature as they continue to recognize the principles of reciprocity and human dignity. For instance, Fahmi Huwaydi, a leading Egyptian thinker and journalist, addressed the question of equality of Muslims and non-Muslims in his book *Muwatinun La Dhimiyun* (citizens not *dhimis*). He rejects the *dhimmi* classification of non-Muslims as a historically relevant idea, and turns to the Islamic normative sources to illustrate that non-Muslims should enjoy, in contemporary Muslim states, full citizenship rights on par with Muslims.[31] Huwaydi's conclusions on equal citizenship are supported by the leader of the main Islamic opposition in Tunisia, al-Ghanoushi, who stresses that non-Muslims enjoy equal citizenship with Muslim majority.[32] In addition, Al-Ghanoushi advocates the right of women to participate on equal footing with men in public life. "There is nothing in Islam," he writes, "that justifies the exclusion of half of the Muslim society from participating and acting in the public sphere. In fact, to do this is to do injustice to Islam and its community in the first place, and to women [afterward]."[33] Similar arguments for gender equality can be seen in the writings of leading *Shi'i* jurists including Murtada Mutahiri, Muhammad Khatami, and Muhammad Mahdi Shamsuddin.[34]

The effort to ground a liberal outlook towards political rights in Islamic tradition is not limited to scholars in the Arab society where Sunni Islam prevails but can also be found in Iran were Shi'ism dominates. Take for instance the views advanced by Mahmoud Soroush in debating a

Persian modernist, Hamid Paydar, on the question of compatibility of Islam and democracy. Paydar who advances a purely Western secular view of the role of religion in society contends that by the fact that religion considers itself "the cradle of the truth" and consumes opposing beliefs under the categories of "apostasy, idolatry, and delusion" is incompatible with "democratic government." Soroush responds by rejecting the dichotomy between democracy and religion as false, since it is possible for someone to "consider an idea absolutely false while judging its bearer blameless, respectable, and even commendable."[35]

The question for Soroush and many Muslim intellectuals is not whether Islam is compatible with democracy, but whether values and beliefs that advance intolerance and promote the imposition of faith by the state are Islamic. Any call to impose faith on people is an instance of manifest error because faith and imposition stand in complete contradiction to one another. Faith is a matter of the heart, and no one should be forced to confess a particular face, let alone be penalized and chastised for not doing so, because using force in this case lead to negating for the very state one intends to achieve.[36] Liberty is indeed a precondition for faith and must therefore be a religious duty to obtain and defend. Without liberty faith will be reduce to external mimicking and spiritless and artificial religiosity. Similarly, without freedom religious law loses its authenticity and stagnate social dynamics. This is because religious law is in the first place a matter of internal commitment and personal volition. Freedom is also a precondition for religious law, because religious understanding of both faith and law are not decided in any centralized and closed system, but through and open and free debate of the advocates of various interpretations and commitments.[37]

Louay Safi is professor of politics and Islam thought at Hamad Bin Khalifa University (HBKU), Qatar, and senior fellow at the Institute of Social Political and Understanding (ISPU), Washington, DC. He writes and lectures on issues of globalization, human rights, and has published on such issues as Globalization, modernity, human rights, and Islamic and the West. He is the author of 24 books and numerous papers, and his most recent publications include Islam and the Drive to Global Justice (Romane &Littlefield 2024) and Islam and the Trajectory of Globalization (Routledge 2022).

NOTES

---

[1] G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of History* (New York: Dove Publications, 1956), p. 109.

[2] Richard Netton, "*Breaking with Athens: Alfarabi as Founder*, Applications of Political Theory By Christopher A. Colmo," *Journal of Islamic Studies* (Oxford University Press, 2008) **19** (3): 397–8.

[3] Muhammad Abu al Nasr al Farabi, *Al madina al fadila*; ed. Ali al Wafi (Cairo: Nahda Publisher, n.d.), p. 66.

[4] Ibid., pp. 37 and 80-86.

[5] Ibid., pp. 40-3.

