Epistemology and Politics in Islamic Philosophy

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Bio

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Abstract

In this chapter, I discuss how the medieval Islamic Philosophers wrestled with issues to do with the role and function of expertise. I show how this leads them to an epistemological position I call “Islamic Moderate Evidentialism” and show how it directly bears upon their political philosophy whereby the Prophet is thought to be the ideal political leader. I then move to a more contemporary context and note parallels of this thought in the mid-20th century revolutionary Islamism of Sayyid Qutb and Abdul A’la Maududi. I show how understanding this movement from the perspective of medieval Islamic Philosophy leads us to articulating a unique political position where both Perfectionist Liberal thought and Anarcho-Socialism sit together side by side.

1. Introduction

‘Islamic Philosophy’, for me, denotes any philosophy that in some way or another engages with the religion of Islam. Islamic Philosophy thus conceived has an old history – beginning at the time of the Prophet Muhammed and continuing on to the present. That’s some 1400 years of thought! Further,
relevant to a volume on Political Epistemology, one of the central things about the Prophet Muhammed for Muslims is that he was the antecedent for the role of ‘Caliph’ – which roughly translates as ‘viceregent of God on Earth’. In the concept of a Caliph we see the roles of political and religious leadership inexorably bound. This means that any philosophy which aims to engage with Islam must in some way address a political question. Moreover, the centrality of the role of Prophecy within Islam also raises some essentially epistemological questions: how can we verify genuine Prophecy? What is the difference between the epistemic state of people prior to, and after, receiving the Prophecy (in the Koran, the time preceding the Koranic revelation is referred to as al-Jāhilīyah - meaning ‘ignorance’)? It is therefore not an exaggeration to say that political epistemology is of central importance to all of Islamic Philosophy.

Unfortunately it will be impossible for me to address but a small portion of it. I will focus on two of the most prolific philosophical movements: (i) the school of Falsafa as it was practised in what is sometimes called the ‘classical’ period of Islamic Philosophy; (ii) the ‘Modernist’ Movement which arose in the late 19th century and was arguably the progenitor of modern-day ‘Political Islam’. I will focus on an epistemological thesis that I believe to be found in both schools of thought: Islamic Moderate Evidentialism (the thesis that while only evidence can give you reason to believe any proposition, some people are exempt from this). I will argue that this (broadly speaking) epistemological thesis leads to a unique political position where the following two things are espoused: A form of Anarcho-Socialism; A Perfectionist Liberal Account of Political Legitimacy. (Anarcho-Socialism being, roughly, the idea that there should be no state with a monopoly of legitimate violence; Perfectionist Liberal account of Political Legitimacy is one according to which Liberalism is not justified as a means through which to navigate political disagreement, but rather in its upholding of liberal values).
The central issue of verifying Prophecy is taken up by some of the very first philosophical and theological schools of Islam, who end up endorsing a thesis known as Evidentialism: the thesis that evidence (or ‘epistemic reason’) solely determines what one ought to believe. I will address Evidentialism within Islam in the next section (2). However, Evidentialism has some serious problems from within an Islamic perspective: most notably the problem of respecting the epistemic uniqueness of Prophecy. I address this problem together with the proposed solution to it as developed by Falsafa – Islamic Moderate Evidentialism – in section 3. In section 4, I show the political implications of this theory, and how it explains why the Prophet is the ideal political leader. I then move, in section 5, to discuss the Islamic Modernist Reform movement, and how some of its members married up the thesis of Islamic Moderate Evidentialism with certain Marxist ideas. In section 6, I discuss how this leads to a Perfectionist Liberal account of political legitimacy, and in section 7 how it leads to a form of Anarcho-Socialism.

