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FOUNDATION OF RELIGION: AN APPRAISAL OF AL-FĀRĀBĪ'S AND IBN SĪNĀ'S POSITIONS

Dinin Temeli: Fârâbî ve İbn Sinâ'nın Pozisyonları Üzerine Bir
Değerlendirme

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FOUNDATION OF RELIGION: AN APPRAISAL OF AL-FĀRĀBĪ'S AND IBN SĪNĀ'S POSITIONS

Rahim ACAR

ABSTRACT

It is a matter of debate how to explain religion and how to relate it to philosophy and various scientific disciplines, which are based on the natural sources of human knowledge. Ancient and medieval scholars heavily discussed relations between philosophy and religion. Modern discussions on the relations between religion and science, between reason and faith, are reflections of the same discussion. In this paper, I tried to examine the position of al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā, two well-known medieval Muslim philosophers, on the relation between religion and philosophy. These two philosophers defended a similar position on the major problems in this issue, even though there are points where they have different explanations. They seem to agree that philosophical theories and religious teachings are two different expressions of one and the same truth. While philosophical theories consist of judgements that are literally true, judgments that indicate the reality as it is, religious teachings consist of metaphorical, or symbolic, expressions of literally true philosophical theories, so that masses can understand and reach happiness. Having examined their position, I argued that their position implies a pluralistic response to the fact of religious diversity; and their position shows some similarities to modern defenses of religious pluralism. However, I also argued, conceiving the relations between philosophical theories and religious teachings in this way relegates religious teachings to a secondary position. And assigning a secondary position to religious teachings may not be appealing to sincere followers of religions. Affirming that religious teachings do not contain judgments that are literally true and informative about the reality seems to remove the foundation that justifies one's commitment to religious teachings.

Keywords: al-Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā, Religious Language, Religious Diversity, Realism.

I

The question of how one may explain religion on rational grounds has been an important question for philosophers and intellectuals. This is true for the best known figures in modern times, for the giant philosophical figures of medieval times as well as for the ancient Greek figures of the western philosophy. The fact that it was a hot topic in the medieval period, when we see major monotheistic religions dominating the whole culture, is shown through a rich literature in which



philosophers and theologians discussed their relationship.¹ In modern times, i.e., starting with the enlightenment philosophers, one may trace the sharp dichotomy between reason and commitment, religion and philosophy, knowing and believing, natural world and supernatural things. Although each philosopher displays his/her peculiarities when relating philosophy and religion, reason and religious belief, dominant position in modern western philosophy up until the second part of the 20th century portrayed an animosity between the two sides.

Among medieval philosophers and theologians one may trace a general trend which portrays a friendly relationship between religion(s) and philosophy, believing in religious teachings and organizing one's life according to religious prescriptions without being irrational. Within this general conception of friendly relationship between philosophy and religion, one may distinguish two broader approaches: (1) the one that gives a higher status to religion and religious teachings, the position of ultimate authority, let's say, and (2) the one that gives philosophy a higher status with regard to religion.

Al-Fārābī's and Ibn Sīnā's positions, which I shall try to expose, regarding the relationship between philosophy and religion falls, in general, under the second approach. To explore their position, I am going to focus more on what al-Fārābī says and append discussion of Ibn Sīnā's views to it. This is mainly because, al-Fārābī wrote extensively on the issue of the relationship between philosophy and religion, while Ibn Sīnā seems to have been brief on this matter. However, it seems that on major issues Ibn Sīnā is in agreement with al-Fārābī. Of course one may discern important differences between their writings. For example, al-Fārābī's writings do not give specific examples. He does not refer to the cultural-religious elements of the environment where he lived. In contrast, one finds in Ibn Sīnā's writings clear references to Islamic teachings, political-religious debates or institutions. He even wrote epistles commenting on various verses of the Qur'an and explaining certain Islamic teachings.² In this paper, I am rather concerned with the major points on which they agreed. These points of agreement making a common ground between them can be traced in issues such as (1) the origin of religious knowledge, (2) the function of religion and (3) the character of religious teachings. Based on this agreement one is justified to treat them together.

Two major reasons may be cited, among others, to indicate the importance of al-Fārābī's and Ibn Sīnā's approach to the relationship between philosophy and religion. First, their approach may be attractive in our time, because their

¹ Ibn Rushd's *Decisive Treatise* and the question I of Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae* might be cited as two well-known examples regarding these discussions. Averroes, *The Book of the Decisive Treatise*, trans. C. E. Butterworth (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2001); and Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 1 (ST Ia.1) *Christian Theology*, Latin Text and English trans. Thomas Gilby (Blackfriars: 1964).

