

The Qur'an, Reason, and Revelation: Islamic Revelation and Its Relationship with Reason and Philosophy

RASOUL NAMAZI

UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

namazi@uchicago.edu

Since the arrival of revealed religions and their encounter with Greek philosophy, the issue of the relationship between reason and revelation has been one of the most important problems in the history of thought. One important aspect of this issue is that it determines and guides the relationship that philosophers have with religious writings, which rest upon faith in divine revelation. Knowing that they are products of a miraculous contact with God, how should one approach them? Can they be read, understood, and evaluated like any other writing? Is a philosophic approach to revealed texts possible? More importantly, are revealed texts compatible with the spirit of philosophy? Do revealed texts approve or disapprove of the pursuit of knowledge through natural human reason?

In this paper, I intend to study the relationship between the Qur'an and philosophy. Naturally one must first explain what one means by "philosophy" and expound its relationship with divine revelation and faith. Let me begin with the question of reason before turning to philosophy. The clearest discussion of the reason-faith distinction is found in Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*.¹ As Aquinas explains, to have faith is to assent to something, to

The author would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their helpful and constructive comments, which greatly contributed to improving the final version of the paper.

¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. the English Dominican Fathers (London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne, 1922), II-II q. 1 a. 5.

accept it as true, because it is revealed by God. One *knows by faith* that something is true because God has *said* it. On the contrary, to know something by reason is to assent to it because it is perceived as true by our *reason*, that is, by our natural faculties. To *know by reason* is to assent to something independently of divine revelation: faith is “the evidence of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1).² The believer assents to that which he believes, not because he sees it or has rational proofs for it, but because he trusts in what divine revelation tells him.

Now even if such a clear-cut distinction between reason and revelation is also present in Islamic thought,³ many contemporary scholars of Islam tend to obfuscate or simply ignore it. Among the notable examples is Seyyed Hossein Nasr, an influential figure in the field of Islamic studies. Nasr defends and follows a form of Islamic philosophy that he calls “prophetic philosophy,” a kind of theosophy rather than philosophy.⁴ Nasr is a modern representative of the postclassical tradition of Islamic thought in which *falsafah* became transformed into *al-hikmat al-ilahiyyah* (divine wisdom) and gave birth to a synthesis of philosophy, mystical contemplation, and the esoteric reading of the Qur’an, Hadith, and the sayings of the imams and Sufi sages. This kind of philosophy easily leaps from the theoretical intellect of the Greeks to revelation and Hadith, ignoring the reason-faith distinction. Nasr’s synthetic perspective is particularly relevant to our question as he and some of his former students have recently edited a new translation of the Qur’an with annotations and several commentaries which clearly bear the influence of his philosophical approach.⁵ However, ignoring the reason-faith distinction is not limited to the traditionalists and the followers of the postclassical tradition of Islamic philosophy.

² I have used the King James Version for biblical quotations. I have also made extensive use of M. A. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur’an: English Translation with Parallel Arabic Text* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) which I have sometimes slightly modified to make it more literal. References to the Qur’an are identified by “Q.”

³ Alfarabi, “Enumeration of the Sciences,” in *The Political Writings: “Selected Aphorisms” and Other Texts*, trans. Charles E. Butterworth (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 81–84, V. 5, Uthman Amin 109ff.

⁴ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “The Quran and Hadith as Source and Inspiration of Islamic Philosophy,” in *History of Islamic Philosophy*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Oliver Leaman (New York: Routledge, 2003), 27ff.

⁵ See especially Seyyed Hossein Nasr et al., eds., *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary* (New York: HarperOne, 2015), 1645–59, 1659–79, 1719–37, 1737–51. To see the influence of Nasr’s philosophical approach on this commentary, apart from the traditional esoteric interpretation of well-known verses (e.g. Q 24:35), see the annotations on Q 2:189.

We can see the same trend among the modernist Muslims who, facing the incompatibility of the Qur'an with the latest discoveries of human reason and the ideals of modernity, try to provide a more rational and modern understanding of the Qur'an: among these figures is the influential intellectual Abdolkarim Soroush. The latter began his reflection on the relationship between Qur'anic revelation and reason by arguing that while the Qur'an, as the Word of God, is immutable, our understanding of it is necessarily historical as it is dependent on our particular situation and intellectual presuppositions. Soroush does not argue that there is no objective meaning in the Sacred Text independent of the subject. In this regard, he is not as radical as Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, another contemporary scholar of the Qur'an, who simply denied the possibility of any objective meaning. However, for Soroush, the Sacred Text itself, like Kant's noumenon, is out of our reach and can only be accessed by us through the use of our reason.⁶ In other words, we cannot speak of the one and *true* meaning of the Qur'an or *divine* knowledge properly, as our interpretation of scripture always reflects our human and historical presuppositions and any "divine knowledge" acquired from the Qur'an is in the end human.

In recent years, Soroush has made a much more radical claim by underscoring the role of the Prophet in the composition of the Qur'an. From this perspective, not only our knowledge and interpretation of the Qur'an but also the Qur'an itself is historical, as it is the product of the mind of the Prophet, and thus bears all of his human limitations and imperfections. According to Soroush, the crude corporalism, the dated scientific views, the Arabic character of the rewards promised to the believers, the inhuman social norms like slavery, and the cruel punishments like amputations found in the Qur'an each reflect the worldview of its author who lived in seventh-century Arabia.⁷

It seems that Soroush's whole direction of thought goes toward a rather conventional historicism and a denial of the divine origin of the Qur'an. In this regard, the Qur'an appears as a product of human reason rather than a divine message that must be followed by faith. However, Soroush is faced with a dilemma, because he wants to remain faithful to the traditional idea of the divine origin of the Qur'an and at the same time underscore the role

⁶ Abdolkarim Soroush, *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam*, ed. Mahmoud Sadri and Ahmad Sadri (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 31; Roy Jackson, *What Is Islamic Philosophy?* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 73–74. For Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd see Navid Kermani, *God Is Beautiful: The Aesthetic Experience of the Quran*, trans. Tony Crawford (Cambridge: Polity, 2015), 113–14.

⁷ Abdolkarim Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, trans. Nilou Mobasser (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 70–83.

of the Prophet in scripture. In other words, his objective is to subscribe to a radical historicism while also preserving the traditional belief in a sphere of knowledge beyond reason. Soroush's way out of the dilemma is this: not unlike Nasr, Soroush's preoccupation with the Persian mysticism of Rumi and the philosophical views of al-Ghazali pushes him toward an obfuscation of the reason-revelation distinction. He now speaks of the Qur'an as a product of "prophetic dreams" not unlike the *inspirations* of poets and mystics and denies that his recent theological views amount to a straightforward denial of the supernatural origin of the Qur'an.⁸

One can observe a similar dilemma in Fazlur Rahman's historicist hermeneutics of the Qur'an. Rahman also underscores the role of the Prophet in the composition of the Qur'an while trying to remain faithful to the traditional conception of the Qur'an as the Word of God. For Rahman, the "Qur'an is the divine response, through the Prophet's mind, to the moral-social situation of the Prophet's Arabia." Rahman's objective is to maintain the position according to which "the Qur'an is entirely the Word of God" while simultaneously arguing that the Qur'an is "also entirely the word of Muhammad."⁹ As one can see from the conclusions of Rahman's Qur'anic hermeneutics, it is doubtful that one can uphold both of these contradictory positions at the same time. Rahman contends that the truly divine message of the Qur'an is ethical: the Qur'an intends to advertise and establish "an egalitarian and just moral-social order."¹⁰ However, it is not clear why these moral values and objectives, which are also present in many purely rational philosophical systems, must be considered suprarational and why they had to be revealed to man by God. In other words, the efforts of Soroush, Rahman, and other scholars to harmonize the Qur'an with modern ideas seem to culminate either in an abstraction from the suprarational or in an obfuscation of the reason-faith distinction.

These cases show the importance of having a clear vision of the classical distinction between reason and faith in divine revelation when trying to discuss the relationship between the Qur'an and philosophy. A good example of such clarity in dealing with the question of revelation is found in

⁸ Abdolkarim Soroush, "Prophetic Dreams: Praise to a Sleep Better than Wakefulness," *BBC Persian*, 2016, http://www.bbc.com/persian/blogs/2016/05/160525_144_nazeran_soroush_bazargan; Katajun Amirpur, "The Expansion of the Prophetic Experience: Abdolkarim Sorūsh's New Approach to Qur'anic Revelation," *Die Welt des Islams* 51, no. 3-4 (2011): 428.

⁹ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 5, 31.

¹⁰ Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an* (Chicago: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1980), 62.