2. Evidentialism and Proof of Prophecy

Islam is a religion of Prophesy. Its central religious text – the Koran - was revealed to Muhammed via the Angel Gabriel, and is considered to be the unadulterated word of God. The Muslim declaration of faith – the al-Šahāda – is that ‘there is no God but God, and Muhammed is the Messenger of God’. A very natural question that arises from this is: how are we, non-Prophets, to know that Muhammed’s message is the genuine word of God? According to the Mutazilite theological tradition what you are required to believe cannot not depend on what tribe you happen to belong to. All people are simply required to believe one thing: the truth. This then gives us an answer as to how to discern the true from the false prophet: verisimilitude. The genuine Prophet’s message will accord with the truth, and the false prophet’s will not. This in turn accords well with the idea that the Prophet’s role is a political one, since faith is not then considered a matter for the private sphere, but rather an obligation toward something public: the evidence.
This line of thought is taken up by the inaugurator of the tradition of Philosophy known as *Falsafa* (an Arabized word for the Greek *philosophia*): al-Kindi (c. 801 - 873). In his work - *On First Philosophy* - he famously writes:

> We ought not be ashamed of appreciating the truth and of acquiring it wherever it comes from, even if it comes from races distant and nations different from ours. For the seeker of truth nothing takes precedence over the truth, and there is no disparagement of the truth, nor belittling either of him who speaks it or of him who conveys it. (The status of) no one is diminished by the truth; rather does the truth ennoble all. (Al-Kindi *On First Philosophy*, p. 58viii).

Here, al-Kindi is referencing Greek Philosophy, which had come into the Islamic purview when the Islamic empire conquered such places as Alexandria. Al-Kindi is here arguing in favour of Muslims studying Greek Philosophy. The argument is premised on epistemic value monism: only the truth is of epistemic value, or is at least of most epistemic value. But more than that, it is premised on the idea that considerations about the truth trump all other considerations when it comes to the question of what we ought to believe (“nothing takes precedence over the truth”). This looks like an endorsement of what is sometimes in contemporary epistemology called: ‘Evidentialism’ix - the thesis that there can be no non-epistemic reasons for belief. Put differently, only considerations relevant to whether \( p \) is true can settle the normative question of whether you should believe that \( p \).

This view, or something close to it, is sometimes called ‘rationalism’ in the context of discussing the Mutazilites and al-Kindi\( ^x \). The thought being that for both, Islam was a religion that was to be believed on the ordinances of *reason* and not of faith or blind obedience. I prefer the term ‘Evidentialism’,
however, to set it apart from the issue that was also relevant in this period of Islamic Philosophy as to whether experience was required for knowledge, or if we can know things (or how much we can know) a priori. Evidentialism gives us an answer to the question of how to discern genuine Prophecy. The genuine Prophet, like the genuine expert, speaks the truth, and we can test that against public evidence. This, however, seems to assume then that expertise and Prophecy contain no ‘esoteric’ knowledge (knowledge that can only be gained by consulting those sources) on pain of reneging on the claim that there is an independent, public test to be had. But of course that raises the question: do we really need Prophecy and experts when we can directly consult the evidence? Evidentialism seems to have a problem, then, with respecting what we can call the epistemic uniqueness of Prophecy – the idea that there are esoteric truths within Prophecy that could not be learned other than by consulting it.

3. Islamic Moderate Evidentialism

By far the most well know of the philosophers of the classical period, following al-Kindi, were al-Farabi (872-950), Ibn Sina (980-1037), and Ibn Rushd (1126-1198). All three of these thinkers endorse versions of a modulated form of Evidentialism, which we can call Islamic Moderate Evidentialism. The celebrated Christian philosopher St. Thomas Aquinas also held a version of Moderate Evidentialism. The way that he moderates Evidentialism is to restrict those propositions to which Evidentialism applies. We can thus formulate a very loosely ‘Western’ (for ease of exposition) version of Moderate Evidentialism:

**Western Moderate Evidentialism**: For all subjects $S$ and most propositions $p$, only epistemic reasons justify $S$’s belief that $p$. 
Put differently, beliefs in some propositions can be justified by non-epistemic reasons. For example, such propositions, according to Aquinas, as that God is Triune, or propositions about the afterlife - propositions the truth of which (out of principle) can never be settled by the totality of our evidence. To put this back in terms of the issue regarding the epistemic uniqueness of Prophecy: that God is Triune cannot be learned simply by considering the world - we must look to the Christian Bible to learn this. But while this does mean that belief in such matters cannot go against our evidence (hence why for Aquinas there can be harmony between ‘reason and faith’) it cannot be independently verified. So insofar as Prophecy is esoteric, it is impossible for us to discern real Prophecy. The solution to this issue proposed by the Falasifa (al-Farabi, Avicenna, and Averroes) is slightly different from Aquinas’. They propose that Evidentialism be moderated not by restricting which propositions it applies to, but by restricting which subjects it applies to. We can formulate the position like this:

**Islamic Moderate Evidentialism:** For some subjects $S$ and all propositions $p$, only epistemic reasons justify $S$’s belief that $p$.