² See for example, Ibn Sīnā's commentary on certain Qur'anic chapters. Ibn Sīnā, *al-Tafsīr al-Qur'ānī wa al-Lughā al-Sūfiyyah fī Falsafa Ibn Sīnā*, ed. Ḥasan 'Āṣī (Beirut: al-Mu'assasa al-Jāmi'iyya li al-Dirāsāt wa al-Nashr wa al-Tawzī', 1983).



conception of the relationship between philosophy and religion may look familiar to modern outlook. As far as the relationship between philosophy and religion is concerned, the position that assigns a higher position to religion up against philosophy and rational endeavors lost its credibility in general among intellectuals since the enlightenment period. Even though the process may have become initiated within the modern European culture, for reasons that we need not go in, it would not be an exaggeration if we call it the dominant position all over the world concerning the relationship between faith and reason, religion and philosophy. And in today's global world—in which diverse religions and religious communities assert themselves—it sounds difficult to assign a higher position to religion in relation to philosophy and rational activity, in order to maintain and justify a friendly relationship between philosophy and religion as well as among various religions and religious communities. Reason, being the common natural basis of all human beings and being the source of all philosophical activity, seems to be pulling people back to earth even though religious commitments are ultimate for believers. Assigning the privileged position to reason may sound more credible not only insofar as inter-community communication is concerned, but also insofar as inner-community communication is concerned. Hence a position assigning a higher position to philosophy vis à vis religion, but at the same time friendly to religion, sounds more promising to lead convincing and realistic explanations.

Secondly, their conception of the nature of religious teachings may help to build up pluralistic approaches to religious diversity, without reducing religion to socio-cultural conditions or individual-psychological aspirations. They acknowledge the divine origin of religion. Indeed, for them not only religious knowledge but also philosophical rational knowledge has supernatural origin. Moreover, rational philosophical knowledge serves as the foundation on which religion—with its theoretical teachings and practical rules, concerning morals as well as acts of worship—is based.

In the following I am going to have a look at al-Fārābī's and Ibn Sīnā's conception of religion and religious knowledge; highlight how their conception upholds the integrity of human knowledge, by examining their position concerning the origin of religion and its relation to philosophy. I am going to state how their conception of religion allows a pluralistic approach to the fact of religious diversity. I am going to raise questions concerning the strength of their position. I am going to ask whether their conception of religion (1) is acceptable to followers of religions, and whether it (2) is reasonable from a philosophical point of view.

II

It seems better to highlight my assumptions about the terminology before all else, because al-Fārābī (d.950) and Ibn Sīnā (d.1037) lived in a cultural environment quite different from the modern western one. I am going to assume that their conceptual paradigm and examples reflect Islamic religious teachings whether it is acknowledged or not. Thus basic terms such as *milla*, revelation, prophetic



knowledge should be understood in this manner. For example, the term *milla*, used by al-Fārābī to indicate religion, seems to correspond to the non-technical sense of the Arabic term “*al-dīn*,” which is rendered in English as “religion.” The term *milla* may refer to something broader than religion in the modern technical sense. It may include ideologies, like Marxism, or world-views with practical rules in general as well as the world-views including belief and commitment to some supernatural being. This may be religion in the broader non-technical sense.³ Technical terms such as revelation and prophetic knowledge should be understood in this manner as well. For these philosophers, revelation is based on conjunction with a supernatural agent, the cosmic intellect, which may also be identified as the angel Gabriel. The people who have such powerful conjunction with the supernatural agent are prophets and leaders of their socio-religious community.

For both al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā, religious teachings are valuable and must be respected, because, just as it is the case with philosophical knowledge, religious teachings are traced back to a divine origin. In order to identify (1) the epistemological status of philosophical knowledge and religious teachings and (2) their relationship, we need to have a closer look at the sources of human knowledge. Roughly speaking, there seems to be two sources out of which human rational knowledge springs forth. In the formation of the true human knowledge, supernatural causes have a share and the human rational soul has its own share. However, one should keep in mind that al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā assign different lots to each of these two factors. And the roles, or lots, assigned to these two factors may not be smoothly integrated all the time. Having these general remarks in mind, let's have a look at the functions of these two factors in attainment of knowledge.⁴

Without going into details, I should give a general outline of their theory of knowledge. For al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā, the human rational knowledge is ultimately traced to the active intellect, which is the last heavenly intellect in the cosmological hierarchy. The emergence of the human being as an organism is explained by the interaction between heavenly and earthly forces. However, this organism is in a

