

Leo Strauss and Islamic Political Thought

In this book, Rasoul Namazi offers the first in-depth study of Leo Strauss's writings on Islamic political thought, a topic that interested Strauss over the course of his career. Namazi's volume focuses on several important studies by Strauss on Islamic thought. He critically analyzes Strauss's notes on Averroes's commentary on Plato's *Republic* and proposes an interpretation of Strauss's theologico-political notes on the *Arabian Nights*. Namazi also interprets Strauss's essay on Alfarabi's enigmatic treatise *The Philosophy of Plato* and provides a detailed commentary on his complex essay devoted to Alfarabi's summary of Plato's *Laws*. Based on previously unpublished material from Strauss's papers, Namazi's volume provides new insights into Strauss's reflections on religion, philosophy, and politics and their relationship to wisdom, persecution, divine law, and unbelief in the works of key Muslim thinkers. This work presents Strauss as one of the most innovative historians and scholars of Islamic thought of all time.

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To Heinrich Meier

I have read that in some Italian pictures Plato is represented holding in his hand the *Timaeus* and Aristotle his *Ethics*. If a pupil of Maimonides or of the Islamic philosophers had found pleasure in representations of this kind, he might have chosen rather the inverse order: Aristotle with his *Physics* or *Metaphysics* and Plato with his *Republic* or *Laws*.

– Leo Strauss

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Preface

In recent years, there has been a considerable increase of interest in the thought and writings of Leo Strauss, now recognized as one of the most influential and controversial thinkers of his generation. A rising awareness of the importance of Strauss's commentaries on a variety of authors can be observed: his contributions to the study of the history of ancient and modern political thought, as well as Jewish figures, are generally recognized as being worthy of discussion and are debated even by those who have serious reservations about Strauss's claims and general perspective. Strauss's studies on medieval Islamic political philosophy, however, have received a rather limited response from scholars of Islamic political thought: many studies on Islamic thought are written in complete disregard of Strauss's scholarship on the subject. Those few writings that discuss Strauss's ideas, on the other hand, range from brief and very dismissive comments to a few critical but interesting discussions, a few sympathetic short but valuable essays, and detailed studies that are intellectually very rich and informative but which focus on aspects of Strauss's intellectual production other than Islamic political thought proper. This limited reception of Strauss's contribution to the study of Muslim philosophers is not consonant with the unique position medieval Islamic political thought occupies in Strauss's intellectual biography. It was because of the discoveries Strauss made while studying medieval Islamic philosophy that he was guided toward classical Greek philosophy: his studies on Maimonides pointed him back toward Alfarabi, and through Alfarabi Strauss was guided back toward Plato, as well as to a new understanding of Jewish thinkers. It is therefore not surprising that Strauss once called "Arabic

political philosophy” his “specialty.”¹ The same preoccupation with Islamic thought left an undeniable mark on Strauss’s writings on modern philosophers and hence – as can be seen in his later writings, unpublished notes, and course transcripts – Strauss remained highly interested in Islamic thought until the end of his life. If we consider the judgment of the scholars who are knowledgeable about Strauss’s intellectual biography that medieval Islamic philosophy played a major role in his thought, it is surprising that very few studies discuss Strauss’s works on Islamic philosophy in much detail. One can therefore say, to borrow an apt expression, “there is room for inquiry here.”²

This volume tries to fill this gap in the literature by focusing on this aspect of Strauss’s thought in a comprehensive fashion. The result will not only reveal a better understanding of the role played by Islamic political thought in Strauss’s writings but also introduce the unique perspective of one of the most original historians of philosophy on Islamic thought. There is much talk in academia about the need to open the discipline of philosophy to “non-Western” thinkers, such as Islamic philosophers. One of the prerequisites for such inclusion would be to treat the writings of these thinkers not only as objects of historical study but also as works still relevant to contemporary philosophical and politico-religious debates. Strauss was among those who entered into dialogue with the writings of Islamic figures as products of remarkable thinkers addressing universal questions. His writings can therefore help us in furthering the inclusion of these works in the discipline of philosophy and treating them with the seriousness they require.