Put differently, only a certain group of people should believe on the basis of truth alone. It is solely appropriate for a cognitive elect, or epistemic elite, to believe just on the basis of epistemic reason. The rest of us are unable to use only reason to come to the beliefs that we need to have, so we can have beliefs that are justified for reasons unrelated to truth. Thus, Prophecy has a unique epistemic purpose: to teach members of the public what they could not have learned had they attempted to use reason alone (perhaps through the use of similes and metaphors which are not strictly true). But at the same time contains nothing that cannot be independently verified.
That rough characterisation of the Falasifa’s epistemological position does, of course, raise a number of questions. For instance, if everything that is in Prophecy can be independently verified against our evidence can there really be anything esoteric within Prophecy? If the metaphors contained with it are approximations of truths then why cannot there be other approximations or metaphors that will lead people to believe those truths than those contained in Prophecy? If they are the only effective metaphors, then that itself will have to be independently ascertained, so not esoteric after all.

There are nuances in all of the positions of the respective Falasifa that address this. Unfortunately, I will not be able to detail them all here. But I think it is worth saying a bit more about the nuances in al-Farabi’s position, since I think they have a very direct relevance for political epistemology (his account of knowledge has a direct bearing on what he thinks should be political leadership). For al-Farabi, the difference between the Prophet’s knowledge and our knowledge does not have to do with which propositions we know. Rather, it is the manner in which propositions are known that is important. Truth is not the only epistemic value. For al-Farabi, what makes the Prophet epistemically special is that he is able to grasp, or directly intuit, many or all of the a priori truths of the world at once, where most of us can at must have an intellectual intuition of such truths one at a time\textsuperscript{xii}. Try, for example, having the intellectual intuition regarding the law of non contradiction together with the intuition that everything is self identical! He can do this, explains, al-Farabi due to an enhanced power of the imagination, and because he can then see these truths together, he can see their intimate connection\textsuperscript{xiii}. He thus understands the very same truths that can be grasped individually by anyone, but does so much more deeply. It is this wholesale understanding that is esoteric – the individual propositions that are believed by both us and the Prophet can thus be considered verifiable against public evidence without negating the epistemic uniqueness of Prophecy. And, further, it is because the Prophet has these special abilities regarding the understanding that he has a special rhetorical ability: he knows how to explain one truth in terms of another. This in turn gives him a distinctly political role.
4. The Prophet Law-Maker

Islamic Moderate Evidentialism, then, constitutes what is a unique position in political epistemology. One of the central questions of contemporary political and social epistemology has been about our trust in experts: which ones should be trust? This is a structurally similar question to the one al-Farabi was asking: who among those who call themselves a ‘prophet’ should we trust? And how do we know the answer to this without putting into question the need for Prophets or experts? In his seminal paper in contemporary political/social epistemology Alvin Goldman calls the issue related to the last question, the ‘Expert-Novice problem’ (Goldman 2001, p. 96) – how can we, the novices, come to recognise genuine expertise without having to become experts ourselves? According to Goldman, one way in which we might come to recognise an expert is through their rhetorical and dialectical flourish – their testament makes sense to us, they are able to explain the things about which they have expertise. But the obvious objection involves wondering whether one can have knowledge about something and yet be absolutely terrible at explaining it. Or, alternatively, wondering whether someone could be very good at making things seem like they make sense, when in fact they have very little knowledge about the thing they are trying to explain. I’m sure we have all met successful blaggers! There seems to be no principled connection between knowledge that $p$ and the ability to successfully explain $p$ to novices.

