

A Critical Investigation of the Platonic Influence on Early Arab
Philosophers' Notion of Creative Control

The Waqwaq Way: A Novel

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Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

School of Literature, Drama and Creative Writing
University of East Anglia

June 2020

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the impact of Plato's views on mimesis on early Arab philosophers. Using historical, literary and philosophical methodologies, I examine the development of ideas about art and creative expression from the Quranic period through to the Abbasid age, the second Muslim dynasty. It is argued that in the Abbasid period there was a change from the early Muslims' enthusiasm for philosophical inquiry and artistic freedom in the secular space. My research traces the circulation and influence of Platonic ideas, especially on Al Farabi, who is considered the Arab world's most original thinker. The thesis draws upon existing historical scholarship on Islam's early period and commentaries on Platonic philosophy and Islamic philosophy and theology and also takes into account the changing attitude to images within the larger regional context of the eastern Mediterranean. Al Farabi's writings show that ideas about controlling creative expression were in circulation in the mediaeval Arab world. Among Muslim philosophers, Al Farabi hewed most closely to Platonic principles, formulating a political philosophy that naturalised Plato's imaginary ideal state for the world to which he belonged. Like Plato, Al Farabi argued that creative expression should support the ideal ruler of the ideal state. I suggest that Al Farabi was the point at which Platonic ideas influenced the way Muslim thinkers responded to creative expression. The creative work, *The Waqwaq Way*, engages with the critical investigation in several ways. The framing narrative is the Worldwide Conclave of the Faithful, a first in Islam's history. The Conclave discusses the state of Islam and the daring prospect of "un-reform" or the reversal of puritanical measures. One of the novel's main characters is an admirer of Al Farabi's intellectual prowess. And the mediaeval Inkwell, the fount of every story ever told, provides guidance on the argument about creative expression.

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Acknowledgements

Without Giles Foden, I would never have embarked on this journey. Without Anshuman Mondal, I would not have been able to navigate it. The wisdom and guidance of both my supervisors is the reason I have been able to research and write this thesis. I am deeply indebted to Professor Foden and Professor Mondal.

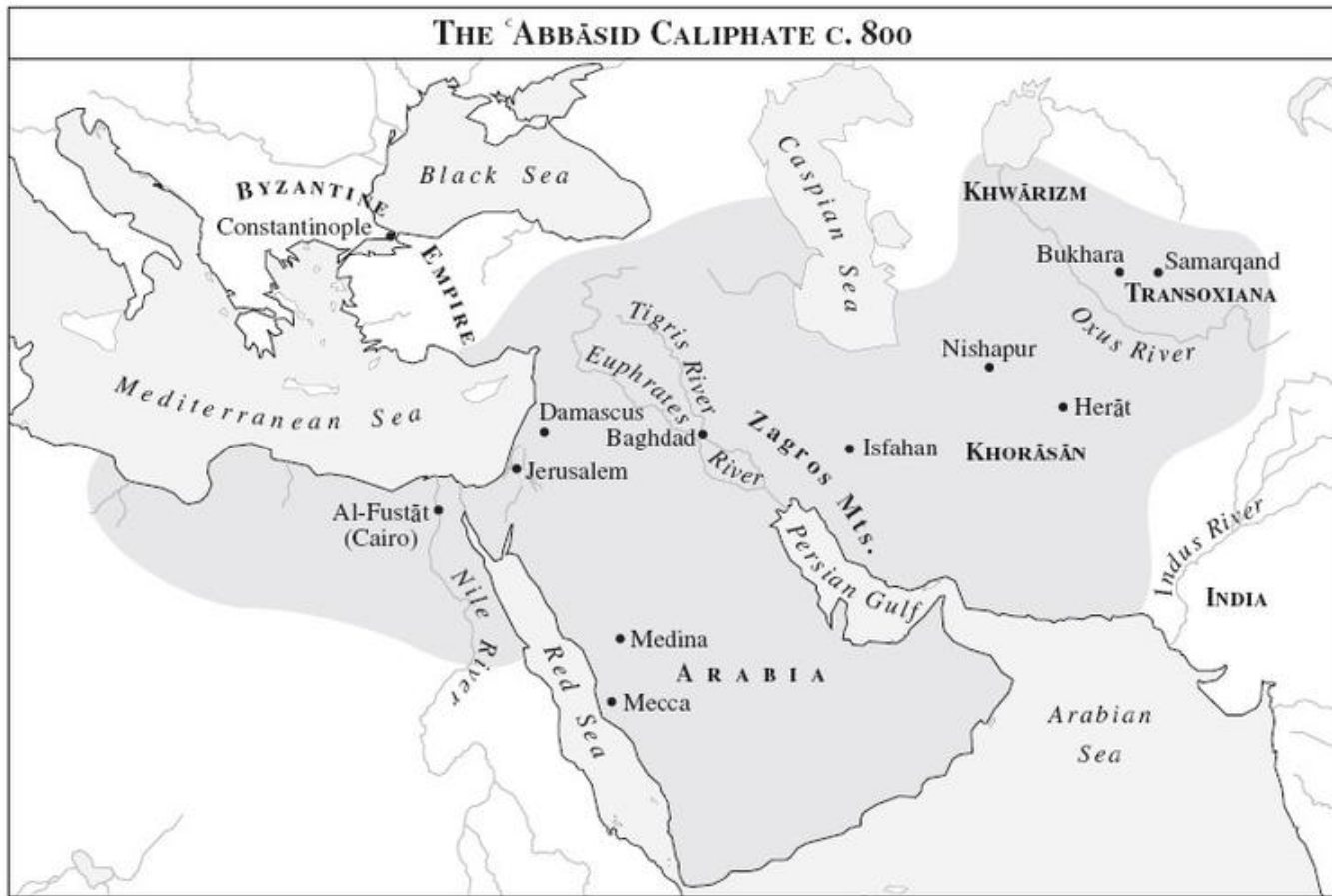
A CRITICAL INVESTIGATION OF THE PLATONIC
INFLUENCE ON EARLY ARAB PHILOSOPHERS' NOTION
OF CREATIVE CONTROL