The audience addressed in this volume consists of two main groups. First are those readers who have some familiarity with Strauss’s writings and would like to know specifically about his writings on Islamic thought. My deepest desire, and I hope not a vain one, is that these

¹ Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin, *Faith and Political Philosophy: The Correspondence Between Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin, 1934–1964*, ed. Peter Emberley and Barry Cooper (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2004), 12 (Letter to Eric Voegelin on February 13, 1943).

² Daniel Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography*, trans. Christopher Nadon (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 53; Rémi Brague, “Athens, Jerusalem, Mecca. Leo Strauss’s ‘Muslim’ Understanding of Greek Philosophy,” *Poetics Today* 19, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 235–59; Georges Tamer, *Islamische Philosophie und die Krise der Moderne: Das Verhältnis von Leo Strauss zu Alfarabi, Avicenna und Averroes* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 35–36; Makram Abbès, “Leo Strauss et la philosophie arabe. Les Lumières médiévales contre les Lumières modernes,” *Diogenes* 226, no. 2 (2009): 117–41.

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readers, after having reread the texts discussed here “forty times” without gaining complete clarity about them, by chance encounter this volume and find that it helps them discover, at least in part, the purposes of these writings of Strauss. The second group of potential readers consists of those fellow scholars of Islamic thought who, despite their erudition, and perhaps because of the fault of our teachers, might not have been introduced to Strauss’s works and his contributions to their discipline. Counting on the openness expected in scholarship, and believing in the duty of sharing one’s meaningful discoveries with one’s friends, this volume intends to introduce them to Strauss’s unique approach to the study of Islamic philosophy. My aim is not to “convert” anybody to “Straussianism” – whatever this ambiguous label may mean – or to convince anyone that Strauss was right on every point. In general, I believe that both deference and hostility in dealing with the ideas of an important thinker result in weak scholarship. Rather than these two unscholarly passions, curiosity has been the primary motive in my study of Strauss, a curiosity I hope my readers come to share.

The following volume consists of an introduction, four chapters, and four appendices. The Introduction provides a panoramic view of Strauss’s thought, with a special emphasis on his interest in Islamic political thought. This summary presentation will focus on what I call the four pillars of Strauss’s intellectual project: (1) Reason and Revelation; (2) Ancients and Moderns; (3) The Theologico-Political Problem; and (4) Esotericism. All these themes have a direct relationship to Strauss’s writings on Islamic thought and his biographically documented interest in the writings of the *Falāsifa*. This summary presentation is followed by a critical assessment of previous studies on Strauss’s interest in Islamic thought, divided into two groups. The objective of this critical assessment is, first of all, to discuss some of the common misconceptions regarding Strauss’s writings on Islamic philosophy in those writings that are mainly critical of his scholarship. The second objective is to show that, despite some very important studies on Strauss’s scholarship on Islamic thought, there is a significant gap existing in the scholarship, which this volume tries to remedy by engaging in a careful, intensive interpretation of Strauss’s writings, correspondence, and other surviving material, as well as by presenting and interpreting two transcripts on Islamic thought that were not published by Strauss.

Chapter 1 is dedicated to the interpretation of a recently discovered, unpublished typescript by Strauss on Averroes’s commentary on Plato’s

Republic.³ Strauss only published a single brief text discussing Averroes in some detail. However, from his published writings on Islamic philosophy and his surviving notes, one can infer that he has read Averroes's works with considerable care.⁴ In this transcript, available as Appendix A and composed sometime after 1956, Strauss underscores the conflict between philosophy and Islam in Averroes's commentary on Plato's *Republic*. The transcript consists only of short notes and, therefore, to reveal its message, it needs to be interpreted in the context of Strauss's other writings. Strauss's interpretation of Averroes is based on the idea that Averroes must have been aware of the incompatibility of Islamic revelation with the best regime of Plato. Unlike other scholars, who are mainly preoccupied with Averroes's access or lack thereof to a reliable translation of Plato's *Republic*, Strauss argues that the deficiencies of Averroes's commentary do not mean that Averroes lacked access to Plato's *Republic*; he claims that such apparent deficiencies might be intentional and significant for understanding Averroes's views. Strauss's transcript is discussed first in this volume because it is not only significant for understanding his interpretation of Averroes's commentary but also provides a good introduction to the specifics of Strauss's approach to the study of Islamic philosophy.