Now, because al-Farabi is dealing with Prophecy here, not mere expertise, he has an answer to the correlated question: the Prophet not only has perfect knowledge, but perfect understanding – he can see how everything is connected since he sees all the a priori truths at once. Indeed his perfected knowledge (only he can attain the highest level of certainty) is a function of his perfected understanding. And this gives him perfect rhetorical and dialectical abilities because he understands,
say, how the intricate rules of geometry are related to what you had for breakfast. Thus if you were ever engaged with a genuine Prophet, it would be impossible for you not to be persuaded by him. In the idealised state of the Prophet rhetorical and theoretical ability or virtue then fundamentally come together. And the same is true for practical virtue: because the Prophet knows how everything is connected, he knows better than anyone else how to realise the ideal.

As I mentioned, this, for al-Farabi, gives the Prophet a uniquely political role. This is in part developed from Plato’s Republic. The Falsafa movement was very much concerned with understanding Greek Philosophy, incorporating and seeking to harmonise it with the central tenets of Islam. In the Republic, Plato had proposed a tripartite theory of state that mirrored the tripartite division of the human soul. Where the individual human soul comprises an appetitive, a spirited, and a rational element, the city state comprises, correspondingly, workers (appetitive), guardians (spirited), and philosopher kings (rational). The individual human soul finds happiness when its various divisions work in harmony, a harmony which can only be guaranteed when the rational element of the soul governs the rest. Likewise then, for Plato, the flourishing city state, or human collective, can only be guaranteed when the theoreticians – the Philosophers – are in charge. But, Plato also tells us in the Republic, that the harmony can be guaranteed only if the Philosophers invent ‘noble lies’ - metaphors for people to more easily grasp the truth about why the state is organised as it is, but nonetheless at most only approximate the truth. Al-Farabi’s critique of Plato then is to wonder whether those with theoretical knowledge alone are the best people to dispatch these noble myths, which surely requires dialectic and rhetoric skill to be done effectively. This is why the Prophet is a better political ruler than those who have mastered Philosophy alone, since the Prophet’s perfection is a composite of both practical-rhetorical and theoretical virtue. That is, he is at once both a Philosopher and a Rhetorician – perfectly made for keeping the divisions of the state in harmony. But as others have argued (see Khalidi 2001) the final political question for al-Farabi was about what we should do,
given what we have learned about the idealised state, when we find ourselves in less than ideal conditions (i.e. in the aftermath of the death of the Prophet Muhammed). That al-Farabi does not see theoretical knowledge as the governing modality I think has important implications with respect to his overall stance on Political Legitimacy, as we will discuss in sections 6,7.

5. Islamic Modernism and Neo Marxism

At the time of the late 19th century, the Ottoman Turks still controlled the Islamic Empire. But the Ottoman empire was thought to have gone into serious decline. The Islamic Modernist Reform movement arose in response to the perceived need to “modernise” the Islamic world out of this predicament. However, key thinkers of the movement such as Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838 - 1897) and Mohammed Abduh (1849 - 1905) thought that in order to properly reform, the Islamic world needed to recover its past. It was to modernise by turning back, and recovering the Evidentialist impulses seen in the Mutazilite and Falsafa traditions (for discussion see Kedourie 2014). They felt that the West not only had colonised territorially, but also intellectually. That the ideas of Evidentialism had been taken from the West from Islamic thought, unacknowledged, and they had allowed the West to flourish, embracing Liberalism and Science. Here is Muhammed Abduh, for example:

The religious leaders of the West successfully aroused their people to make havoc of the eastern world and to seize the sovereignty over those nations on what they believed to be their prescriptive right to tyrannize over masses of men...but...they found freedom in a religion where knowledge, law and art could be possessed with entire certitude. They discovered that liberty of thought and breadth of knowledge were means to faith and not its foes...Then it was that the nations of Europe began to throw off their bondage and reform
their condition, re-ordering the affairs of their life in a manner akin to the message of Islam.

(Abduh 2006, p. 22).