Leo Strauss's writings on the Bible. One can benefit from his general framework to study the relationship between reason and revelation in the Qur'an. Strauss's framework is based on a fundamental question facing human beings: whether they can acquire that knowledge which they need to guide their lives by the unaided efforts of their natural powers, or whether their knowledge of such matters is dependent upon divine revelation. The first possibility is characteristic of philosophy and the second is that of revealed religion. What one knows by reason one knows through faculties available, in principle, to every human being. The source of rational knowledge is ordinary sense perceptions and it is the result of reflection upon what one acquires through senses. This natural human knowledge must be contrasted with the supernatural knowledge available through revelation and contact with the divine. The latter is given exclusively by God to those who through supernatural means are in contact with him. In other words, the natural rational knowledge of philosophers is different from the supernatural divine knowledge of the prophets and men of god found in revealed texts like the Bible. This is not to imply that the Bible, as a product of revelation, does not *occasionally* make use of reasoning and arguments. Indeed, reasoning and argument are also found in the Bible. For example, we can see evidence of the biblical use of arguments in the following passage: "He that planted the ear, shall He not hear? He that formed the eye, shall He not see?" (Ps. 94:9). The reasoning being that the God who has made a sense organ also possesses the faculty of sensing. But even here, in this uncommon example of reasoning, the Bible implies and *presupposes* the other part of the argument: God made the ear.¹¹ In other words, the mere use of reason in the Bible must be distinguished from philosophy in the strict sense. For Strauss, revelation is distinguished from philosophy in that it simply *asserts* what is true without supporting the assertion with *arguments*. We know that the world was created by God "by virtue of declaration, pure and simple, by divine utterance ultimately."¹² Assertion is the core and essence of revealed knowledge of the Bible. There is a clear contrast between the reasoned, natural, and verifiable approach of philosophy and the indemonstrable, supernatural, and rationally unverifiable assertions of revelation.¹³

¹¹ Leo Strauss, transcript of "Seminar in Political Philosophy: Aristotle's *Rhetoric* (Spring 1964)," session 3, April 6, 1964, p. 43, Leo Strauss Center, University of Chicago.

¹² Leo Strauss, "On the Interpretation of Genesis," in *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity*, ed. Kenneth Hart Green (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 369.

¹³ John J. Ranieri, *Disturbing Revelation: Leo Strauss, Eric Voegelin, and the Bible* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2009), 116–24; Keith Ward, *Religion and Revelation: A Theology of Revelation in the World's Religions* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994).

One other aspect of Strauss's framework that would be helpful towards our study of the Qur'an is that Strauss rejects the possibility of a synthesis of reason and revelation and argues that dependence on either of these two different kinds of knowledge results in two different and *opposite* ways of life: "the one thing needful according to Greek philosophy is the life of autonomous understanding. The one thing needful as spoken by the Bible is the life of obedient love."¹⁴ One brings the autonomy, self-reliance, curiosity, and doubt that are characteristic of philosophy, while the other accounts for the heteronomy, dependence, faith, and certitude that characterize faith in revelation and religion. No harmonization or synthesis of philosophy and religion is possible because they both proclaim their exclusivity: a life of obedience to divine wisdom or a life of free insight are the two opposing alternatives available to man.¹⁵ From the Bible's perspective, philosophic doubt and the quest for knowledge are either superfluous or impious.¹⁶ Philosophy necessarily enters into conflict with revealed religions because these religions are based on the idea that the Creator of the world, through His prophets or by His incarnation, has revealed to man the most important knowledge about the world, god, and the purpose of life, and that this knowledge is more complete and comprehensive than the knowledge that man, by his own forces, can achieve. From the height of divine wisdom revealed by God, the human knowledge of the philosophers is at best incomplete or, at worst, wrong and a sign of vanity.¹⁷

ARGUMENT FOR REVELATION

Taking the above framework into account, we can now ask: What is the relationship between the reason-revelation dichotomy and the Qur'an? Should the Qur'an be approached as a work of revelation rather than a work of reason? Must we put the Qur'an against philosophy in the same way that the Bible is the antagonist of philosophy? The surest way to discuss this issue is

¹⁴ Leo Strauss, "Progress or Return?," in *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism: An Introduction to the Thought of Leo Strauss*, ed. Thomas L. Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 104.

¹⁵ Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 74–75; Leo Strauss, "Liberal Education and Responsibility," in *In Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 22; Leo Strauss, "Thucydides: The Meaning of Political History," in *Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, 73; Ehud Luz, "How to Read the Bible According to Leo Strauss," *Modern Judaism* 25, no. 3 (2005): 264–84.

¹⁶ Leo Strauss, "Jerusalem and Athens," in *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 172.

¹⁷ See Ps. 94:11, 1 Cor. 1:19, 3:19, Jer. 8:9, Isa. 29:14.

to consult the Qur'an itself and begin at the beginning.¹⁸ According to traditional accounts, the opening of sura Al-'Alaq (Q 96:1–5) was the first Qur'anic revelation.¹⁹ Ibn Ishaq reports that Muhammad used to go alone into the cave of Hira where he would spend several days in meditation. One night the angel of revelation, Gabriel, comes to him and commands him to “read.” Mohammed replies, “What shall I read?” The angel insists and “pressures” him three times and every time Mohammed says the same thing: “What shall I read?” “Read! Your Lord is the Most Bountiful One who taught by the pen, who taught man what he did not know” (Q 96:3–5). In these first lines of Qur'an, it is emphasized that man is taught by the Creator. The allusion to “pen” is also significant: it has always been the most important and elementary instrument of learning and teaching, and there are some traditional reports that claim that the 68th sura, entitled Al-Qalam (“the pen”) was the second sura revealed to Muhammad. Traditionally Muslims have drawn the conclusion from these verses that the Prophet was illiterate,²⁰ a claim that was supposedly advanced to refute the charge that he had plagiarized ideas present in Judeo-Christian writings (see Q 29:48, 2:78, 3:20, 3:75, 62:2). According to these traditions, the man who was charged with transmitting God's revelation was illiterate and therefore could not have composed the Qur'an. However, it seems that the message of these first verses goes beyond stressing the illiteracy of the Prophet and hence the divine origin of the Book.

¹⁸ Another possibility is to engage in a study of Islamic tradition to see how the Qur'an was perceived by its first readers and its original transmitters. However, there are serious problems in the historiography of early Islam as some sceptical scholars have powerfully challenged the reliability of early traditional sources and have shown how little we can reliably know from traditions (*hadith*) and prophetic biographies (*Sira*) about the life of the Prophet and the context in which the Qur'anic text first appeared. Therefore, I believe it is more reasonable to look exclusively at the Qur'anic text as a resource for discussing this issue. For the sceptical school see Patricia Crone and Michael Allan Cook, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); Patricia Crone, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987); Joseph Schacht, “A Reevaluation of Islamic Traditions,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, no. 2 (1949): 143–54; John Wansbrough, *Qur'anic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977); John Wansbrough, *The Sectararian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978); Andreas Görke, “Prospect and Limits in the Study of the Historical Muḥammad,” in *The Transmission and Dynamics of the Textual Sources of Islam: Essays in Honour of Harald Motzki*, ed. Nicolet Boekhoff-van der Voort, Kees Versteegh, and Joas Wagemakers (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 137–51. One of the merits of following the sceptical school in approaching the study of the Qur'an is that one can thereby concentrate on scripture itself rather than reading the text through the lens of the traditional “occasions of revelation” (*asbab al-nuzul*) or its modern historicist equivalents.

¹⁹ Ibn Ishaq, *The Life of Muhammad*, trans. A. Guillaume (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2004), 106–7.

²⁰ James A. Beverley, “Muhammad,” in *The Qur'an: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Oliver Leaman (New York: Routledge, 2006), 420.

These passages also show that the source of learning in general is God. It is from Him that man receives knowledge. Knowledge is owed to Him. God is the teacher of what man did not know, and presumably could not know by himself and through his own ingenuity.

There are many other passages in the Qur'an which can be advanced to prove the dependence of man on divine knowledge. The first sura, the obligatory part of the daily prayer in Islam, depicts Muslims asking God to "guide" them to the straight path (Q 1:6). It seems that according to the Qur'an no one can guide his life without a divine scripture (Q 6:156ff., 37:167ff.). It also seems that the idea of conscience is absent in the Qur'an and independent reason is considered insufficient for guiding men in their lives.²¹ Scripture is presented as "containing guidance for those who are pious" (Q 2:2-4). God condemns those who try to imitate God's words and give their opinions about the state of the afterlife, those who say things of which they have no real knowledge (Q 2:79-80). One can see the same idea in a conversation reported between God and the angels in which the latter declare their inability to name things because they "have knowledge only of what" God has taught them, "the All Knowing and All Wise." In contrast, Adam is shown capable of naming things because God "taught Adam all the names" (Q 2:31-33). The divine origin of human knowledge is also true of Muhammad to whom God taught "the Scripture, wisdom, and things" he did not know (Q 2:151, 2:231, 7:62, 8:60, 12:86, 12:96, 62:2). God reminds Muhammad that He taught him "what was beyond [his] knowledge" (Q 12:102, 26:83, 26:132). God is also said to have given knowledge and wisdom to other prophets and men mentioned in the Qur'an, including Moses (Q 28:14), the Children of Israel (Q 45:16), David, Solomon (Q 27:15, 38:20), Luqman (Q 31:12), and Jesus (Q 43:63). The Qur'an condemns the arrogance of man, because "he sees himself self-sufficient," while it was God who "taught man what he did not know...by the pen" (Q 96:4-7).