[6] Richard Walzer, *On the Perfect State*, (Kazi Publications, 1985), 409-10

[7] Abu Bakr al Baqillani, *Al Tamhid*, pp. 164-65.

[8] Abu al Maali al Juwaini*, Giyathul UImam*, p. 47.

[9] Al-Kulayni, Al-Kafi, Vol. I, p.200. See also Muhammad Abdul Kareem Attoum, *Al Nazariyah al Siyasiyah lil s*hi'a, p. 47

[10] Ibid., p. 49

[11] Ruhullah al Khomeini, *wilayat-e faqih.*

[12] Al Baqilani's *al Tamhid*, or al Fara's *Al Mu'tamad fi usul al din*, or al Baqillani, *Gyathul Umam*.

[13] Ibn Khaldun, Muqadima, p. 29-30.

[14] Ibid., 101-2.

[15] Ibid., 125-7.

[16] Jamaluddin Afghani, *al-A'mal al-Kamilah*, ed. Muhammad Imara (Beirut: al-Mu'asasah al-Arabiyah lil-Dirasat wa al-Nashr, 1979) 20, 29. The birthplace and sectarian origin of al-Afghani have been the subject of fierce debate. While many Sunni writers insist that he was born at Asadabad near Kabul in Afghanistan, Shi'i sources have maintained that he was born at As'adabad in Iran. Nikki Keddie, in her biographical work on al-Afghani, has made a persuasive argument in support of the latter version. See her work, Sayyid Jamaluddin "Afghani": A Political Biography (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), and An Islamic Response to Imperialism: Political and Religious Writings of Sayyid Jamaluddin "al-Afghani" (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); also the collection of a1-Afghani's works, al-A'mal al-Kamilah, edited by Muhammad Imara.

[17] Muhammad Abduh, *al-Islam din wa hadarah*, ed. Tahir al-Tinaji (Cairo: al- Hilal, n.d.), p. 148.

[18] Jamaluddin al-Afghani, "Lecture on Teaching and Learning," in *An Islamic Response to Imperialism*, ed. Nikki R. Keddie (Berkeley, Ca: University of California Press, 1968), p. 17.

[19] Afghani, *al-A'mal al-Kamilah*, 334-9.

[20] Afghani, "Lecture on Teaching and Learning," 17.

[21] Ibid., 18.

[22] Afghani, "The Benefit of Philosophy," in *An Islamic Response to Imperialism, 120-21.

[23] Afghani, "Lecture on Teaching and Learning," 17.

[24] Ibid., 329.

[25] Afghani, "Islamic Solidarity," 21.

[26] Afghani, "Islamic Solidarity," in *Islam in Transition: Muslim Perspectives*, eds. John J. Donohue and John L. Esposito, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982) 19.

[27] Ibid., 24; and Afghani, "Commentary on the Commentator," *in An Islamic Response to Imperialism*, 123.

[28] Afghani, *al-A'mal al-Kamilah*, 28-33.

[29] Afghani, "Islamic Solidarity," 23.

[30] Afghani, *al-A'mal al-Kamilah*, 35.

[31] Fahmi Huwaydi, *Muwatunum La dhimiyun* (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 1985).

[32] Rashid al-Ghanoushi, *al-Huriyyat al-Ammah fi al-Dawah al-Islamiyyah* [Public Rights in the Islamic State (Beirut, Labenon: Markaz Dirasat al-Wihdah al-Arabiyyah, 1993), p. 135.

[33] Ibid., p. 132. The list of eminant Muslim scholars and leaders who have adopted reformist views includes, just to cite few highly influential people, Fahti Osman, Muhammad Salim al-Awwa, Tariq al-bishri, Ridwan al-Sayyed, Ishaq Farhan, Anwar Ibrahim, Khalisnur Majid, and Chandra Muzaffar.

[34] See Zaki Milad, "al-Fikr al-Islami wa Qadayyah al-Mar'ah" *al-Kalimah* 21 (1998), pp. 9-24.

[35] Mahmoud Sadri, p. 138.

[36] Ibid., pp. 142-44.

[37] Ibid., p. 144.