The Islamic Modernist movement paved the way for what we today call ‘Political Islam’, and especially the Muslim Brotherhood (founded by Hassan al-Banna in 1928). It very much set up the discourse whereby the Muslim world was to make progress by going backward, reclaiming the ‘true’ Islam. A very important thinker within the Muslim Brotherhood was Saayid Qutb (1906 - 1966). His political philosophy and epistemology is really a marriage of the Islamic Moderate Evidentialism of the Falasifa and some Marxist ideas, which are given a Muslim spin.

From Islamic Moderate Evidentialism, Qutb gets the idea that there is an intellectual elite who will need to dispatch ‘noble myths’ in order to keep the public together. And, from Marx, he gets the idea of ideology, and, especially from Lenin, the idea of a vanguard that needs to lead the masses. Also from Lenin, he gets the idea of a distinction between positive and negative ideology. ‘Ideology’ in the Marxist tradition denotes something more like ‘propaganda’ (see Stanley 2015). ‘Negative Ideology’ is propaganda used by a ruling minority to subjugate the masses, where ‘Positive Ideology’ is propaganda used by a ‘vanguard’ who have seen through the negative ideology in order to combat it.

Of course, ideology is most effective when the fact that it is ideology is concealed, so the masses in the grip of ideology will not know this about themselves – ‘ideology is self-deception’ (Geuss 1981, p. 12). Thus, like with Islamic Moderate Evidentialism, Leninist thought has it that rational arguments will be ineffective in defeating the negative ideology, and hence we need ‘positive ideology’ – or, put differently, noble myths. Qutb uses the Koranic term for ignorance - Jāhilīyah - to describe what he identifies as the state the majority of Muslims found themselves in: in denial. They think they are living in Muslim countries, but are really they are living under puppet regimes designed to
promulgate Western Capitalism (worship material things, above the spiritual) and imperial ambition (cultural, economic, territorial). And he thinks that the epistemic elite, i.e. an *ulama* serving the role of the vanguard for Lenin, will see through this state of *Jāhilīyah* combatting it through the use of positive ideology. Thus we get a bringing together of the Modernist Reform Movement, Islamic Moderate Evidentialism, and elements of Marxist thought – and so a revolutionary vision for Islam.

It is not too difficult to see how this revolutionary tenor would appeal to the likes of the more radical Islamists, such as those who formed what came to be known as *Al-Qaeda*: Osama Bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri. They saw this as justification for terrorist acts, especially in the first instance within Muslim countries: putative leaders and the people living under them might claim to be muslim, but since they are under the spell of *Jāhilīyah* they are not. This makes them apostates in their eyes, and so (according to a precedent in Islamic law) were deserving of the death penalty. Further, it would take much more than rational argument to break them out of *Jāhilīyah* – they needed, instead, to receive a huge shock that would come from terrorist action. Having noted this, I think it is important to also note that while his thought contains revolutionary Marxist elements, it also contains aspects, via Islamic Moderate Evidentialism, that resemble Modern Liberalism. I move to discuss those in the next section.

### 6. Islamic Political Legitimacy and Perfectionist Liberalism

The issue of when a state has political *legitimacy* is currently enjoying a lot of attention within contemporary political philosophy. One popular answer is that a state rules legitimately just in case it rules with the consent of the people it rules over. I think this is broad answer preferred by so-called ‘anti-Perfectionist’ Liberals (e.g. Jonathan Quong 2010). The obvious objection to this involves
worrying whether a state is really a legitimate one when the people’s consent is unjust. Thus, the broad alternative line - that you find in ‘Perfectionist’ Liberalism – is to say that what is needed for political legitimacy is not mere consent, but correct belief. That is, there are facts of the matter that determine whether a polity acts in line with justice or not. A legitimate state is one that gets us to act in accordance with those facts – or at least more so than had the state not wielded coercive power over us (see Raz 1986). This looks like the Islamic Moderate Evidentialist line on political legitimacy: there are truths about what determines a just polity. A legitimate state is one that governs in such a way to ensure that the various components of the polity are acting as harmoniously as possible. But in order to do this it needs the populace not only to go along with what the government is doing (consent) but to some degree understand why they are doing what they are doing (belief). Thus not only does the state need to get the people to act in a manner more akin with Justice, it also needs to get them to believe things that are as close to the truth as possible. In other words, it needs to make use of noble lies and positive-sense ideology.