The divine origin of Qur'anic knowledge is also manifest in its style: the Qur'an speaks to Mohammed or speaks about him, but Mohammed never speaks in the text, he is silent. Muhammad's detractors deride him as only "an ear!" (Q 9:61). Mohammed's most famous epithet is "messenger" (*rasul*). He is unequivocally *only* a messenger and the originator of the message is God. The word "Qur'an" itself, used for naming the whole body of the text, originally means "reading" or "reciting" and the Qur'an sometimes calls

²¹ Cf. Rom. 2:14-15 and Rémi Brague, *La Loi de Dieu* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), 152.

itself a book or writing (*kitab*). In other words, the audience's relationship to the Qur'an is one of a reader or a listener, that is, a passive receiver. The Qur'an is "sent down" (*nuzul*) to men, an expression which in various forms is used more than two hundred times in the text. The Qur'an also calls itself *al-furqan*, the distinguisher, and it is said that God gave Moses "the Book, and the distinguisher, so that you might be guided" (Q 2:53, 25:1). One must say that the Qur'an, which promises the triumph of those who "stand in awe of God" (Q 24:52), is more akin to the Bible that says "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Prov. 9:10, Jer. 9:23) than to Socrates's way of life which stressed that "the unexamined life is not worth living." The believer, as he is depicted in the Qur'an and the Bible, lives in fear, anxiety, and trembling (Q 8:2, 70:19) as well as in hope: fear of God, the End of Time, and "imminent torment" (Q 78:40), along with the hope of eternal bliss (Q 76:11–22). The believer does not live the philosophic life of serenity and leisure (*scholē*) beyond fear and hope.²²

Considering these points, one might conclude that according to the Qur'anic perspective the most important knowledge is only available through revelation, while the philosophic life dedicated to curiosity, doubt, and the acquisition of knowledge through reason is at least superfluous and bound to fail or is even characteristic of unbelief. The Qur'an provides man with a knowledge that is beyond his natural capacities that he must simply believe and embrace unconditionally. But is it possible to present a case for the Qur'an as a work of reason which is compatible with or even friendly to the spirit of philosophy?

ARGUMENT FOR REASON

The critical point with respect to any revelation is its pretension to truth. But how can one determine the truth of Qur'anic revelation? How can one evaluate Muhammad's claim to be the Prophet of God? The usual, traditional answer to the question of how to establish a genuine revelation was by miracles. If, in the case of some revelation which claims to be genuine, we establish that a certain phenomenon in its favor is miraculous we can establish its genuineness. This means that in the case of the Qur'an one must investigate whether there is any miracle which proves its divine origin. Traditionally the Qur'an itself is presented as Muhammad's highest miracle. This claim is based on some passages in the Qur'an in which God demands the unbelievers who

²² Strauss, "Progress or Return?," 109.

“have doubts about the revelation” sent to Muhammad to “produce a single sura like it”; God is certain that they cannot do this (Q 2:23–24, 10:38). God assures the unbelievers that even if “all mankind and jinn came together to produce something like this Qur’an, they could not produce anything like it” (Q 17:88). God tells us that any imitation of the Qur’an would have inconsistencies, while there is no inconsistency in the Qur’an (Q 4:82). However, what is actually meant by these claims is not as clear as one might think. God challenges the unbelievers to bring a “similar” sura; but it is not clear what “similar” means.²³ Does it mean a text as eloquent, concise, or fluent as the Qur’an? But such qualities seem to be a matter of taste: some might find other speeches, poems, or rhymed prose more beautiful than the Qur’an²⁴ or even question the Qur’an’s literary value.²⁵ The Qur’an’s claim to be inimitable by the Arabs, a people famous for its poetic genius, is puzzling to say the least; it seems that something other than pure literary quality is meant here, and later generations simply invented the story of the Qur’an’s superior literary characteristics to make some sense of this claim. In other words, the Qur’an might mean that its *content* is superior to any other writing’s. However, this also depends on what we find in the Qur’an and our evaluation of its worth.

Apart from the Qur’an’s miraculous character, is there any other miracle which can vouch for the truth of Islamic revelation? Muhammad’s life and his doings, as the mouthpiece of revelation, are understandably crucial here. The Qur’an accepts the concept of miracles and reports many miracles associated with Abraham (Q 2:260, 21:68–70), Moses (Q 17:101, 26:63–68) and Jesus (Q 2:87, 3:46, 5:110–14). In Moses’s confrontation with the Pharaoh, Moses calls his miracles “something convincing” (Q 26:30). Unbelievers also recognize the importance of miracles for establishing the truth of revelation and there are numerous Qur’anic passages in which the unbelievers demand miracles from Muhammad (e.g., Q 2:118; 3:183, 4:153, 6:7–8, 6:37, 6:91, 7:105, 11:12, 11:53, 13:7, 13:27, 14:10, 15:7–14, 20:133, 21:5, 26:154, 29:50). There is even a somewhat amusing passage in which God challenges the unbelievers to produce evidence for their unbelief (Q 27:64)! In a word, the Qur’an unequivocally recognizes the decisive importance of miracles for identifying

²³ This point is also made by Muhammad ibn Zakariya al-Razi. See Abu Hatim Al-razi, *The Proofs of Prophecy*, trans. Tarif Khalidi (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2011), 167.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*, ed. Carl Niemeyer (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), 64; Maxime Rodinson, *Muhammad: Prophet of Islam* (London: Tauris Parke Paperbacks, 2002), 92; Theodor Nöldeke, *The History of the Qur’an*, ed. Wolfgang H. Behn (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 90.

a genuine revelation and deciding whether a scripture is indeed the Word of God. However, this recognition is also clearly contrasted with the lack of miracles in the case of Muhammad. Muslim historians have attributed many other miracles to the Prophet of Islam, for example that he split the moon or was one night transported to Jerusalem.²⁶ However, these alleged miracles are either entirely absent from the Qur'an and depend wholly on Traditions, or the Qur'anic passages on which they are based are very ambiguous. In fact, the Qur'an's account of Muhammad's prophethood is clearly in contradiction with traditional accounts which attribute miracles to the Prophet of Islam.²⁷ The Qur'an denies that Muhammad has performed any miracle (Q 6:35, 6:50, 6:109, 15:7–14, 26:4, 29:50, 30:58, 41:14) and argues that it is God who decides whether miracles should be produced or not. It also reminds the reader and the Prophet that miracles were not effective in the past and many people abandoned prophets despite their miracles (Q 3:126, 6:7–8, 6:109, 17:59, 28:48, 35:25). The Qur'an rejects the unbelievers' request for miracles comparable to those "signs...given to Moses" by reminding them that despite those miracles Moses was not believed by his followers (Q 28:48).²⁸

Why is it that, unlike other prophets in the Qur'an, Muhammad does not perform miracles? It is said in the Qur'an that "there was a Scripture for every age," and in former times prophets performed miracles (Q 13:38). Does this mean that the age of miracles has passed? Are Muhammad's "modern" contemporaries less open to the possibility of, and therefore less likely to believe in, miracles? Are they living in the postbiblical "disenchanted world"? Whatever one might think about these suggestions, there is clearly a general push towards a remarkable demystification of prophecy in the Qur'an. As was

²⁶ For a traditional list see Al-razi, *The Proofs of Prophecy*, 145ff.

²⁷ There is a passage in Judah Halevi's *Kuzari* in which a Muslim scholar argues that "miracles have been performed by [Muhammad], but they have not been offered as proof for accepting his Law" (1:7). According to this participant in the dialogue, the only miracle which proves the genuineness of Muhammad's mission is the Qur'an. The king of Khazars refuses to accept the miraculous character of the Qur'an because "a non-Arab like myself will not be able to recognize its miraculous and extraordinary character" (1:6). One should bear in mind that this claim is made in a work written in Arabic! It is possible that Halevi is trying to make the same point about Islam that I am making here, that to claim that the language of the Qur'an is miraculous is puzzling and Muhammad did not base his prophethood on miracles. (Quotations are from Barry S. Kogan's unpublished translation.)

