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Introduction
What is a philosophical religion?

INTRODUCTION

When the medieval Muslim philosopher Averroes, who spent much of his life explaining Aristotle, examined the relationship between Islam and philosophy, he reached the following conclusion:

> Since this Law [*sharīʿa*] is true and calls to the reflection leading to cognition of the truth, we, the Muslim community, know firmly that demonstrative investigations cannot lead to something differing from what is set down in the Law. For the truth does not contradict the truth [*al-ḥaqq lā yuḍādd al-ḥaqq*]; rather, it agrees with it and bears witness to it. (*Faṣl*, 8–9)

According to Averroes, "demonstrative investigations" are conducted by philosophers. The results they reach cannot differ from the content of the *sharīʿa*, because the truth of the former is the same as the truth of the latter.[1]

It is instructive to compare Averroes's assessment of the Islamic Law with the assessment of the Law of Moses by Paul-Henri Thiry, Baron d'Holbach, an important representative of the radical wing of the French Enlightenment:

> From the outset of the Bible we see nothing but ignorance and contradictions. Everything proves to us that the cosmogony of the Hebrews is no more than a composition of fables and allegories, incapable of giving us any [true] idea of things, appropriate only for a savage, ignorant, and vulgar people, unfamiliar with the sciences and with reasoning. In the remaining works attributed to Moses, we find countless improbable and fantastic stories and a pile of ridiculous and arbitrary laws. At the end the author describes his own death. The books following Moses are no less filled with ignorance. . . . One would never come to an end if

[1] This, at any rate, is Averroes's intention. The thesis that the truth of philosophy does not contradict the truth of religion is also compatible with the weaker claim, proposed, for example, by Thomas Aquinas, that revelation contains truths that do not contradict philosophy, but are also not accessible to it.

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one attempted to note all the blunders and fables, shown in every passage of a work which people have the audacity to attribute to the Holy Spirit. . . . In one word: In the Old Testament everything breathes enthusiasm, fanaticism, and raving, often ornamented by a pompous language. Nothing is missing from it, except for reasonableness, sound logic, and rationality which seem to have been excluded stubbornly from the book that serves as a guide to Hebrews and Christians. (*Le Christianisme dévoilé*, 87–89)[2]

To be sure, the Enlightenment's attitude to religion is not monolithic. Materialists like Julien de La Mettrie and d'Holbach who reject religion altogether represent only one side of the spectrum.[3] On the opposite side, philosophers like Mendelssohn and Lessing try in different ways to reconcile their Enlightenment commitments with traditional forms of Judaism and Christianity.[4] In between are deists like Voltaire, Hermann Samuel Reimarus, and Thomas Paine who can be as acerbic as d'Holbach when it comes to the "fabulous theology" of traditional religions, "whether Jewish, Christian, or Turkish," while espousing what they consider the "true theology" of reason.[5] What the passage from d'Holbach illustrates well, however, is the attempt by part of the Enlightenment to exclude religious beliefs and practices from reason's domain. The goal is to replace ignorance caused by fables and superstition with knowledge and a life guided by arbitrary laws with a life guided by reason.

Also Enlightenment thinkers who do not, like d'Holbach, dismiss traditional religion as "fantastic stories" and "arbitrary laws" object to it if they see it as interfering with what is arguably at the heart of Enlightenment concerns: the autonomy of reason. Even if religious prescriptions were irreproachable, we would still lack autonomy if we simply obeyed them. The problem is particularly salient if we consider religions like Judaism or Islam. For at their heart lies a Divine Law – in the broad sense of *torah* in Hebrew and *sharīʿa* in Arabic – which determines what we may and may not do, promising reward for obedience and threatening punishment for

[2] On the importance of d'Holbach for understanding the Enlightenment, see Israel (2010). Interestingly, d'Holbach is aware that what he describes as the irrational content of the Bible can be reconciled with philosophy by means of allegorical interpretation. See his reference to Origen's and Augustine's allegorical reading of Genesis in the note on p. 88. This is precisely Averroes's solution for contradictions occurring between philosophy and the *sharīʿa*; see, for example, *Faṣl*, 9–10.

[3] For de La Mettrie's materialism, see in particular *L'homme machine*.

[4] For Mendelssohn, see in particular *Jerusalem*. For Lessing, see, for example, *Erziehung* and my discussion in the epilogue.

[5] Paine, *The Age of Reason*, 6. For the opposition of "true and fabulous theology," see the title page of the first edition (1794). For Reimarus, see his *Apologie*; for Voltaire, see the relevant articles in the *Dictionnaire philosophique* (for example "Église," "Fanatisme," "Religion," "Superstition," and so forth).