However, for the contemporary Perfectionist Liberal, the independent truths about justice will involve truths about civil liberties: a truly just state, for instance, will be one that guarantees freedom of belief and expression. In the classical view from Islamic Moderate Evidentialism, the truths of justice, as we have presented them here involve only harmony between different parts of the polity, and seems silent on the issue of civil liberties. Nevertheless, I think that on the Islamic Moderate Evidentialist picture, the fact that the Prophet stands in place for the Philosopher Kings has implications that address the issue of civil liberties. And, certainly for Qutb, an Islamic state is one that is meant to guaranteed liberties like freedom of belief:

[Islam] strives from the beginning to abolish all those systems and governments which are based on the rule of man over men and the servitude of one human being to another. When
Islam releases people from this political pressure and presents to them its spiritual message, appealing to their reason, it gives them complete freedom to accept or not to accept its beliefs...in an Islamic system there is room for all kinds of people to follow their own beliefs, while obeying the laws of the country which are themselves based on the Divine authority. (Qutb 2006, p. 61)

This line of thought is vindicated for Qutb, I think, by the fact that the Koran explicitly tells us that “There is no compulsion in religion” (Koran 2:256). Thus, Qutb can think that that Islam mandates complete freedom of belief despite saying that the laws of any given polity must be based on “the Divine Authority”, since a system of laws based on Islam will be one that mandates freedom of belief. It is meant to be a fact, then, that there can be no just society where this human right is not enshrined. As such the view looks very much like a kind of Perfectionist Liberalism. Is this view anti-democratic, however? If the truth is ultimately what generates proper political authority, then what status does popular will and opinion have with respect to the running of a legitimate government? We will address this question in the following section.

7. Graded Knowledge and Anarcho-Socialism

A thinker who is often put together with Qutb, as a radical, Islamist political thinker is the Pakistani philosopher Abul A’la Maududi (1903 - 1979). He addresses, head-on, the issue of how Perfectionism, and especially theological variant of Perfectionism, is compatible with democracy. For example, he says:

What distinguished Islamic democracy from Western democracy is that while the latter is based on the concept of popular sovereignty the former rests on the principle of popular
**Khilafat.** In Western democracy the people are sovereign, in Islam sovereignty is vested in God...[the people] have to follow and obey the laws given by God through his Prophet.

(Maududi 1950, p.16).

What Maududi means by the claim that Western democracy is “based on the concept of popular sovereignty” is that it is not the truth about justice for Western democracy that grants legitimacy, but the people’s will, independent of the truth. This is an idea familiar with anti-perfectionist conceptions of political legitimacy – that because there can be reasonable disagreement regarding the truth about justice (cf. Rawls 1993) only consensus can ground legitimate governance, and democracy measures consensus. Conversely, an Islamic Democracy for Maududi is based on the Popular Khalifat – the people are God’s deputies to enact His will on Earth. Democracy is an instrument to ensuring that society is a just one, it is not the end in itself by which we measure whether a society is a just one.

But how does the idea of a Popular Khalifat, or a “Caplihate of Man” (as Andrew March has recently called it) fit together with the political epistemology of Islamic Moderate Evidentialism, according to which the masses and an epistemic elite have divergent statuses? Is not Islamic Moderate Evidentialism really a kind of elitism, rather than a view that mandates democracy? In response, I think we can first wonder whether the impulse to inform the public as best one can is not in fact actually a democratic impulse, enabling not just mere consent, but informed consent. Second, we have left it under-specified up to now who the elite are meant to be. While it is tempting to assume that thinkers such as al-Farabi would be naturally inclined to conceive the elite as the ulama, I think that would be partially a mistake, at least in the case of al-Farabi. In an essay - *The Conditions of Certainty* - he outlines various grades of knowledge one can have. One can interpret al-Farabi in that essay as saying that only the Prophet’s state of knowledge can involve perfect certainty, and, as
such, for everyone else, the Ulama included, there will need to be partially non-epistemic justification for belief. That is, even the beliefs of the most intellectually gifted amongst us will be in some sense approximations to the truth.