²⁸ The passage reminds us of Edward Gibbon who made this ironical comment: "The contemporaries of Moses and Joshua had beheld with careless indifference the most amazing miracles. Under the pressure of every calamity, the belief of those miracles has preserved the Jews of a later period from the universal contagion of idolatry; and in contradiction to every known principle of the human mind, that singular people seems to have yielded a stronger and more ready assent to the traditions of their remote ancestors than to the evidence of their own senses" (Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* [London: Harper & Brothers, 1835], 1:178).

mentioned, the Qur'an does not deny the miracles of the previous prophets, however, it insists that the prophets in general and Muhammad in particular are nothing but human beings. Repeatedly Jesus is identified as the "son of Mary" (Q 4:157, 5:17, 43:57, 61:6) to emphatically bring it to mind that Jesus was only a mortal man and not the Son of God. It is said that Jesus and Mary "both ate food" like other mortals (Q 5:75). Muhammad is also described as "only a mortal like you" (Q 41:6, 6:50, 6:91, 7:63, 7:69, 7:188), apparently not elevated above human weaknesses. The ordinary character of Muhammad's life mentioned in the Qur'an is quite remarkable. Even the unbelievers were surprised that according to the Qur'an the prophets are "men like us" (Q 14:10). It is not therefore surprising that later generations of Muslims tried to find extraordinary things in the Prophet's life, as if even they could not easily accept this aspect of Muhammad's mission and felt something was lacking.

The absence of an appeal to miracles does not mean that the Qur'an takes belief for granted. Instead, it tries to justify itself and to convince its readers; it is an *argumentative* writing. It argues for the unicity of God by saying that if there existed several deities the whole world would have perished because of their conflict (Q 21:21–22, 23:91). It justifies charity (*zakat*) by explaining that it prevents the accumulation of wealth and contributes towards its partial redistribution among the Muslim community (Q 9:60, 59:7). God refutes the unbelievers' denial of the possibility of Resurrection by reminding them of their birth (Q 36:77–83). One is often struck by the amount of space dedicated to disputation and polemical apologetic. The Qur'an "regularly addresses actual or implicit antagonists."²⁹ Many have found "full arguments with premises and conclusions, antecedents and consequents, constructions *a fortiori*, commands supported by justification, conclusions produced by rule-based reasoning, comparisons, contrasts, and many other patterns."³⁰ From the polemical nature of the Qur'an, Wansborough concludes that the Qur'an was born in highly sectarian conditions.³¹ One might question Wansborough's conclusion because the same thing can be said about the New Testament but one rarely finds such an argumentative spirit in the latter.

²⁹ Jane Dammen McAuliffe, "The Construction of a Qur'anic Commonplace," in *Myths, Historical Archetypes and Symbolic Figures in Arabic Literature: Towards a New Hermeneutic Approach*, ed. Angelika Neuwirth (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1999), 163; George Anastaplo, "Islamic Thought: The Koran," in *But Not Philosophy: Seven Introductions to Non-Western Thought*, ed. George Anastaplo (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2002), 182.

³⁰ Rosalind Ward Gwynne, *Logic, Rhetoric and Legal Reasoning in the Qur'an* (London: Routledge, 2004), x.

³¹ Wansborough, *The Sectarian Milieu*.

Furthermore, this argumentative nature of the Qur'an is clearly related to the absence of miracles, while in the New Testament miracles of Jesus abound. Muhammad obstinately refrains from relying on any personal miracle or extraordinary sign to prove his prophecy.³² The Qur'an asks the Prophet to "call to the way of your God," not by performing miracles, but "with wisdom [*hikma*] and kind exhortation [*mou'ezeh*] and disputation [*jadal*]" (Q 16:125).³³ It seems that the Qur'an intends to convince its readers of the truth of its claims *by its constant appeal to reason*, that is, by relying on natural and verifiable statements characteristic of philosophy rather than by relying on supernatural miracles to support indemonstrable and unverifiable assertions of revelation. The Qur'an asks the unbelievers to observe the natural world and argues that these observations, coupled with reasoning and reflection, would lead one to accept its message. It seems that the main argument for the truth of the Qur'an is its reasonableness.³⁴

The Qur'an replaces the experience of miracles with the experience of Creation. The amazement derived from the experience of nature and its intricacies is advanced as the proof of the truth of the Qur'anic revelation. In innumerable verses the Qur'an depicts nature and its complex details in order to prove the truth of Muhammad's revelation. It is as if the Qur'an believes

³² There might be a link between the absence of miracles and the composition of the Qur'an. The order of the Qur'anic text, or more precisely the apparent lack thereof, has preoccupied the mind of readers for centuries. However, an observation might lead us to suspect that there is some order in the current arrangement. Although the number of verses differs slightly from one edition to another, according to the most common view there are 6236 verses in the Qur'an. This means that the central verses are 186th and 187th of sura 26, entitled "The Poets." These two verses are part of a dialogue between the unbelievers and the Prophet in which the unbelievers call the latter "nothing but a man like us," a poet. They demand that he perform some miracles to prove his divine mission. Does this mean that the question of Muhammad's lack of miracles was the "central" preoccupation of the original editors of the Qur'an? Did they believe that this is the most important teaching of the Islamic revelation? For observations about the meaning of the current arrangement see also Anastaplo, "Islamic Thought: The Koran," 209n58; Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), xxviii. For other examples of possible numerological passages with esoteric meaning see Q 74:30–31 and also the discussions about the numerological importance of the "abbreviated letters" (*muqattiat*) placed at the beginning of certain suras.

³³ Averroes interpreted this verse as God commanding the Prophet to teach men differently: some by philosophy, some by preaching, and some by dialectic. The same terminology was used by Muslim philosophers to describe Aristotle's classification of speeches as demonstrative, rhetorical, and dialectical. See Averroes, *The Book of the Decisive Treatise determining the Connection between the Law and Wisdom*, trans. Charles E. Butterworth (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2001), 8, Müller 7; Arthur J. Arberry, *Revelation and Reason in Islam* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2013), 15. According to Fakhry, it was this command "which, following the period of conquest, was historically at the basis of the debates with Christians" (Majid Fakhry, "Philosophy and the Qur'an," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe [Leiden: Brill, 2001–6], 4:71).

³⁴ Muhammad Abu-Hamdiyyah, *The Qur'an: An Introduction* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2002), 36.

that men's amazement before nature would lead them to faith. It repeatedly argues that "there truly are signs in the creation of the heavens and earth, and in the alternation of night and day, for those with understanding...who reflect on the creation of the heavens and earth" (Q 3:190–91, 2:164, 6:97, 7:57, 10:67). Men are asked to "reflect," "reason," and "observe" (Q 13:3, 13:4, 14:25, 22:73, 24: 39–40, 25:50). It seems that for the Qur'an the faculties of observation and reasoning are the only ones needed for discerning the "right way" and accepting Islam. To the Arabs and many other people who do not believe in the Resurrection of the Dead, the Qur'an gives arguments from history, nature, and logic (Q 22:5–10, 36:76–83, 56:47–96). It is in fact *the* Qur'anic method to argue with its readers. Apparently, it does not refuse to establish its claim before the tribunal of human reason, it even demands it. To Muhammad's supposedly Jewish and Christian detractors who asked for his miraculous signs of prophecy, questioned the truth of his mission, and made mention of his ordinary life (Q 20:133, 25:7–9, 30:58), the Qur'an regularly responds that the creation of earth and heaven, what grows in nature, the generation of living beings, the existence of male and female, and other natural phenomena are signs enough for the truth of his prophecy (Q 26:6, 30:17ff.). The Qur'an is preoccupied with natural phenomena and generation, and one can observe a process of substituting natural phenomena for miracles in it. These phenomena are not miraculous; they are not supernatural but instead manifestations of God in the natural world. It is as if in the Qur'an reflection on and observation of nature are the equivalent of witnessing miracles. The same word (*aya*, "sign") that is used for natural phenomena (Q 57:17, 30:22ff.) is also used for miracles (Q 7:73, 17:101, 26:67, 26:121, 26:154, 26:158), and even for the verses of the Qur'an (Q 28:59). The Qur'an goes so far as to call the natural knowledge of bees "revelation" (*wahy*): "And your lord revealed to the bee, saying 'Build yourselves houses in the mountains and trees and what people construct'" (Q 16:68). If the natural knowledge of the bees is called a revelation, one might ask, are the revelations sent down to Muhammad also a kind of *natural* knowledge?