Timeline of early Islamic history

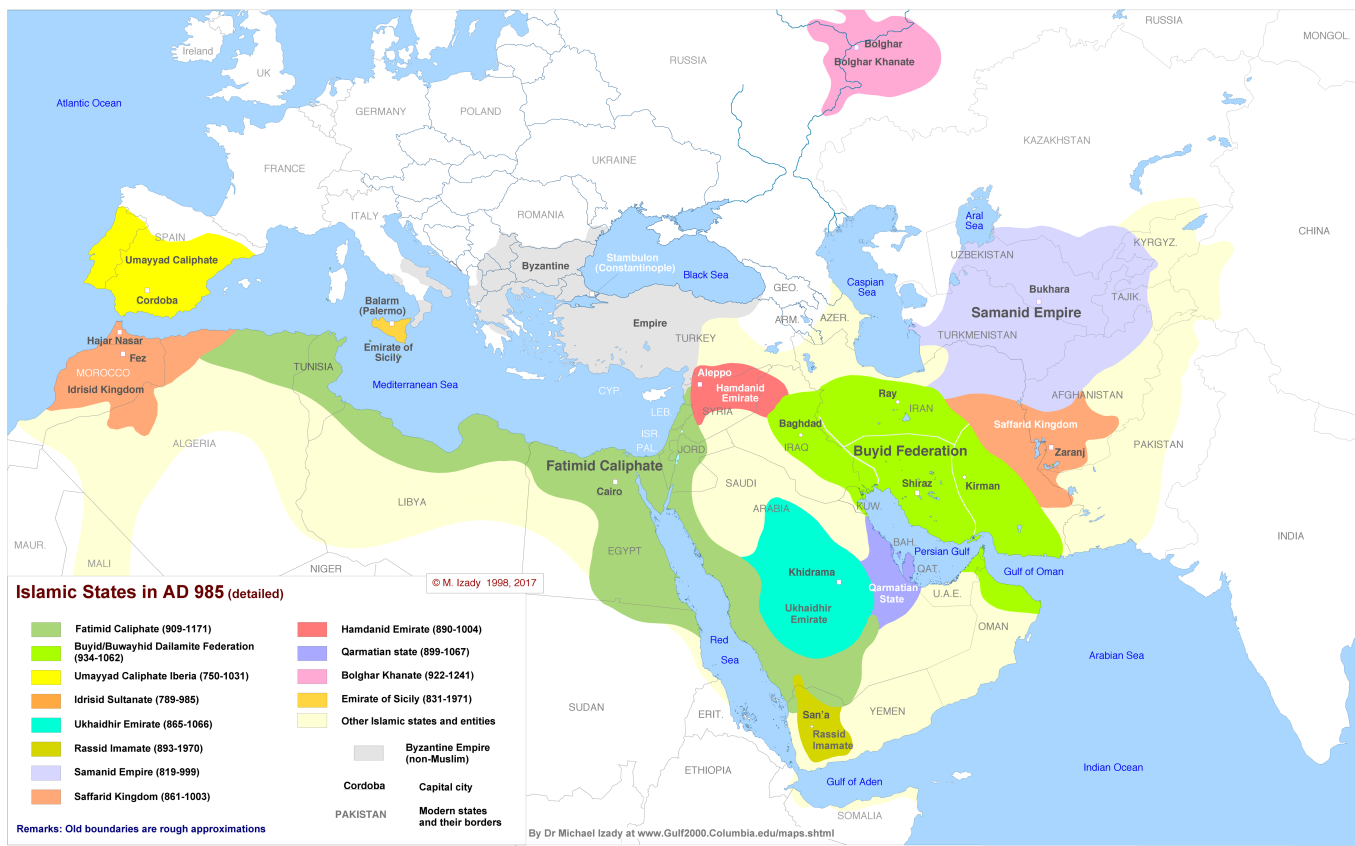
622 A.D.	Start of the Islamic calendar
632 A.D.	Death of Prophet Muhammad
632-661 A.D.	The Rashidun (rightly-guided) caliphate
	– 632-634: Abu Bakr
	– 634-644: Umar
	– 644-656: Uthman
	– 656-661: Ali
661-750 A.D.	Umayyad caliphate
750-1258 A.D.	Abbasid caliphate