If we put that together with the idea that the Prophet, and not the Philosopher Kings, is the ideal political leader, we get in a position to see the accord with democracy. As Khalidi has persuasively argued (Khalidi 2003) the important political question for al-Farabi concerns how we organize ourselves politically in the absence of a Prophet. Given that the Prophet’s perfected state of certainty is an amalgam of both theoretical and practical virtue, and that only the Prophet can achieve this state, neither the philosophers, nor the non-philosophers can singularly assume the political role of the Prophet. Thus, in the absence of a Prophet the various parts of the state will need to come together of their own accord in order to be virtuous and sit in harmony. No person, group or institution can engender that harmony for them. This is akin to saying that there really should be no government at all (hence anarcho-socialism) – and that is really the force of the ‘Popular Khalifat’ that Maududi talks about. As Andrew March puts it in his recent, influential book:

God is the principal agent and actor, and the first response of the people-as-deputy is a passive and receptive one. But the force of God dignifying mankind as His caliph is that He has deputized no one else in between God and man – no kings, no priests, no scholars. (March 2019, p. xviii).

8. Conclusion.
I hope I have shown then that the epistemology of the “Classical’ Islamic Philosophers – Islamic Moderate Evidentialism – leads to a unique political position where both Perfectionist Liberal thought and Anarcho-Socialism sit together side by side. I do not know of any contemporary position quite like it, and it deserves the attention of those engaged in political epistemology xvii.

References


Black, D. 2006: “Knowledge (ʿilm) and certitude (yaqīn) in al-Fārābī’s Epistemology” Arabic Sciences and Philosophy 16.1 pp. 11 – 46.


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i For a good statement of this view see Akhtar 2011.

ii This is made more all the more of a pressing question in (especially Sunni) Islam due to the fact that Muslims are enjoined not just to follow the Prophecy as revealed to Muhammed in the Koran, but to follow the practises and teachings of the Prophet, collected by others in *Hadith* – and it was important when these were being collected that they be authenticated. For an excellent account discussion of this issue see Griffel 2004.

iii *Falsafa* is the generic Arabic word for ‘Philosophy’, but it also specifically refers to the Classical Islamic Philosophy of the Medieval period. For a remarkable, quick introduction see Adamson 2015.

iv For discussion see Chomsky 2014.

v See Raz 1986.

vi For good overviews see, among many, Black 2001 and Watt 1987.

vii For the kind of ‘Evidentialism’ I am here discussing see Shah 2006. In modern Epistemology and Philosophy of Religion, ‘Evidentialism’ denotes a subtly different view that is meant to distinguish it from so-called ‘externalist’ accounts of epistemic justification where, very roughly, one does not need to be aware of what one’s justifiers are in order to be justified in believing a proposition (see Plantinga 2000). The version of ‘evidentialism’ I am talking about here is compatible with ‘externalist’ and ‘internalist’ accounts of justification.

viii This translation is from Ivry 1974. For an excellent book-length account of al-Kindi’s thought, see Adamson 2007.

ix See Booth 2016.
Of course, we can learn that God is Triune by reading the Christian Bible. In this respect, the Bible on such matters can be thought to be giving us ‘evidence’. But how do we know that this bit of the bible is genuine prophesy? We cannot test it against our public evidence (so we have to believe it by faith). It is this public notion of evidence that I denoting by the term ‘evidence’.

See Booth 2016 for a defence of this interpretation.

Al-Farabi is also a Neo-Platonist, who sees an affinity between Islam and the Neo-Platonist Emanationist metaphysics, according to which the physical world is an emanation from the One. For an introduction to al-Farabi’s thought, see Fahkry 2002. For a good selection of translated texts see Butterworth 2001.

See Khatab 2006 for a recent, illuminating study on Qutb.

Translates as “the learned ones”, they are, traditionally, the scholars and guardians of knowledge in Islam.

For discussion, see Saeed & Saeed 2004.

For an excellent introduction see Coicaud 2002.

See Black 2006 for a detailed commentary and almost complete translation.

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