³ For a discussion of the meaning of the term *milla*, see Muhsin Mahdi, “Remarks on Alfarabi’s Book of Religion,” in *Perspectives arabes et medievals sur la tradition scientifique et philosophique grecque*, ed. Ahmad Hasnawi et alii (Leuven: Peeters, 1997). See also, Abdullah Selman Nur, “Fārābī’nin Mille Teorisi,” (al-Fārābī’s Theory of *Milla*), MA Thesis, (İstanbul: Marmara Üniversitesi, Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü, 2011) and Fatih Toktaş, “Fārābī’nin Kitâbü’l-Mille Adlı Eserinin Takdim ve Çevirisi,” *Dîvân: İlmî Araştırmalar*, (2002/1): 254-255.

⁴ For the sake of brevity, I cannot go into details of their explanations concerning the function of active intellect and the role they assign to the human rational soul. Obviously al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā have diverging accounts in this regard. Their accounts diverge not only from one another but also we may see that each philosopher has divergent accounts in his different works. I am going to try to keep in mind major agreements and major disagreements between their positions. For a substantial analysis of delicate points in their positions, tracing their relationship as well as locating them in their historical context, see Herbert A. Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes on Intellect: their Cosmologies, Theories of the Active Intellect, and Theories of Human Intellect* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), chapter III & IV. This work will be referred to as *Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes on Intellect*.



state of potency regarding rational, intellectual, knowledge, and its perfection requires actualization of the human potential intellect, or rational power, which makes human beings differ from other animals.⁵ Human perfection by actualization of the human intellect takes place by the providential activity of the active intellect which is the last member of the cosmic chain of intellects. Al-Fārābī identifies three stages of the human rational soul with regard to actualization, or possession of rational knowledge. (1) the level of material intellect (or potential intellect) that indicates a “natural disposition,” (2) the level of actual intellect, that indicates the stage where the natural disposition becomes actualized by its conjunction with the active intellect and (3) the final stage is called acquired intellect that indicates a state of possession of certain body of knowledge.⁶ By reaching this level of acquired intellect a person seems to become a philosopher, by knowing all humanly knowable things. Ibn Sīnā explains major stages of actualization of the human rational power in four stages, (1) potential intellect, (2) habitual intellect, (3) actual passive intellect, and (4) acquired intellect denoting the actual situation when the human soul is in conjunction with the active intellect.⁷

Now the question to be answered is to identify, what exactly does the providential activity of the active intellect consist of? What does the active intellect provide for the human rational soul so that it is actualized and it reaches its perfection? Al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā seem to agree that the active intellect provides the human rational soul with the basic principles of thought. The emission (*fayḍ*) from the active intellect acts upon the human material intellect and the sense perceptual images stored in the imaginative faculty turn into intelligible thoughts. Thus “the first intelligible thoughts common to all men” emerge by the emission of the light of the active intellect.⁸ For both thinkers, primary intelligibles are impressed by the active intellect into the human rational power.

As far as the secondary intelligibles are concerned, while for Ibn Sīnā it is clear that they are also known by the conjunction with the active intellect,⁹ the scope of the intelligibles provided by the active intellect and common to all men is not clear in al-Fārābī’s case. Certainly they include the so-called principles of thought, primary logical truths, like the whole is greater than the part. But for al-Fārābī, they also seem to contain principles of all major areas of knowledge. “The emission from the active intellect transforms perceptions stored in the imaginative faculty into the principles

⁵ R. Walzer (ed. and tr.) *Al-Farabi on the Perfect State: Abu Nasr al-Farabi’s Mabadi’ Ara’ Ahl al-Madīna al-Fādila* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 198-201. From now on this will be referred as *al-Madīna al-Fādila*.

⁶ *Al-Madīna al-Fādila*, 242-45.

⁷ For Ibn Sīnā’s discussion of the levels of human intellect, see. Ibn Sīnā, *Avicenna’s De Anima (Arabic Text), being the Psychological Part of Kitāb al-Shifā’*, ed. F. Rahman (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 48-50; Ibn Sīnā, *Kitāb al-Najāt fī al-Ḥikma al-Mantiqiyya wa-al-Ṭabī’iyya wa-al-Ilāhiyya*, ed. Majid Fakhry (Beirut: Dār al-Āfāq al-Jadīda, 1985), 203-205.

⁸ *Al-Madīna al-Fādila*, 199-203.