Chapter 2 of this study is dedicated to the interpretation of another transcript found among the Leo Strauss Papers, also included in this volume as Appendix B. Entitled "1001 Nights," the transcript contains detailed notes on many of the stories included in the Calcutta II version of the *Arabian Nights*.⁵ For several generations, scholars of the *Arabian Nights* have directed their attention mainly toward questions regarding the sources and origins of the stories included in the *Arabian Nights*, as well as the study of their strictly formal characteristics. When not engaged exclusively with the literary study of the *Arabian Nights*, most scholars tend to read this remarkable document of Arabic thought to obtain information about the common mentalities and beliefs of the medieval and

³ Leo Strauss Papers, box 18, folder 17, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

⁴ Steven Harvey, "The Story of a Twentieth-Century Jewish Scholar's Discovery of Plato's Political Philosophy in Tenth-Century Islam: Leo Strauss' Early Interest in the Islamic *Falāsifa*," in *Modern Jewish Scholarship on Islam in Context: Rationality, European Borders, and the Search for Belonging*, ed. Ottfried Fraisse (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2018), 223n14; Tamer, *Islamische Philosophie und die Krise der Moderne*, 47n24.

⁵ Leo Strauss Papers, box 20, folder 2, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

early modern Islamic societies. Unlike many of these studies, Strauss has offered a remarkable theologico-political interpretation of this famous Arabic text. In his notes, composed sometime after 1959, Strauss concentrates exclusively on the teachings of the stories included in the *Arabian Nights*, and reads the text as a coherent, carefully crafted whole rather than as an anthology of unconnected tales. A table of concordance of the stories discussed in Strauss's transcript and in common editions of the *Arabian Nights* is provided as Appendix C. As in the case of the transcript discussed in Chapter 1, Strauss's transcript on the *Arabian Nights* consists of brief notes of an often enigmatic character. The points Strauss discovers in the *Arabian Nights* are therefore accessible only by having the text of the *Arabian Nights* as well as Strauss's complete writings in view. This is the method I have followed to present Strauss's intentions in the transcript for readers who otherwise would perhaps not be able to derive the full benefits of reading Strauss's notes.⁶

A detailed analysis of Strauss's first substantial commentary on a writing of Alfarabi, titled "Fārābī's *Plato*," is provided in Chapter 3.⁷ This rather obscure, yet fundamental writing of Strauss contains some of his most important ideas about Alfarabi, his relationship with Plato's philosophy and religion, Alfarabi's view on esotericism, and what he later calls zetetic philosophy.

A detailed examination of Strauss's interpretation of Alfarabi's summary of Plato's *Laws* is the subject of Chapter 4.⁸ Strauss's complex article on Alfarabi's summary, which complements his earlier "Fārābī's *Plato*," has received minimal attention.⁹ The original manuscript of Strauss's article, found among the Leo Strauss Papers, can substantially

⁶ An earlier version of this chapter was published as Rasoul Namazi, "Politics, Religion, and Love: How Leo Strauss Read the Arabian Nights," *Journal of Religion* 100, no. 2 (2020): 189–231. I have made substantial additions to the previous version and entirely revised it for this volume. The table of concordance is also entirely revised on the basis of the identification of Strauss's own copy. I would like the University of Chicago Press for giving me permission to use the paper as the basis of the chapter in this volume.

⁷ Leo Strauss, "Fārābī's *Plato*," in *Louis Ginzberg: Jubilee Volume on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday*, ed. Saul Lieberman, Alexander Marx, Shalom Spiegel, and Solomon Zeitlin (New York: The American Academy for Jewish Research, 1945), 357–93.

⁸ Leo Strauss, "How Fārābī Read Plato's *Laws*," in *What Is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1959), 134–55.