HUMAN KNOWLEDGE IN THE QUR'ANIC STORIES

It is not only from explicit passages in the Qur'an that one can discover its view of natural knowledge, the knowledge characteristic of philosophy. The same is true of the Bible, which above all educates the readers and transmits its message through its many stories. One biblical story that is particularly important for our study is the story of the Fall. It has been argued that the story of the Fall in the Bible is the clearest critique of the freestanding and

autonomous knowledge characteristic of philosophy.³⁵ Through this story, the Bible confronts us with the fundamental alternative to the autonomous activity of philosophy, namely, obedience to God and His revelation. In the biblical telling, there are two parts of the story of the Fall that are particularly important for this antiphilosophical interpretation: First, the forbidden tree is specifically called “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” and God warns Adam that if he eats from it, he “will certainly die.” Second, the serpent of the Bible tempts Adam and Eve by saying that if they eat from the tree “your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Gen. 2:17, 3:5). But the Qur’anic version of the story of the Fall has significant differences from its biblical counterpart and gives a different account of these two aspects of the story. In the Qur’anic version, God commands Adam and Eve not to go “near this tree or you shall become wrongdoers.” The Qur’an does not mention any link between the forbidden tree and knowledge; the tree is not even named. Furthermore, Satan in the Qur’an tempts Adam and Eve by saying that “your Lord only forbade you this tree to prevent you becoming angels or immortals” (Q 7:19–20). In other words, the Qur’anic Adam and Eve are not tempted by the prospect of acquiring knowledge; they are misled because of their desire to become angels or immortals. In Genesis, the original disobedience of man is due to his desire to acquire the knowledge of good and evil. The grounds of his disobedience consisted in gaining autonomous knowledge that man possesses by himself, independently of God. In the Qur’anic version of the story a critique of autonomous human knowledge is not implied and the motivation behind the original disobedience is not the desire for knowledge. The critique of autonomous rational inquiry is not the theme of the Qur’anic story.

However, one might argue that the Qur’anic story of Moses and Khidr depicts the antagonism of reason and revelation in the Muslim scripture. In this story (Q 18:65–82), Moses meets “one of Our servants,” a man to whom “We had given knowledge of Our own.” This man is not named but Muslim traditions identify him as Khidr. Moses asks for permission to accompany Khidr so that he can learn what he “has been taught” by God. At first Khidr resists but owing to Moses’s persistence, Khidr accepts on the condition that Moses not question him about what he does. On their way Khidr damages a boat, kills a young man, and repairs a wall. Each time Moses protests and asks for the reason for Khidr’s surprising acts and each time Khidr reminds

³⁵ Strauss, “On the Interpretation of Genesis,” 372–73; Leon Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 51; Robert Sacks, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis* (Lewiston, ME: Edwin Mellen, 1990), 65.

Moses of his promise not to question him. On the third time Khidr loses patience and tells him that they should part company. But he first explains “the meaning of the things” Moses could not bear with patience. The message of the story seems to be that one must follow God’s servant without questioning his actions. It is the most important anecdote that can be provided as evidence of the opposition of the Qur’an to the spirit of philosophy. Supposedly, according to this story, a Muslim is meant to live in perfect obedience and not seek the knowledge of good and evil himself. However, the moral of the story is not entirely clear. It is remarkable that even Moses, one of the prophets, or in fact *the* prophet of God in the Qur’an (mentioned five hundred and two times, more than any other prophet) who was given “wisdom” by God (Q 26:21), lacks the knowledge accessible only to people like Khidr. In other words, the truly divine knowledge of Khidr seems to be different from the wisdom of prophets like Moses, and if a divine man like Moses lacks such knowledge, how can one expect ordinary human beings to possess it? Are we meant to imitate Khidr, or Moses?

There is one other Qur’anic story which also manifests the difference between the biblical view of philosophy and the Qur’anic perspective: in the first chapter of Genesis the divinity of the heavenly bodies, one of the most widespread ideas of the philosophical cosmology, is denied.³⁶ The depreciation of the heaven and the denial of the divinity of the heavenly bodies is also present in the Qur’an: “Do not bow down in worship to the sun or the moon, but bow down to God who created them” (Q 41:37). However, the idea that the heavenly bodies are not divine is presented in the Bible as one of the things that God by His grace has *revealed exclusively* to His chosen people: “And lest thou lift up thine eyes unto heaven, and when thou seest the sun, and the moon, and the stars, even all the host of heaven, shouldest be driven to worship them, and serve them, which the Lord thy God hath divided unto all nations under the whole heaven” (Deut. 4:19). In other words, this biblical knowledge, the depreciation of heaven, is not based on any argument: it is simply *asserted* and we are simply *told* that heaven is not divine. On the contrary, there are a few passages in the Qur’an which seem to encourage cosmological contemplation. The God of the Qur’an swears by “the raised canopy” (i.e., the sky) (Q 52:5) and by “the positions of the stars” and He tells the reader that it is “a mighty oath, if you only knew” (Q 56:75). Furthermore, the idea of the divinity of the heavenly bodies is refuted in the Qur’an by *arguments* and through the story of Abraham. The latter is depicted as

³⁶ Strauss, “On the Interpretation of Genesis,” 369.

engaged in cosmological observation and contemplation of heaven. Observing the setting of the sun, the moon, and the stars Abraham concludes that they cannot be divine and he therefore ascends from worshiping the heavenly bodies to monotheism.³⁷ In other words, Abraham in the Qur'an arrives at the conclusion that the heavenly bodies are not divine through the use of his autonomous reason (Q 6:76–79).

THE QUR'AN AND ISLAMIC PHILOSOPHY

The above observations lead us to question the status of the Qur'an as a simple work of revelation and make that status quite ambiguous: it is not uniquely based on supranational knowledge and its relationship with human reason and the philosophic way of life is vague. In the history of Islamic thought many thinkers struggled to clarify the relationship between the Qur'an and the tradition of philosophy coming from the Greeks. Significantly, the nonmiraculous character of the Qur'an, its argumentative character, and its ambiguous relationship with natural reason have put their imprint on their efforts. Before the emergence of Islamic philosophy, the debate about the relationship between reason and revelation appeared in the conflict between the so-called traditionalist and rationalist theologians. The rationalists have often been charged by their traditionalist opponents with holding the view that men do not need revelation, that everything can be known through reason.³⁸ It seems that at least some of the rationalists believed that all the knowledge available in scripture is also available to unassisted human reason (provided it is given time and applies itself to knowing them) and that there is nothing essentially suprarational about Qur'anic teachings; although it is difficult to find such a radical position explicitly stated in their surviving works.³⁹ However, in treating this subject, it is important to take the problem

³⁷ The reasoning seems to be this: the celestial bodies are chained to a prescribed course of movement and lack the freedom characteristic of a superior Being. Cf. Kass, *Beginning of Wisdom*, 35, and Genesis 2. In the Bible, this fact is depicted or hinted at by *God*.

³⁸ Richard C. Martin, Mark Woodward, and Dwi S. Atmaja, *Defenders of Reason in Islam: Mu'tazilism from Medieval School to Modern Symbol* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1997), 12, 75, 187–88; George F. Hourani, *Reason and Tradition in Islamic Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 18; Oliver Leaman, *An Introduction to Classical Islamic Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 147; Umar F. Abd-Allah, "Theological Dimensions of Islamic Law," in *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, ed. Tim Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 250.

³⁹ "Most Mu'tazilite theologians...assumed that everything is available to the unassisted human mind, provided the human mind is given time and applies itself to knowing them. They argued that prophecy and revelation are necessary because humans need to be instructed about things required for their well-being in this world and the next. Although some humans could know these things if

of persecution into account. It would be unreasonable to believe that if any thinker held such radical views he would openly advertise them. In any case the traditionalists firmly denied the radical rationalistic view. Their position is best presented in the comments of Malik ibn Anas on the Qur'anic passages which speak of God "sitting upon the throne" (e.g., Q 7:54, 20:5). Reportedly Malik said that "the sitting is known, its modality is unknown. Belief in it is an obligation and raising questions regarding it is a heresy."⁴⁰ In other words, the knowledge provided by the Qur'an, according to Malik, is not accessible to human reason and must be accepted solely on faith. This approach ultimately led to an extreme form of literalism, found for instance in Ibn Taymiyyah. Reportedly the latter said during a sermon that "God comes down from heaven to earth, just as I am coming down now," upon which he came down from his pulpit.⁴¹

The reign of rationalist theologians was quite brief. However, with the rise of the systematic tradition of classical Islamic philosophy, the idea that the Qur'an contained rational knowledge gained a new impetus. One of the most important figures to discuss the relationship between the Qur'an and reason was al-Kindi. He discusses this question in two works in which he explicitly quotes and discusses Qur'anic verses. The first is *The Prostration of the Outermost Body* in which he comments on the beginning of Sura ar-Rahman (Q 55:6). In this sura the stars are depicted as prostrating themselves; commenting on this passage, al-Kindi argues that the Qur'an may be "understood wholly through reasonable deductions"⁴² and shows how this Qur'anic passage, if read figuratively, is in harmony with philosophical cosmology. He discusses the same subject in *On the Quantity of Aristotle's Books* where he makes contrasts between the human and divine sciences. According to al-Kindi, human sciences are acquired through study and effort and are lower in rank than divine science which can be acquired without study or effort and in no time. The knowledge of the prophets is an example of divine science; they know through

given sufficient time and mental power and application, there was at the time of the coming down of revelation a disparity between what humans knew and what they needed to know. What humans know at any time is subject to a great many accidents, and in any case not all humans know what they need to know well enough to act upon it. Revelation is an act of grace that removes these accidental shortcomings rather than an imparting of information about things whose very nature is such that the unassisted human mind, by its very nature, has no access to them" (Muhsin Mahdi, *Alfarabi and the Foundation of Islamic Political Philosophy* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001], 45).