⁹ See footnote 7.



of mathematical science, the principles of ethics or practical reason, and the principles of physics and metaphysics.”¹⁰ By using the principles received from the active intellect an individual human being “can discover whatever can be known by discovery in a given genus [of science].”¹¹ However, al-Fārābī leaves it unclear where the boundaries lie between the role of the active intellect and the efforts of the human intellect. This is because people differ in their inborn ability to receive the emission from the active intellect. Unlike al-Fārābī, for Ibn Sīnā all intellectual knowledge may be reached by conjunction with the active intellect. Human effort provides an occasion to establish conjunction with the active intellect. All intelligibles are found in the active intellect. Human beings do not work the intelligibles out, or produce it on their own.¹² But they can only discover and know them via their conjunction with the active intellect. Al-Fārābī, however, seems to assign a stronger role to the human mind in claiming rational knowledge.

For al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā, prophecy is associated with the imaginative power of the human soul. The emanation coming from the active intellect may be received, not only by the rational power, but also by the imaginative faculty of the human soul. Having received the influence of the active intellect, [and with the help of heavenly souls in Ibn Sīnā’s case] the imaginative faculty produces the prophecy in the broader sense as well as the prophecy and reception of revelation in the more religious-technical sense. Imagination (*mutakhayyila*), stores sense perception, it manipulates them, combines new images, or dissects a sense-perceptual image into pieces. And when it becomes free enough from being occupied by sense-perceptual images, it may also create new images. Dreams are included among such images.¹³ Prophecy is explained as a result of the fact that human imaginative faculty receives the emanation from the active intellect. Although the faculty of imagination plays the key role in receiving revelation from the active intellect, it seems that the emanation from the active intellect reaches to the imaginative faculty only via the rational power of the human soul. If the person who receives the emanation from the active intellect has a powerful imaginative faculty, the emanation from the active intellect influences not only his rational power but also his imaginative power. This person is a philosopher inasmuch as he receives emanation from the active intellect by his rational power, and he is a prophet inasmuch as he receives emanation from the active intellect by his imaginative power. Thus the person with a powerful imaginative faculty receiving the emanation of the active intellect becomes not only a philosopher but also a prophet. In this sense, a prophet may be considered as a philosopher with a powerful imaginative faculty.¹⁴ Every prophet must be a philosopher but not vice versa.

¹⁰ Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes on Intellect*, 51-52.

¹¹ Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes on Intellect*, 53.

¹² Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes on Intellect*, 85; Ibn Sīnā, *Avicenna’s De Anima*, 48-50.

¹³ Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes on Intellect*, 58-59.

¹⁴ Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes on Intellect*, 58-61.



For al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā, religion has a divine origin, just as philosophical knowledge does. But it is secondary to philosophical knowledge.¹⁵ We must highlight the function of imaginative faculty in order to have a better grasp of the relationship between philosophy and religion. The characteristic feature of imaginative faculty is to create representations, or imitations. This may work either as making images out of sense perceptual data, or creating images and representations of abstract ideas, in a sense recasting abstract ideas, or truths, into concrete symbols and images located in a time-space context. This latter aspect of the activity of imaginative power plays the key role in prophecy. A prophet, who is at the level of acquired intellect, knows the truth as it is, thanks to his rational power. At the same time, he is able to translate these rational philosophical truths into symbols and images thanks to his powerful imaginative faculty.¹⁶ Thus these latter make up the body of religious teachings, consisting of beliefs and rules to guide human life. The revelation of theoretical and practical truths that make up religion may be in three ways. Either all knowledge pertaining to theoretical and practical issues is given to the prophet as it is. Or the prophet himself discovers all knowledge by a power (*quwwa*) revealed to him, or he reaches knowledge partly in the first way and partly in the second way.¹⁷ In all cases, religious knowledge is considered as the result of divine revelation.

In order to gain more insight into the nature of religious knowledge I must highlight their conception of the character of philosophical theories. Al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā acknowledge certainty to human knowledge and assign a broad scope, but they discriminate among philosophical knowledge claims. We may describe Al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā, as epistemological realists, in the sense that for them reality can be truly known. Or the demonstrative philosophical knowledge that we have corresponds to reality as it is. A certain body of knowledge gives us true structure of everything at the intellectual level. The divine origin of rational knowledge seems to be the guaranty. They also assign a broad scope to human knowledge of reality. For both al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā, some human beings—at least prophets—know either all or almost all of the intellectual knowledge possessed by the active intellect. It seems clear, especially for al-Fārābī, philosophical knowledge is a body of knowledge already acquired and expressed. The philosophical heritage of Aristotle seems to constitute the body of knowledge that can ever and always be reached by demonstrative reasoning.¹⁸

¹⁵ Al-Fārābī, *Kitāb al-Ḥurūf*, in *Medieval Islamic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Muhammad Ali Khalidi (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 1-2 (prg.108-109); Ibn Sīnā, *Kitāb al-Shifā', al-Ilāhiyyāt*, ed. George C. Anawati et alii. (Cairo: Organisation Générale des Imprimeries Gouvernementales, 1960), 442-443; Ibn Sīnā, *Kitāb al-Najāt*, 339-340.