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disobedience. It seems thus clear that not we, but God makes the rules. According to Kant, the "motto" of the Enlightenment – "*Sapere aude!* Dare to use your own reason [*Verstand*]" – is addressed to those who out of "laziness and cowardice" follow "the guidance of others" (*fremde Leitung*): the guidance of a "book," for example, or the guidance of a "priest" (*Seelsorger*) – literally someone who takes care of another person's soul (*Aufklärung*, 35/54). Submitting to the Divine Law is "counterfeit worship" (*Afterdienst*). True worship, by contrast, is following the prescriptions of reason (*Religion* 4.2, 167–68/164).[6]

Philosophers like Averroes would reject the opposition between true and counterfeit worship.[7] For one thing they take the actions that a rational agent chooses to be the actions prescribed by God conceived as Reason. In the ideal case, therefore, self-rule and God's rule coincide. They distinguish, moreover, between adequate and inadequate motives for doing what God prescribes. Averroes's Jewish colleague Maimonides, for example, criticizes a person who acts from fear of punishment or hope for reward as "serving God out of fear," which he contrasts with "serving God out of love," the motivation of a rational agent (*Madda'*, Laws Concerning Repentance 10.5). To be self-ruled, then, means to know the good and to be motivated to act according to this knowledge. Note, however, that for Kant all human beings are *equally* able to be autonomous if only they overcome their laziness and cowardice and dare to use their own reason. Averroes and Maimonides deny this: the rank of human beings is determined by their degree of perfection which, in turn, determines their capacity for self-rule. Critics of prophetic religion, like Celsus in antiquity and Abū Bakr al-Rāzī in the Middle Ages, had already argued that all human beings should live under the guidance of reason. Averroes and Maimonides agree, yet point out that the Divine Law remains an indispensable guide for members of the community who are unable to attain *perfect* self-rule. There are *degrees* of self-rule, they contend, not true and counterfeit worship.[8]

In yet another way philosophers like Averroes and Maimonides challenge widespread views about the relationship between reason and religion. For

[6] At times, however, Kant qualifies his critique and attributes an educational purpose to traditional religions as we will see in the epilogue.

[7] They would also disagree with Kant's concept of autonomy. My claim is that they advocate a meaningful concept of self-rule, not that they agree with Kant's.

[8] Of course the main political concern in contemporary liberal democracies is not the citizens' rational self-rule but their freedom from external interference. Whether they base their life plans on rational deliberation or not is up to them. Following Isaiah Berlin (1969) we can distinguish between a concern with positive and a concern with negative liberty. Proponents of a philosophical religion only appear to be committed to positive liberty. I discuss this issue in Fraenkel (forthcoming b).

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them the Divine Law established by a prophet – for example Moses or Muhammad – embodies the same philosophical principles as the divine *nomoi* conceived by philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle.[9] They could not agree more with Plato's claim that laws are divine if they direct the citizens to "Reason [*nous*] who rules all things" (*Leg.* 631d).[10] The same holds for Aristotle's claim at the end of the *Eudemian Ethics* that actions are good if they contribute "to worshiping [*therapeuein*] and contemplating [*theorein*] God" (8.3, 1249b20–21). Maimonides, for example, argues that the goal of the Law of Moses is "the apprehension of God [*idrāk Allāh*], mighty and magnificent, I mean knowledge [*al-ʿilm*] of him" (*Eight Chapters* 5, 164/75–76). This is the meaning of Deuteronomy 6:5: "And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul" – God's commandment to study "all the theoretical sciences" (*al-ʿulūm al-naẓariyya*), most importantly physics and metaphysics (*Guide* 3.28, 373/512 with 1.34, 50/75). For physics, the investigation of things in motion, leads via the eternal motion of the celestial spheres to the apprehension of God, the first cause of nature.[11] The same idea is encapsulated in Averroes's claim that the "happiness" (*saʿāda*) to which the Islamic Law guides is "the knowledge [*maʿrifa*] of God, mighty and magnificent, and his creation" (*Faṣl*, 8) which requires "rational inquiry [*al-naẓar*] into the existing things and their contemplation [*iʿtibāruhā*] insofar as they are proof of the Maker" (*Faṣl*, 1). Both Aristotle's writings and Averroes's commentaries on Aristotle can be seen as the implementation of this program and thus as divine worship in the sense of the *Eudemian Ethics*. But in Averroes's case they are also the fulfillment of his duty as a Muslim.[12]

Averroes and Maimonides, then, would have been surprised about radical Enlightenment figures like d'Holbach who claim that religion has no place

[9] As we will see in chapter 3, medieval Arabic philosophers usually adopt a strong version of the late ancient view of the harmony of Plato and Aristotle.