⁴⁰ Majid Fakhry, *A History of Islamic Philosophy* (London: Longman, 1983), xvii.

⁴¹ Arberry, *Revelation and Reason in Islam*, 22.

⁴² Al-Kindi, *The Philosophical Works of Al-Kindi*, trans. Peter Pormann and Peter Adamson (Karachi: OUP Pakistan, 2012), 175, Rashed & Jolivet 177.

the will of God who bestows upon them this knowledge “without study, effort, or inquiry, without the methods of mathematics or logic, and without time.”⁴³ To elucidate his point al-Kindi gives the example of a Qur’anic passage in which God argues for the possibility of the Resurrection of the Dead (Q 36:79-82) and contends that the philosophers cannot provide an argument similar to the Qur’an’s “in brevity, clarity, unerringness and comprehensiveness.”⁴⁴ However, he then proceeds to give a detailed philosophical explanation of the meaning of the Qur’anic passage. What is interesting in these two cases is that in both al-Kindi seems to be saying that there is nothing in the Qur’an inherently inaccessible to human reason and philosophy: the human and divine sciences both arrive at the same knowledge, and this is why there seems to be an agreement among commentators that al-Kindi believed in a perfect agreement of philosophy and revelation.⁴⁵ However, three points should be mentioned here. First, how can al-Kindi call the Qur’anic knowledge clear and comprehensive when one needs an elaborate and complex philosophical commentary to explain the figurative meaning of words in a short passage? Second, it seems that al-Kindi is aware of some conflict between the Qur’anic view of the Creation and the philosophic idea of the eternity of the world, although he only alludes to this problem.⁴⁶ Third, there remains the problem of the necessity of revelation: if the Qur’an and philosophy both teach the same truth, why do men need revelation? This is a major criticism which Alfarabi also puts into the mouth of a group of theologians: “were revelation to provide a human being only with what he knew and could perceive by his intellect... people...would have no need for prophecy or revelation.”⁴⁷ As we shall see, later Muslim philosophers struggled with this problem. As for al-Kindi, his response seems to be that the Qur’an is more clear and comprehensive than philosophic arguments, although as I mentioned one can doubt that this response is entirely convincing.

⁴³ Ibid., 286, Guidi & Walzer 372–73. The same point is also made in *On the Reason Why the Higher Atmosphere Is Cold* (ibid., 210–11, Abu Rida 93).

⁴⁴ Al-Kindi, *Philosophical Works*, 287, Guidi & Walzer 373.

⁴⁵ Peter Adamson, *Al-Kindi* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 44; Richard Walzer, *Greek into Arabic: Essays on Islamic Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), 196; William Montgomery Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1985), 40.

⁴⁶ Al-Kindi, *Philosophical Works*, 287–88, Guidi & Walzer 373–74; Charles E. Butterworth, “Al-Kindi and the Beginning of Islamic Political Philosophy,” in *The Political Aspects of Islamic Philosophy: Essays in Honor of Muhsin S. Mahdi*, ed. Charles E. Butterworth (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 30–31.

⁴⁷ Alfarabi, “Enumeration of the Sciences,” 81, V.5, Uthman Amin 109.

While al-Kindi quotes Qur'anic verses and explains their philosophic content, Alfarabi, arguably the most influential Islamic philosopher, systematically avoids speaking about Islam and prefers to present his views on religion in general.⁴⁸ However, the way he uses traditional Islamic concepts like “the trustworthy spirit” (*al-ruh al-amin*) and “the holy spirit” (*ruh al-qudus*)⁴⁹ and his description of the virtuous regime and its ruler who receives revelation⁵⁰ and whose tradition is followed by later generations⁵¹ show the Islamic context of his thought.⁵² What is remarkable in Alfarabi's view of the reason-revelation distinction is that by introducing the concept of the philosopher-prophet-ruler in his political philosophy, it seems that he practically denies any difference between the knowledge of philosopher and the prophetic knowledge of the Qur'an. According to Alfarabi, the ruler who perfects his rational faculty enters into contact with the active intellect, the angel of revelation: “he is the one of whom it ought [*yanbaghi*] to be said that he receives revelation.”⁵³ Alfarabi also imagines the possibility of a prophet without philosophical qualifications, although it is not clear whether this is only a kind of thought experiment—as Mahdi puts it, “a psychological distinction...useful for understanding the nature of both prophecy and philosophy”—or a real possibility.⁵⁴ At any rate, even the second account would not necessarily mean that the unphilosophical prophet has access to knowledge that is in principle unavailable to philosophers. More importantly, the dominant image of revelation in Alfarabi remains the philosopher-prophet-ruler, the “perfect human being.”⁵⁵ It seems that Alfarabi's view of prophecy

⁴⁸ It seems that by avoiding Islam specifically Alfarabi suggests that for his virtuous regime the particularities of religion are not important: “it may be possible for the religions of virtuous nations and virtuous cities to differ even if they all pursue the very same happiness” (Alfarabi, “Political Regime,” in *The Political Writings*, vol. 2, *Political Regime and Summary of Plato's “Laws,”* trans. Charles E. Butterworth [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015], 75, sec. 90, Fauzi Najjar 86).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 30, sec. 3, Fauzi Najjar 32. Cf. Q 2:87, 2:253, 5:113, 16:102, 26:193.

⁵⁰ Alfarabi, “Political Regime,” 69, sec. 80, Fauzi Najjar 79; Alfarabi, “Book of Religion,” in *The Political Writings: “Selected Aphorisms” and Other Texts*, 111–12, sec. 26–27, Muhsin Mahdi 64.

⁵¹ Alfarabi, “Selected Aphorisms,” in *The Political Writings: “Selected Aphorisms” and Other Texts*, 37, aph. 58, Fauzi Najjar 66. This is the idea behind the Islamic concept of Sunna, the traditions and practices of the Prophet that are considered models to be followed by Muslims.

⁵² For a discussion of other Islamic concepts which inform Alfarabi's thought see Majid Fakhry, *Al-Farabi, Founder of Islamic Neoplatonism: His Life, Works and Influence* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2002), 101–17.

⁵³ Alfarabi, “Political Regime,” 69, sec. 80, Fauzi Najjar 79. Cf. *ibid.*, 30, sec. 3, Fauzi Najjar 32: “Of the active intellect, it ought [*yanbaghi*] to be said that it is the trustworthy spirit and the holy spirit”; and *ibid.*, 29, sec. 2, Fauzi Najjar 31: “The first [cause] is what ought [*yanbaghi*] to be believed to be the deity.”

⁵⁴ Mahdi, *Alfarabi and the Foundation of Islamic Political Philosophy*, 135.

⁵⁵ See the description of “the king in truth” in Alfarabi, “Selected Aphorisms,” 37, aph. 58, Fauzi Najjar 66.

is that which Maimonides identifies as the opinion of *falasifa*: “prophecy is a certain perfection in the nature of man. This perfection is not achieved in any individual from among men except after a training.” Maimonides distinguishes this position from that of others (apparently traditionalists) who consider prophecy to be a power given by God to any man He wishes regardless of his intellectual acumen.⁵⁶ In the same vein, for Alfarabi, a prophet must be a trained philosopher who has perfected all aspects of philosophy: “the first ruler of the virtuous city must already have thorough cognizance of theoretical philosophy; for he cannot understand anything pertaining to God’s, may He be exalted, governance of the world so as to follow it *except* from that source.”⁵⁷ He goes so far as to say that “any religion in which the first type of opinions [i.e., the theoretical opinions] do not comprise what a human being can ascertain either from himself or by demonstration and in which there is no likeness of anything he can ascertain in one of these two ways is an errant religion.”⁵⁸ In other words, it seems that for Alfarabi, all genuine religious knowledge is accessible to human reason, and the truth of the theoretical views of any given religion should be ascertainable by human reason; there is nothing essentially suprarational about the knowledge derived from revelation.

Taken literally, Alfarabi’s understanding of prophecy amounts to saying that Muhammad was a philosopher, or as Averroes puts it, “every prophet is a sage [*hakim*].”⁵⁹ As I mentioned, Alfarabi is curiously silent about Islam and its relationship with the philosophical tradition originated by the Greeks. However, he writes that “religion is an imitation of philosophy”⁶⁰ and makes the curious remark that “philosophy is prior to religion in time.”⁶¹ He also traces one of the causes of the conflict between philosophy and religion to the fact that sometimes followers of a religion are ignorant of the *philosophic origin* of their religion.⁶² He thereby gives the impression that he believes a

⁵⁶ Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), II.32; Al-Kindi, *Philosophical Works*, 286, Guidi & Walzer 372.