¹⁶ Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes on Intellect*, 61-62.

¹⁷ Al-Fārābī, *Book of Religion (Kitāb al-Milla)*, in *The Political Writings: Selected Aphorisms and Other Texts*, trans. C. E. Butterworth (Ithaca, New York & London: Cornell University Press, 2001), 94 (prg.1).

¹⁸ Al-Fārābī, *Kitāb al-Ḥurūf*, 19 (prg.143).



Although al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā defend that reality can be known as it is, they also indicate that not all philosophical knowledge claims are acceptable or true. In this regard, al-Fārābī divides three kinds of alleged philosophical, rational, knowledge: (1) demonstrative philosophy, (2) dialectical philosophy and (3) sophistical philosophy, or sophistry. There is only one demonstrative philosophy and it is the true philosophy. Dialectical philosophy and sophistical philosophy are not philosophy in the true sense, they are uncertain and dubious, are supposed to be philosophy, but in fact they are not. They are discriminated on the basis of their methodologies and the kinds of premises they start with.

Since religious teachings are the figurative images, and similes substituted for rational-philosophical abstract truths, and since philosophical knowledge claims are subject to discrimination, religions may also be subject to discrimination. That is why we have virtuous religions and corrupt religions. Assuming that prophetic knowledge, that which a prophet declares and enacts, initiates the establishment of religion, it seems that for both al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā, some religious beliefs and rules to guide the organization of life are as valuable and trustable, or veritable as rational philosophical knowledge. These are virtuous religions. But since religion consists of figurative images and symbolic expression of abstract intelligibles, dialectical and sophistical philosophy might also be cast into religion, and these are considered corrupt religions.

Although our formal criterion to judge a religion as a virtuous, or a corrupt one, concerns the kind of philosophy on which they depend, al-Fārābī wants to discriminate them on the basis of their conception of happiness, or on the basis of the means they advise to reach happiness. As a result of the fact that religion is an expression of philosophical truth through symbols and images, religious sphere reflects the competing claims of philosophy. But they are in fact evaluated on the basis of the conception of happiness towards which they urge people. Just as dialectical and sophistical kinds of philosophy provide only a dubious—supposed but not real—truth, a corrupt religion based on them may offer to society only an uncertain, supposed but not real happiness. It may encourage false means to reach happiness.¹⁹ Wealth, fame and power may be good examples of false means. The true conception of happiness, which is the criterion to distinguish between the virtuous and corrupt religions, concerns immateriality. That is, if a religion directs people towards freedom from matter and material conditions, then such a religion may be a virtuous religion. Immateriality and purification from matter seem to be a necessary condition for perfection and happiness. It is not clear, but one inclines to interpret purification from matter not only as a necessary condition but also the sufficient condition for discriminating between virtuous and corrupt religions.

¹⁹ Al-Fārābī, *Book of Religion*, 102-104 (prg.14)



To have better grasp of al-Fārābī's and Ibn Sīnā's conception of religion and religious teachings, it may be a good idea to compare philosophy and religion with regard to (1) their origin, (2) their aim or purpose, (3) their audience, or target, (4) their expression of truth and (5) demonstration of their claims. In all these five areas, that which is associated with philosophy seems to have the primary, or essential, status, while that which is associated with religion seems to have the secondary, or accidental status.

This is quite visible regarding issues of origin and purpose. As far as the issue of origin is concerned, philosophy and religion both are based on the conjunction with the active intellect. But one is the result of the conjunction of the human rational power with the active intellect, the other is the result of the conjunction of the imaginative power with the active intellect. But the conjunction of the imaginative power seems to be via the rational power. Thus the conjunction of the imaginative power is an extension of the conjunction of the rational power. As far as their aim or purpose is concerned, they both serve to reach perfection and happiness. But they differ insofar as their audience is concerned. While philosophy provides perfection for talented individual souls, religion is intended for the happiness of masses. As such religion is a derivation from the rational fundamental truth. It is devised for the happiness of masses, by recasting the philosophical truth to satisfy the need of less-talented masses.