[10] For the conception of God as *Nous* in Plato's later theology, see Menn (1995). As we will see in chapters 2 and 3, both Eusebius of Caesarea and al-Fārābī explicitly identify the *Nous* mentioned in this *Laws* passage with the God of Scripture. Note that I will often use "God" in a loose way. While all proponents of a philosophical religion are committed to a concept of God as Reason, they do not always take it to be the only or even the highest divine principle. The differences in their philosophical theologies, which I will sketch in the following chapters, do not affect my core argument, however.

[11] Cf. Aristotle, *Physics* 8.5–6 and *Metaphysics* 12.6–7. Maimonides refers to the Aristotelian proof as "the greatest proof through which one can know the existence of the deity" (*Guide* 1.70, 121/175).

[12] On the study of philosophy as a religious duty in medieval Islamic and Jewish philosophy, see Davidson (1974). Although the passage from the *Eudemian Ethics* nicely illustrates the continuity between the ancient and the medieval position, it is unclear whether the work was known to philosophers in the Muslim world.

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in our lives if we choose to follow reason. From the Enlightenment, in turn, it is possible to draw lines to modern attitudes to religion. They include the nineteenth-century critiques of religion as alienation by Feuerbach and Marx, and in a different way by Nietzsche, as well as the late Victorian *topos* of a perpetual "warfare" between science and religion.[13] This background helps to understand the contemporary perception of the project of reason as something fundamentally different from religion and often in conflict with it.

Letting critics of religion define the framework of my introductory discussion has a number of drawbacks. Obviously no historian of philosophy or religion these days would speak of "warfare" and the like. More importantly, my aim is not to say that only philosophers like Averroes and Maimonides offer a respectable interpretation of religion while everyone else is caught up in narrow-minded literalism. No such value judgment is meant to be implied. What the contrast between Averroes and d'Holbach helps bring into focus is that for the philosophers I discuss in this book the projects of reason and religion cannot be meaningfully distinguished at all. It is worth recalling, moreover, that the critique of religion did not start with the Enlightenment. Proponents of the premodern position are, in fact, in part responding to charges such as that religion consists in fables and superstition or that religious authority prevents rational self-rule.[14]

THE CONCEPT OF A PHILOSOPHICAL RELIGION

Averroes and Maimonides advocate what I propose to call a "philosophical religion." By this I mean a distinctively philosophical interpretation of religions such as Judaism or Islam. My notion of religion thus roughly corresponds to what is covered by the notion of the Divine Law for Jews and Muslims: the comprehensive order of private and public life established through the beliefs, practices, and institutions of the religious community. My main reason for using "religion" instead of "Divine Law" is the contested place of laws in the Christian version of a philosophical religion.

[13] For Feuerbach, see, for example, *Das Wesen des Christentums* and *Vorlesungen über das Wesen der Religion*; for Marx, see *Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie. Einleitung*; for Nietzsche, see, for example, *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft*, in particular paras. 125, 158–60, and *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*. For the "warfare" thesis, see Draper, *History of the Conflict Between Religion and Science* and White, *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom*. The warfare thesis is currently enjoying a revival in the invectives against religion brought forth by a self-stylized Neo-Enlightenment.

[14] See the criticisms of Celsus and Rāzī discussed in chapters 2 and 3.

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In the sections below I lay out what I take to be the key concepts informing this interpretation. Making the structure of a philosophical religion explicit is useful because the philosophers to be examined in the following chapters interpret their religious traditions as philosophical religions, but do not provide an account of what a philosophical religion is. In addition, my account is meant to explain how I use the notion of a philosophical religion. Since philosophy and religion meet in many settings, producing a wide range of configurations, this will help to distinguish what counts as a philosophical religion and what does not on my use of the notion. With respect to some features of a philosophical religion there are variations which are not captured by the reconstruction offered below. These variations will emerge more clearly from the subsequent historical chapters.

Theocracy and the perfection of reason

At the center of a philosophical religion is the ideal of Godlikeness attained through the perfection of reason. For one thing, intellectual perfection is the goal to which all members of the religious community ought to be directed. While this ideal can be realized to a greater or lesser degree, it is realized most completely through philosophy, culminating in knowledge of God. Thus philosophy is the highest form of worship. At the same time, intellectual perfection is also religion's foundation, because it is the most distinctive trait of the founders and leaders of a religious community. Christian philosophers push this view furthest: their Christ is not only a perfect philosopher, but wisdom itself.