⁵⁷ Alfarabi, “Book of Religion,” 113, sec. 27, Muhsin Mahdi 66. For “the first ruler” as the Prophet see *ibid.*, 111–12, sec. 26–27, Muhsin Mahdi 64.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 97, sec. 4, Muhsin Mahdi 46.

⁵⁹ Averroes, *Tahafut Al-Tahafut (The Incoherence of the Incoherence)*, trans. Simon Van Den Bergh, 3rd repr. ed. (London: Gibb Memorial Trust, 2008), 361, Bouygues 583. Sometimes the Qur’an reads like a work written by a bookish person: “on that Day, We shall roll up the skies as a writer rolls up his scrolls” (Q 21:104, 52:2, 96:3–5).

⁶⁰ Alfarabi, “The Attainment of Happiness,” in *Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*, trans. Muhsin Mahdi (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 44, sec. 55, Hyderabad 40.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 45, sec. 55, Hyderabad 41.

⁶² Alfarabi, *Al-Farabi’s Book of Letters (Kitāb Al-Ḥurūf): Commentary on Aristotle’s Metaphysics*, ed.

philosophical tradition has had some influence on the formation of Islam. It is not clear whether he has something like the Platonic influence on Christianity in mind⁶³ or he is making a much more radical claim, that Muhammad himself was influenced by a philosophic tradition. In this regard, it might also be significant that Alfarabi's major political works (*The Virtuous City* and *Political Regime*) bear little resemblance to philosophic writings; they consist of statements about God, world, and society without any trace of argument or demonstration. Is Alfarabi imitating in his time what he believed Muhammad did before him? As *the* representative of the Platonic tradition, Alfarabi must have been familiar with Plato's depiction of ancient philosophers who used "arts of concealment" and disguised themselves with different garbs including that of prophecy.⁶⁴ Did Alfarabi believe Muhammad was an Arab philosopher who concealed his teaching under the guise of a revealed religion? It is not impossible that Muslim Platonists saw some parallelisms between the life of Muhammad and that of Socrates, the archphilosopher, even though Muhammad, as he is depicted in traditional biographies, was not of course a philosopher. However, there are a few things in the Qur'an that some readers might interpret as marks of philosophy. Apart from the argumentative nature of the Qur'an, its cosmological themes, and Muhammad's lack of miracles, there is also the fact that in a society where people identify themselves with their forefathers, Muhammad regularly criticizes the ancestors of the unbelievers as misguided people and asks their descendants to forsake their errant customs and beliefs. Unbelievers often justify their idolatry by saying that they are following the ways of their fathers (Q 2:170, 5:104, 7:28, 7:70, 21:53, 23:24, 26:74), and criticize Muhammad for his effort in turning them away from the faith of their fathers (Q 10:78, 11:62, 14:10, 26:137; cf. Moses in Q 26:26, 28:36, 43:22). The Qur'anic critique of the ancestral resembles the philosophic rejection of the ancestral in favor of the good.⁶⁵ Muhammad's relationship with the youth might also remind someone of the accusation brought against Socrates of corrupting the youth.⁶⁶

Muhsin Mahdi (Beirut: Dar El-Mashreq, 1969), 155, sec. 149.

⁶³ Mahdi, *Alfarabi and the Foundation of Islamic Political Philosophy*, 221. For a version of this theory that argues that the Hebrew Bible was written in accordance with the detailed instructions found in Plato's *Laws* see Russell E. Gmirkin, *Plato and the Creation of the Hebrew Bible* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2016).

⁶⁴ Plato, *Protagoras* 316d4–317a; *Sophist* 216c5–d8.

⁶⁵ Aristotle, *Politics* 1269a1–3.

⁶⁶ Plato, *Apology* 24b–26a. Most of Muhammad's early followers were the youth of Mecca. It is reported that one of Muhammad's followers even offered to go and kill his father who was one of the Meccan leaders inimical to the Prophet (Rodinson, *Muhammad: Prophet of Islam*, 184).

However, the question that now imposes itself is: did Muslim philosophers like Alfarabi really believe that Muhammad was a philosopher?⁶⁷ Dealing with such a question, as I mentioned, one must keep in mind that revealing one's heretical views in closed societies amounts to putting one's life in danger. Persecution has understandably forced philosophers to conceal their unorthodox views and also to defend their activity by any means necessary. For instance, Alfarabi tries to provide an Eastern lineage for philosophy to avoid the charge of following an alien type of practice coming from the heathen Greeks.⁶⁸ One other way by which Muslim philosophers tried to justify their fascination with the foreign discipline of philosophy was by invoking many passages in the Qur'an in which wisdom (*hikma*) is mentioned, sometimes alongside scripture (e.g., Q 3:81). Naming wisdom and scripture together gives the impression that they both make the same knowledge available to human beings, that they are two parallel ways to acquire the same knowledge. Sometimes wisdom is presented as a quality of God (Q 2:240, 2:260, 3:6, 3:18, 3:126, 4:11, 4:17, 4:26, 4:92, 4:104, 4:111, 4:165, 4:170, 5:38, 6:83, 8:10, 24:18, 24:58, 27:6) and sometimes as that of prophets. For instance, Sura 31 of the Qur'an entitled Luqman is dedicated to a prophet known for his *hikma*.⁶⁹ In the Qur'an wisdom is often described as a unique blessing (e.g., Q 2:269). This same Qur'anic term (*hikma*) was used by Muslim philosophers to mean philosophy. To call Muhammad a philosopher, a *hakim*, might have been a way to legitimize philosophy in a hostile environment—but we must suspend our judgment on this question for now.

Averroes's *Decisive Treatise* represents the most important effort to legitimize philosophy in Islam. Averroes argues that the activity of philosophy is not prohibited in Islam. He defines philosophy as the "reflection upon existing things and consideration of them insofar as they are an indication of the Artisan."⁷⁰ Pointing to numerous verses in which believers are commanded to reflect about the world, Averroes concludes that the study of philosophy is commanded by God. He also maintains the parity of religious and philosophic knowledge and argues that philosophic knowledge is in harmony with religious knowledge. For him what is set down in the Qur'an is in perfect harmony with the results of the demonstrative reflection

⁶⁷ Brague, *La Loi de Dieu*, 198.

⁶⁸ Alfarabi, "The Attainment of Happiness," 43, sec. 53, Hyderabad 38. Cf. the remarkable defense of philosophy in Al-Kindi, *Philosophical Works*, 11–12, Rashed & Jolivet 12–15.

⁶⁹ Nasr, "Quran and Hadith as Source and Inspiration," 73.

⁷⁰ Averroes, *Decisive Treatise*, 1, Müller 1.

characteristic of philosophy. In the event of an apparent conflict between the Qur'anic teaching and philosophy, Averroes contends that the philosopher must engage in a figurative interpretation of scripture owing to "the difference in people's innate dispositions and the variance in their innate capacities for assent." Recognizing this, the Qur'an addresses different people with different styles.⁷¹ According to Averroes, people vary with respect to the degree of "assent" they are able to achieve. Some assent by demonstrative, some by dialectical, and some by rhetorical statements⁷² and Averroes thinks that the Qur'an addresses different people by these different methods. In other words, Averroes distinguishes between the few who are capable of philosophy and the majority who need religion; the latter lack the rational capacity needed to go beyond the surface meaning of scripture to discover the inner meanings of the Qur'an which is compatible with the discoveries of philosophy.⁷³ What sets Averroes apart from al-Kindi is the fact that the former argues for the superiority of philosophic demonstration to dialectical and rhetorical statements of the Qur'an. Therefore, the necessity of the Qur'an is not based, as in the case of al-Kindi, on its unquestionable clarity and comprehensiveness, but on the fact that it makes the truth accessible to those who cannot know it through demonstration. However, if Averroes is right that the Qur'anic knowledge is an inferior version of philosophic knowledge, one might doubt that it can be of much use to philosophers *as a source of knowledge* as distinguished from *a useful political instrument*, a civil religion in the proper sense of the term necessary for the education of the many.⁷⁴ In his refutation

⁷¹ Ibid., 9. This idea is also found in others: "Since it is difficult for the public to understand these things in themselves and the way they exist, instructing them about these things is sought by other ways—and those are the ways of representation. So these things are represented to each group or nation by things of which they are more cognizant" (Alfarabi, "Political Regime," 75, sec. 90, Fauzi Najjar 86). See also the quotation from Avicenna's *Risala al-adhawiyya fi amr al-maad* in Daniel De Smet and Meryem Sebti, "Avicenna's Philosophical Approach to the Qur'an in the Light of His Tafsir Sūrat Al-Ikhlās," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 11, no. 2 (2010): 135.