Probably, the most crucial issue regarding the relationship between philosophy and religion is the expression of truth. While philosophy expresses truth as it is, religious beliefs are all or mostly symbolic expressions. While philosophical statements are literally true, religious teachings are symbolic expressions, the literal meaning of which can be identified by philosophers.²⁰ Furthermore, al-Fārābī also confirms that philosophical knowledge consists of universal truths, religious teachings are their particular expressions. These universal truths might be legitimately expressed through diverse symbols and figurative depictions. Thus, one philosophical truth, or judgement, is related to definite religious teachings, in the way a universal concept or judgment is related to particular cases. A universal truth is exemplified, symbolically expressed, by many particulars depending on specific ethnic and geographical conditions.²¹ Indeed for al-Fārābī, since religion concerns masses, every religion must take into account specific social and cultural conditions relevant to the people, to whom it addresses. As statements or commands taking specific social and cultural conditions into account, religious teachings cannot be on a par with the universally applicable philosophical statements.

Religion, or religious teachings, are not opposite to philosophy as such; but rather they may be an adaptation of philosophical truth for masses and an implementation of it for the happiness of society. It contains ideas and rules

²⁰ Al-Fārābī, *al-Siyāsa al-Madaniyya*, F. M. Najjar (ed.), (Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1964), 85.

²¹ Al-Fārābī, *al-Siyāsa al-Madaniyya*, 86.



governing individual and social life.²² These correspond to theoretical and practical parts of philosophy. Religion is a necessary means for maintenance of society. Maintenance of society is in turn necessary for the survival, well-being and happiness of individuals and their realization of virtues.²³ Just as reaching the acquired intellect level by conjunction with the active intellect is required for the perfection and thus for the happiness of talented individuals, religion is required for the maintenance of the society and for the happiness of masses.

Their conception of religious beliefs is similar to modern pluralistic approaches to religious diversity, insofar as they seem to imply a non-realistic account of religious beliefs. One may identify similarities between their explanation of religion and modern pluralistic approaches to religious diversity, with regard to (1) the nature of religious teachings, (2) the nature of criterion by which religions may be evaluated. As I tried to state, al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā argued that religious teachings are symbolic expressions of truth, particular cases that can be classified under a universal proposition. This allows that there may be many virtuous religions with different teachings. Even though there may be different and conflicting beliefs taught by different religions, they may all be true at the same time. This is, because they are not literally true, but only symbolic expressions of literally true philosophical propositions. And one literally true proposition may be translated into many, and perhaps apparently contradicting, symbolically true propositions.

This interpretation of religious teachings may be related to John Hick's position—who was a well-known defender of religious pluralism in the 20th century—assigning religious teachings the status of mythological truth, instead of literal truth. Hick argued that religious teachings are not literally true but they are mythologically true.²⁴ Some belief, or truth-claim, may be mythologically true, if that belief motivates the person who takes it to be true. It does not need to correspond to reality. The only condition it must satisfy is that it motivates and governs the behavior of the person who endorses that belief. Thus religious beliefs are true not because they depict reality, and they give reliable information about reality. But they are considered to be true, because they help people to adopt certain behaviors, and organize their life style in a certain way.

Their conception of religious beliefs as symbolic expressions of rational philosophical truth also shows similarity to the traditionalist perspective argued by Frithjof Schuon. Although Schuon does not give much credit to philosophical-rational knowledge, he would agree with al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā in that religious teachings may not literally indicate reality. They must not be taken literally. For Schuon, religion is a form that symbolically manifests the universal reality, or God,

²² Al-Fārābī, *Book of Religion*, 94 (prg.1).

²³ Al-Fārābī, *al-Siyāsa al-Madaniyya*, 74-78; Ibn Sīnā, *Kitāb al-Shifā'*, *al-Ilāhiyyāt*, 441-442; Ibn Sīnā, *Kitāb al-Najāt*, 338-339.