The key to understanding a philosophical religion is its moral-political character. In a community based on a philosophical religion the life of all members is ordered towards what is best. The beliefs, practices, and institutions that make up this order are divinely ordained. Such a community, therefore, is best described as a *theocracy*, a community ruled by God. The conceptual move from an excellent order to a divine order is based on two steps: First, something ordered towards what is best – whether an organism or the celestial spheres, a human life or a political community – is taken to be rationally ordered. Second, the rational principle that accounts for this order is identified with God. The conception of God as Reason is the metaphysical foundation of a philosophical religion.[15] Note that the theocratic character of the religious community does not depend on the

[15] For the loose way in which I use "God," see above, n. 10.

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rule of a specific social group, but is a function of its rational order. A rationally ordered democracy, for example, would also count as a theocracy on this view.[16] In the ideal theocracy, as we will see, God's rule and self-rule coincide.

Although proponents of a philosophical religion from Plato to Spinoza sometimes describe God metaphorically as "craftsman," this should not obscure the emphatically non-anthropomorphic character of their philosophical theology.[17] God does not act on the basis of deliberation and choice, but through the causal necessity governing "the derivation of an *intellectum* from an intellect" (*Guide* 2.20, 219/313).[18] He also does not direct things to a good outside himself. As the most perfect being, God is the good towards which the universe is ordered. Things share in his perfection as much as their place in that order allows. This order is emphatically non-anthropocentric. It is best understood in terms of the principle of plenitude that equates being with goodness or perfection: God brings "into being everything whose existence is possible, existence being indubitably a good" (*Guide* 3.25, 368/506). On the scale of perfection human beings occupy an intermediate level. According to medieval Muslim and Jewish philosophers, for example, they are above minerals, plants, and animals, but below the celestial spheres and their incorporeal movers.[19]

Why is the best human life a life ordered towards attaining Godlikeness through the perfection of reason? The metaphysical argument for this claim is that reason is our nature's distinctive feature in virtue of which we are human, as well as our nature's most valuable feature because we share it with God. Since God is the ultimate standard of perfection we need to find out how our nature falls short of God to determine what we must do to attain Godlikeness. For one thing, we have only the capacity to know by nature, unlike God who is actual knowledge. Hence the best life is a life devoted to pursuing knowledge. We cannot, however, spend all our time studying science and philosophy. For again unlike God, we are not pure but embodied rational beings. As a consequence we are not self-sufficient, but need many things to sustain ourselves. These needs give rise to non-rational desires, the desire for "food, drink, and sex," for example, or the desire for

[16] Aristotle and Spinoza, for example, partly dissociate the value of the political order from the form of government. A democracy, aristocracy, or monarchy are good if they promote the common good and bad if they promote the good of the rulers; see *Pol.* 3.6–7 and the argument of the *TP*.
[17] For Plato, see the *Timaeus*; for Spinoza, see *KV* 1.9.
[18] Maimonides publicly criticizes, but esoterically endorses, this view as we will see in chapter 3.
[19] A notable exception is Clement who stresses the world's anthropocentric order; see, for example, *Paed.* 1.2, 6.5–6.

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"power, victory, and honor" (*Rep*. 580e–581a). Whereas the perfection of reason is good without qualification because we share it with God, the objects desired by the soul's non-rational parts are good only as means to perfecting reason. Since God has no body, he needs no food, drink, or sex. And since he has no battles to fight or competitions to win he can do without the desire for power, victory, and honor.[20] We, on the other hand, need external goods such as wealth and goods of the body such as health. We need money, for example, to buy food, food to keep the body in good health, and health to be able to study the sciences and philosophy which we cannot do well if we are sick or hungry. And without the desire for power, victory, and honor we would be unable to overcome the internal and external obstacles that lie on our way to intellectual perfection because we are part of the physical world. Given our embodiment, then, our non-rational desires are necessary to create the conditions under which we can devote ourselves to attaining Godlikeness.

One further implication of our embodiment is that, on account of our many needs, we cannot achieve perfection without the help of others. Absolutely speaking, the best life is not a political life. God, for example, needs nobody to assist him in his endeavors. We, however, although we may be able to survive on our own, must collaborate with others if we want not only a life, but a good life – that is, a life in which our needs are efficiently fulfilled and which leaves us leisure to fully achieve our potential through cultural and intellectual pursuits. By dividing labor and focusing on the tasks to which we are best suited, we both contribute to the common good and ensure the realization of our own good. For proponents of a philosophical religion assume that the best state of the community coincides with the best state of each of its members. In a divinely ordered community the production and distribution of instrumental goods is, of course, regulated by the aim to bring about the greatest possible degree of intellectual perfection.