⁷² Averroes, *Decisive Treatise*, 8, Müller 6.

⁷³ Cf. the remarks of Malik ibn Anas and Ibn Taymiyyah, quoted above, with Averroes, *Decisive Treatise*, 20, Müller 16.

⁷⁴ One can observe this in the discussion of the afterlife by Alfarabi and Averroes. In his now lost commentary on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Alfarabi is reported to have branded talk of afterlife "senseless ravings and old wives' tales." However, he also quite easily speaks of the happiness in the afterlife in his political works. See Muhammad Ibn Tufayl, *Ibn Tufayl's Hayy Ibn Yaqzan: A Philosophical Tale*, trans. Lenn Evan Goodman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 100; Shlomo Pines, "Limitations of Human Knowledge According to Al-Fārābī, Ibn Bājjā, and Maimonides," in *Collected Works of Shlomo Pines*, ed. Moshe Idel and W. Z. Harvey, vol. 5 (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1997), 404; Alfarabi, "Selected Aphorisms," 58, aph. 89, Fauzi Najjar 92. The reason behind this contradiction can be found in Averroes's discussion of the Resurrection. Averroes rejects al-Ghazali's accusation that the philosophers do not believe in bodily resurrection by saying that the philosophers believe

of al-Ghazali, Averroes distinguishes between philosophy which “only leads a certain number of intelligent to the knowledge of happiness” whereas the Laws (i.e., religions) “seek the instruction of the masses generally.”⁷⁵ In other words, religion is primarily concerned with the many because the few wise men are capable of relying on their own reason to know the truth and to guide their lives. It is therefore not surprising that this tradition of philosophy looks at the Qur'an mostly as a political phenomenon rather than as a treasure trove of philosophical knowledge.

In going beyond Averroes to study the Muslim philosopher's view of the Qur'an, one must distinguish between the classical school of Islamic philosophy and the postclassical tradition; the latter is based on a form of speculative mystical theology. One can find the origin of this school in the works of al-Ghazali, especially in his critique of the *falasifa's* view that the Qur'an mainly addresses the many. Al-Ghazali argued that the Qur'an and revelation contain knowledge which goes beyond what is available to human reason and is therefore useful to the wise as well as the many.⁷⁶ The tradition which followed in al-Ghazali's footsteps looked at the Qur'an as a source of knowledge which unveils its secrets through esoteric reading. In the esoteric perspective, the Qur'anic text has two levels, *zahir* (outer, outward, obvious, *exōteros*) and *batin* (inner, inward, hidden, *esōteros*). An interpretation which takes its bearing from the hidden teaching of the text is called esoteric. This type of Qur'anic commentary, which can be seen in the writings of many philosopher-mystics such as Shahab ad-Din Suhrawardi, al-Ghazali, Ibn Arabi, and Mulla Sadra, builds a distinctive style of philosophy, or rather theosophy, by extracting the inward meaning of the Qur'an and Hadith through esoteric commentaries and spiritual hermeneutics. In this tradition, philosophical activity is inseparable from ascetic practices and penetration into the inner meaning of the Sacred Texts and sayings of the Prophet and imams, the texts which are considered fathomless and pregnant with the highest kind

in the Resurrection more than anybody else; the reason for this being that the belief in Resurrection “is conducive to an order amongst men on which man's being, as man, depends.” In other words, Averroes gives a purely utilitarian reason for the philosophers' belief in Resurrection. According to him, this belief provides an important framework for a virtuous life without which philosophic life is impossible. More explicitly, one can call it a salutary myth (Averroes, *Tahafut Al-Tahafut*, 359–63, Bouygues 580–88).

⁷⁵ Averroes, *Tahafut Al-Tahafut*, 360, Bouygues 582.

⁷⁶ Al-Ghazali, *Deliverance from Error: Five Key Texts including His Spiritual Autobiography, Al-Munqidh Min Al-Dalal*, trans. R. J. McCarthy (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2000), 83–87; Frank Griffel, “Muslim Philosophers' Rationalist Explanation of Muḥammad's Prophecy,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Muhammad* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 175–77.

of knowledge. The objective of this school, to borrow from Mulla Sadra, is to integrate *quran*, *irfan*, and *burhan*, that is, the Qur'an, gnostic knowledge, and philosophic demonstration.⁷⁷

Like the classical tradition, the esoteric reading of the Qur'an does not lack Qur'anic basis. As for the word "esoteric" (*batini*) itself, in the Qur'an God is called "the First and the Last; the Outer [*zahir*] and the Inner [*batin*]" (Q 57:3). In a famous verse (Q 3:7) often quoted by esoteric commentators of the Qur'an, it is said that some of the Qur'anic verses "are definite in meaning...and others are ambiguous."⁷⁸ The esoteric commentators are inspired by this passage and try to penetrate into the hidden meaning of the ambiguous verses that presumably contain mystical knowledge. Furthermore, the esoteric commentators have interpreted a passage that speaks about the wise who can grasp the meaning of God's comparisons as a justification for their own esoteric interpretation (Q 29:43). In this quest for hidden or esoteric meanings in the Qur'an, those parts of the Qur'an that have strong mystical aspects are used to justify its esoteric interpretation. For instance, the famous "Light verses" (Q 24:35) are often interpreted through esoteric commentaries.⁷⁹ Furthermore, scholars have often observed that the Qur'an is a metatextual, self-referential text; it speaks much about itself. The most significant aspect of the self-referential character of the Qur'an is its role in exegesis. Christians have traditionally interpreted the Old Testament allegorically, and in the New Testament, Jesus often makes use of parables which must be interpreted by readers. But the Qur'an itself invites allegorical interpretation. For instance, in the Qur'an the workings of nature are compared with human life and then it is said that such comparisons and allegories are "the way We explain the revelations for those who reflect" (Q 10:24, 14:25, 16:11–13, 16:65, 16:67, 20:54, 22:73, 23:21, 24:39–40, 25:50, 25:62, 26:8, 27:86, 36:33, 39:21, 45:13, 55:1ff., 59:21).

⁷⁷ Mustafa Muhaqqiq Damad, "The Quran and Schools of Islamic Theology and Philosophy," in *The Study Quran*, ed. Nasr et al., 1735.

⁷⁸ This verse is also quoted by Averroes. However, he uses it to reconcile the discoveries of philosophy with scripture, not for discovering truths unavailable to human reason. It is worth mentioning that the meaning of the passage depends on how or whether one breaks the verse. See Averroes, *Decisive Treatise*, 10, Müller 8, 53n20.

⁷⁹ For more examples see Kristin Sands, *Sufi Commentaries on the Qur'an in Classical Islam* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2006); Muhaqqiq Damad, "The Quran and Schools of Islamic Theology and Philosophy"; Toby Mayer, "Traditions of Esoteric and Sapiential Qur'anic Commentary," in *The Study Quran*, ed. Nasr et al., 1659–79.

Whatever one might think about the legitimacy of such a theosophical approach to the Qur'an, we are here clearly faced with a different approach to the reason-revelation distinction in which a form of continuity replaces the sharp contrast between the two. This is how the whole reason-revelation distinction all but disappears in the postclassical tradition. In other words, this postclassical tradition is, properly speaking, a synthesis of philosophy and religion which easily leaps from one to another and thereby endangers the integrity of the philosophic activity as a rational enterprise.

CONCLUSION

As I have shown, owing to the ambiguity of the Qur'anic text there have been different views on the reason-revelation distinction in the Muslim scripture. Although the synthesis of philosophy and religion in the postclassical tradition of Islamic philosophy can be helpful in clarifying some aspects of the Qur'anic scripture, from the point of view of the reason-revelation distinction the most intriguing view belongs to the classical tradition of Islamic philosophy. The followers of this tradition tended to read the Qur'an as a rational work and considered Islam to be a rational religion compatible with philosophical activity, whose commands can be understood by natural reason. One might not be able to call this view orthodox or compatible with belief in revelation or the suprarational. However, one must also distinguish this view of the Qur'an from the simple denial of revelation, found for instance in Muhammad ibn Zakariya al-Razi. The classical tradition maintains the scepticism of philosophy towards the suprarational claims of revelation, but at the same time it takes scripture seriously and tries to provide a rational foundation for it. This view is also helped by the fact that Islam has always seemed like a rather worldly religion to its defenders and detractors alike. Islam sounds particularly free of any "mysteries" and its founder is more like an earthly ruler than a classic prophet parting the seas or asking us to believe the unbelievable, such as that a God changed into a man and walked on water. I showed that an attentive reading of the Qur'an can lead us to believe that Muslim philosophers' conception of the Qur'an (a work of reason whose content is in principle accessible to human reason) is not entirely unfaithful to the spirit of the Qur'an. Therefore, I believe this view should not be considered solely the Muslim philosophers' exoteric teaching but rather an essential part of their unique philosophical vision.