²⁴ John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 247-248.



according to specific human socio-cultural conditions.²⁵ It is a “saving mirage” (*upaya*) that include divine strategies to orient common people to God.²⁶ It is a form that expresses the truth in a symbolic manner. As a form it can never indicate the truth to exclusion other forms.²⁷ One and the same truth may manifest itself with so many divergent forms. Schuon distinguishes between two ways of interpreting religious beliefs: dogmatic-literal interpretation and speculative-symbolic interpretation.²⁸ He argues that taking religious teachings to be literally true—depicting reality as it is—eliminates their “inherent truth.”²⁹ Obviously there is a dichotomy between dogmatic-literal interpretation and speculative-symbolic interpretation of religious teachings. Dogmatic-literal interpretation of religious teachings is to misunderstand them, because religious teachings are forms of one truth that manifests itself in so many divergent forms. The proper interpretation of religious teaching must take this into account. This means that no religion, or set of religious teachings, may indicate reality to the exclusion, or elimination, of any other religion, or set of religious teachings. Schuon’s dichotomy between dogmatic-literal interpretation and speculative-symbolic interpretation of religious teachings may be related to the dichotomy between the philosophical expression of truth and religious expression of truth in this context. One may think that Schuon’s position is similar to that of al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā insofar as they argued that religious teachings are symbolic expressions and they cannot be literally true. For al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā philosophical theories and judgments are supposed to be literally true, religious teachings are symbolic expressions of those rational-philosophical truths. Schuon’s position may also be similar to that of al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā insofar as they accept that there may be many equally valid religious teachings. This is, because religious teachings are symbolic expressions, and one single rational truth may have multiple symbolic expressions.

One may also find similarities between al-Fārābī’s criterion to determine if a religion is a virtuous one or a corrupt one and the criterion of John Hick. Al-Fārābī’s criterion to judge between religions concerns whether they teach and guide to true happiness. And true happiness is reached by orienting oneself towards freedom from matter and material conditions. It does not refer to any definite belief or act of ritual but a certain orientation of life. It requires one to control one’s selfish desires, which may be reduced to have more material possession and better material

²⁵ Frithjof Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (Wheaton, IL: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1993), 104. For a detailed discussion of Schuon’s conception of the religious teachings and the way they are related to reality, see, Rahim Acar, “Mutlak Hakikat” in Tecellisi Olarak Dinlerin Meşruiyeti: Frithjof Schuon’un Gelenekselci Mevzisine Eleştirel Bir Bakış,” *Ankara Üniversitesi, İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 54, no. 1 (2013): 11-29.

²⁶ Frithjof Schuon, *Christianity/ Islam: Perspectives on Esoteric Ecumenism: a New translation with Selected Letters*, ed. James S. Cutsinger, and trans. Mark Perry, Jean-Pierre Lafouge, and James S. Cutsinger (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2008), 63, 65-72 and ff.

²⁷ Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, 18-21

²⁸ Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, 2-10.

²⁹ Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, 2.



conditions. Granting all the differences between them, still one may find similarities to John Hick's criterion of the truth of religions. His criterion is transformation of individuals from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness. If a religion transforms people from self-centeredness towards Reality-centeredness, then such a religion is true.³⁰ This transformation may be interpreted as adopting morally acceptable behaviors,³¹ a kind of altruism. This may be taken to conform, more or less, to al-Fārābī's conception of the way to true happiness: moving away from matter and material conditions.

III

al-Fārābī's and Ibn Sīnā's explanation of religion may sound acceptable to followers of religions, since it grants the supernatural origin of religious teachings. Roughly speaking, modern explanations regarding religion and religious teachings tend to reduce it to socio-cultural and material conditions of human beings, instead of acknowledging the divine origin.³² However, acknowledging the divine origin of religious teachings and commands concerning morals and acts of worship are essential for followers of religions. Al-Fārābī's and Ibn Sīnā's explanation of the origin of religion grants that religious teachings have a supernatural origin. For them, religious teachings are veritable, because they are produced by the emission received from the active intellect, they are not simply produced by individual minds or by the interaction of various socio-cultural and material conditions.

Their conception of religious teachings as symbolic expression of rational philosophical truths may also be attractive, at first sight, for us who live in multi-religious societies. The conception of the relationship between philosophical and religious knowledge defended by al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā seems to maintain both the reliability of human knowledge and multiplicity of religions. Their position taking religious teachings as the symbolic, figurative, expression of one and only demonstrative philosophical knowledge is important. While it acknowledges the truth of philosophical knowledge in metaphysical issues, it also grants a reliable status to diverse religions. Since they are symbolic expressions of the rational truth, since some literally true propositions can be expressed in many symbolic, figurative images, religious plurality does not deprive the truth of religious teachings. Furthermore, taking religious teachings as figurative expressions may also discourage debates among followers of religions regarding the true religious beliefs. Thus it may contribute to the formation of peaceful multi-religious societies.

³⁰ Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 300-303.

³¹ Herald A. Netland, "Professor Hick on Religious Pluralism," *Religious Studies* 22 (1986): 257.