⁹ Daniel Tanguay, "How Strauss Read Farabi's Summary of Plato's 'Laws,'" in *Leo Strauss's Defense of the Philosophic Life: Reading "What Is Political Philosophy?"*, ed. Rafael Major (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 98–116. See also Joshua Parens, *Metaphysics as Rhetoric: Alfarabi's Summary of Plato's "Laws"* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995).

improve our understanding of this text and provide the opportunity for a more detailed commentary: the paragraphs of this manuscript are numbered, and contain headings that are absent in the published version of the article.¹⁰ My interpretation of this article will take these aspects of the original manuscript, as well as Strauss's other writings and correspondence on Alfarabi and his course transcripts, into account. The paragraph headings of the manuscript are provided as Appendix D.

¹⁰ Leo Strauss Papers, box 22, folder 1, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

Acknowledgments

This occasion of the publication of my first book presents an opportunity to acknowledge long overdue as well as recent debts of gratitude. I was first introduced to the thought and writings of Leo Strauss by Pierre Manent, my teacher for many years. In his famous Friday seminar at Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales on Boulevard Raspail, many gathered to experience something that would stay with them for years. Nathan Tarcov gave me the opportunity to go to the University of Chicago as a Richard Schiffrin Research Fellow at the Leo Strauss Center. He was my magnanimous host for two years as I worked on Strauss's unpublished writings and manuscripts. In Chicago I was acquainted with many colleagues, among them Nasser Behnegar, Daniel Doneson, Steven Lenzner, Ralph Lerner, Christopher Lynch, Gayle McKeen, Robert Pippin, James T. Robinson, Bernhardt L. Trout, and Stuart Warner. Their friendship and knowledge have contributed much to my research. I should here particularly mention Svetozar Minkov, whose unsparing and wise advice has been essential during these years. While working on this project I have also benefitted from the excellent guidance of Joshua Parens and his deep knowledge of Jewish and Islamic thought. The association with the Leo Strauss Center also brought me into contact with Charles E. Butterworth, my guide to the world of the *Falāsifa*, and a model of worldliness and scholarship. While in Chicago, I also met Heinrich Meier, who generously supported my desire to come to Munich and to continue work on this project. So much of what is good about this book owes its existence to his deep knowledge of Strauss's thought and writings and his detailed comments on the manuscript. The stay in Munich also provided me with the opportunity to discuss different aspects of this book with Eric Buzzetti,

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Note on Citations

All citations to Leo Strauss's writings, if available, are to the most accessible English translations. When applicable, I have also provided the volume and page numbers of the German edition of Strauss's collected writings. The following abbreviations are used:

- A Followed by page and line numbers of Averroes, *Commentary on Plato's "Republic,"* trans. Erwin I. J. Rosenthal (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Oriental Publication, 1956).
- AN Followed by volume and page numbers of Malcolm C. Lyons, Ursula Lyons, and Robert Irwin, *The Arabian Nights: Tales of 1,001 Nights*, 3 vols. (London: Penguin Books, 2010).
- D Followed by page numbers of Alfarabi, "Le Sommaire du Livre des 'Lois' de Platon," ed. Thérèse-Anne Druart, *Bulletin d'études orientales* 50 (1998): 109–55.
- GS I Leo Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften. Band 1. Die Religionskritik Spinozas und zugehörige Schriften*, ed. Heinrich Meier and Wiebke Meier, 3rd ed. (Stuttgart and Weimar: J. B. Metzler, 2008).
- GS II Leo Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften. Band 2. Philosophie und Gesetz – Frühe Schriften*, ed. Heinrich Meier and Wiebke Meier, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart and Weimar: J. B. Metzler, 2013).
- GS III Leo Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften. Band 3. Hobbes' politische Wissenschaft und zugehörige Schriften – Briefe*, ed. Heinrich Meier and Wiebke Meier, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart and Weimar: J. B. Metzler, 2008).

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- SNA Followed by page and paragraph numbers of Strauss’s notes on Averroes’s commentary on Plato’s *Republic*, here Appendix A.
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