Even if we know, however, that intellectual perfection is the objectively best state for us, we still need to be motivated to actually study science and philosophy instead of making food, drink, and sex, or power, victory, and honor the focus of our life. In addition to the metaphysical argument, proponents of a philosophical religion thus also offer a psychological argument for the claim that the best life is a life ordered towards the perfection of reason: intellectual activity is the most pleasant activity and hence the

[20] Strictly speaking, the same holds for bodies that are not subject to our limitations, for example the celestial spheres according to Aristotelians.

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thing we should most desire. It is both objectively and subjectively superior to the goods aimed at by our non-rational desires.

Intellectual perfection as the goal of the best life provides the measure for determining the right amount of instrumental goods such as food, drink, and sex, or power, victory, and honor. Whatever takes away from the contemplative life is either too much or too little. Observing the right measure is also crucial for preserving the political order. Without it, conflicts over material goods arise with the effect that some citizens get more and others less than their due. This right measure with respect to the individual and political management of our needs constitutes the moral virtues, for example moderation, courage, and justice. To have a virtuous character means to desire the appropriate amount of instrumental goods for the attainment of intellectual perfection.

The desire to know leading to intellectual perfection by the same token ensures the motivation for moral conduct. We seek sufficient food, drink, and sex to keep in good health because good health is necessary for contemplation. But we do not spend more time on these things than strictly necessary. Hence we are moderate. We defend our community against its enemies because we consider physical pain less harmful than being forced to give up the contemplative life in the wake of defeat. But we will not recklessly endanger ourselves for the sake of power, victory, or honor. Hence we are courageous. We want our fair share of instrumental goods, but we neither want more nor envy others the share due to them. Hence we are just. Our non-rational desires thus are in harmony with the prescriptions of reason.

In analogy to the prescriptions of medical science that aim at producing health, we can describe the moral and political norms of a divinely ordered community as prescriptions of a science of living well that aims at producing Godlikeness. If we master this science and are motivated to follow its prescription we have attained complete self-rule – a life in which all choices are made by reason and supported by desire. In other words: we both know the good and are motivated to act according to this knowledge. To be ruled by reason means to be self-ruled because we are ruled by the distinctly human part of our soul rather than by non-rational desires that we share with plants and animals or by laws imposed on us from the outside. Self-rule is thus contrasted with two forms of enslavement, one internal, the other external.[21] Some proponents of a philosophical religion claim that in a state of complete self-rule conventional notions of "good" and "bad"

[21] See, for example, *Rep*. 577d and 590c–d.

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are no longer meaningful: we do not eat healthy food because it is said to be good or avoid unhealthy food because it is said to be bad, but we choose to eat what we know efficiently satisfies our current nutritional needs. All choices come down to determining which course of action under a particular set of circumstances is most conducive to intellectual perfection.[22]

We can describe this form of self-rule as practical wisdom, in contrast to theoretical wisdom which is the perfection we share with God. Theoretical wisdom, however, is not only the goal towards which a life ruled by reason is ordered. It also provides the knowledge of the order of things and our place in that order required for self-rule.[23] We must understand that God orders nature towards what is best and determine what this means for us. Since reason, as we saw, is both the feature that sets us apart from other natural things (minerals, plants, and animals) and the feature we have in common with God, we attain our distinctive perfection and contribute to the perfection of the whole by perfecting reason. Once the goal is set by theoretical wisdom, practical wisdom determines the path to the goal in light of the particular circumstances under which we live. Since political collaboration is a condition for attaining perfection, practical wisdom must include knowledge of the political order. A shoemaker, for example, must understand the order of the political community of which shoemaking is a part and by which its purpose is determined. He could also be compelled to produce shoes by the ruler, but if he understands how his craft is linked to other crafts, the human need it fulfills, and how it contributes to the common good, he will grasp the reasons why he does what he does and in this sense rule himself. Consider the sovereignty of a ruler who directs all activities in the political community towards the common good on the basis of political science. The shoemaker example suggests that all members of the community can share in this sovereignty and thus act in a self-directed way to the extent they attain the ruler's political science and understand their particular task in its light.

God as the principle governing both the natural order and the good moral-political order holds this body of theoretical and practical knowledge together which self-rule demands. The ideal religious community thus turns out to be a community of philosophers whose life is ordered by reason towards the perfection of reason. God rules directly without the

[22] See, for example, Maimonides, *Guide* 1.2 and Spinoza, *E*4p68.
[23] The following paragraph paraphrases a passage in al-Fārābī (*Falsafat Aristūṭālīs*, 68/79) which I will discuss in chapter 3.

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