³² Of course there are theories of religion, that acknowledge the divine origin of religions and religious teachings. However, it would not be wrong to say that the general tendency among intellectuals, in modern times, is to trace religion not to a divine origin. For useful surveys on this issue, see Daniel Pals, *Nine Theories of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) and James Thrower, *Religion: The Classical Theories* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999).



However, one may look at the issue from a different viewpoint and say that the epistemic status assigned to religious teachings by al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā lacks explanatory power, hence credibility. First of all, taking religious beliefs as symbolic expressions indicates a non-realistic conception of religious teachings. Accordingly, religious teachings do not correspond to reality, and they do not tell us what really there is and what really happened. Secondly, it is difficult to match between a literal truth and its figurative depictions. A literal truth can be symbolically expressed in so many ways that even contradicting statements can be taken as the symbolic expression of the same truth. Thus taking religious teachings as symbolic expressions seems to eliminate the epistemic value of their specific claims about divinity, life on earth, life after death etc. Probably it was one of the reasons why their conception of religious teachings did not find wider acceptance among Muslim intellectuals, in the medieval period. Unlike the time period, when al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā lived, in modern times, many philosophers reject the correspondence theory of truth. However, one may still ask if one can coherently and totally get rid of the assumption that what one believes corresponds to reality. Thus claiming that religious beliefs do not—somehow—correspond to reality, but only a symbolic expression of propositions that correspond to reality, seems to be quite difficult to accept by many sincere followers of religions.

One may also raise questions concerning their conception of philosophy which served as the foundation of religion. They were realists insofar as philosophical theories are concerned. And they can be treated as non-realists as far as religion and religious beliefs are concerned. The question—before us, as people living in the 21st century—is this: is there anything left from the foundation of religion? That is, their idea that reality can be truly known and fully or almost fully knowable by true philosophical activity does not have much credibility in the modern intellectual environment. The foundation that they granted to insure the viability of religion seems to have disappeared. Thus if one takes their conception religious teachings that are supposed to be figurative, symbolic, expressions of literally true demonstrative philosophical teachings, for granted, it is quite difficult to accept religious teachings. This is, because religious teachings seem to have lost their foundation, in our time.



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ÖZ

Dinin Temeli: Fârâbî ve İbn Sinâ'nın Pozisyonları Üzerine Bir Değerlendirme

Dinin nasıl izah edileceği ve insanoğlunun felsefe ve bilim gibi tabii olarak sahip olduğu bilgi kaynaklarına dayanan disiplinlerle ilişkisinin nasıl kurulacağı önemli bir tartışma alanıdır. Ortaçağda ve eski çağlarda din ve felsefe ilişkisine dair tartışmaların günümüzde de din ve bilim ilişkisi ve akıl ve iman ilişkisi şeklinde devam ettiği açıktır. Bu makalede ortaçağ İslam dünyasında din ve felsefe ilişkisinin nasıl olduğuna veya nasıl görülmesi gerektiğine dair Fârâbî ve İbn Sinâ'nın yaklaşımlarını incelemeye çalıştım. Bu iki filozofun, tam tamına aynı olmasa da, din ve felsefe ilişkisini benzer bir şekilde anladıkları görülmektedir. Buna göre felsefî teoriler ve dinî öğretiler tek bir doğrunun iki farklı ifadesi gibidir. Felsefî teoriler gerçekliği olduğu gibi anlatan ve hakikî anlamda doğru olan hükümlerden oluşurken, dini öğretiler hakiki anlamda doğru olan felsefi hükümlerin, kitlelerin anlayıp mutluluğa erişebilmesi için mecazi veya sembolik olarak ifade edilmiş çeşididir. Fârâbî ve İbn Sînâ'nın dini öğretilerin hususiyetine dair bu açıklamalarını inceleyerek, onların görüşlerinin dinî çeşitlilik vakası karşısında çoğulcu bir mevziyi tazammun ettiğini ve bunun da günümüzdeki bazı dinî çoğulculuk teorileri ile benzeştiğini göstermeye çalıştım. Ancak felsefi teoriler ile dinî öğretiler arasındaki ilişkiyi bu şekilde kurmanın, yani dinî öğretileri felsefi teorilere nispetle ikincil konuma yerleştirmenin dindar kimselerce pek de kabul edilebilir olmayacağını iddia ettim. Dinî öğretilerin gerçekliğe dair hakiki anlamda doğru bilgi vermediğini söylemek, dinî öğretileri kabul etmeyi sağlayacak güvenilir bir zemin bırakmamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Fârâbî, İbn Sînâ, Din Dili, Dinî Çeşitlilik, Gerçekçilik.