Before the founding of Islam. Map by Thomas Lessman, available for free at www.WorldHistoryMaps.info



Hylton, Raymond Pierre. 2018. "Reign of Hārūn Al-Rashīd". Salem Press Encyclopedia, 2020
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INTRODUCTION

The immediate provocations for this study were news events in the years 2015 and 2016. I have been a journalist for most of my adult life and was following closely as Muslim gunmen killed the writers, editors and illustrators of *Charlie Hebdo*, the French satirical magazine, and the extremist group ISIS smashed statues and demolished architectural structures in Syria, Iraq and Libya. ISIS and the *Charlie Hebdo* attackers seemed to be making the same point as the late Ayatollah Khomeini, leader of the Iranian revolution of 1979, when he imposed a death sentence by *fatwa* on novelist Salman Rushdie for writing *The Satanic Verses*. That point is as follows: creative expression can and must be controlled in the name of Islam. Anything else would be licence for blasphemy, heresy and idolatry.

The *fatwa* and the shattered statues seemed to elevate strict controls on representation to a core belief of Islam. Critics and apologists alike took it as a given that Islam was inherently opposed to representation and that the proscription somehow derived from Quranic authority or the words or actions of the Prophet Muhammad. But little evidence was offered of this. No one was able to quote a Quranic *surah* that explicitly forbade figural representation or encouraged the censorship of writers and artists. The Prophet's words and actions too did not clearly and always oppose all representation. He preserved a painting of the Virgin Mary and infant Jesus when clearing out idols from the pre-Islamic pagan shrine of the Kaaba, for instance. A number of Hadith or Traditions of the Prophet were offered in support of anti-imagism, but these could hardly be considered binding or the ultimate proof of an inherent Islamic hostility to representation, figural or through the written word. If anything, the interpretation that Islam is opposed to representation seems closer to a quite different source – Plato's justification for controlling poetry and various forms of representation in Athens in the fourth century B.C.

This raises a key question: was there a Platonic influence on Muslim notions of artistic creativity? If so, how and when did it come? As is the way of the twenty-first century, I Googled the question, but the search turned up no answers. To investigate the matter further, I had to begin a long journey. At the outset, it seemed absurd and fanciful to think that Plato, the western world's preeminent philosopher, might have provided the rationale for modern Islam's violent attempts to control

representation. But there was too neat a dovetailing between Plato's argument for controlling poets and other artists and that of recent Islamist fundamentalists.

The development of attitudes towards artistic creativity in the early centuries of Islam established a frame that largely persisted despite historical variations and developments over the next several centuries and into the present day. These attitudes were, in fact, rather *laissez faire*, except for the sacred space – mosques and shrines. There was nothing to suggest an inherent Islamic hostility to representation and still less any textual authorisation for attempts to control representation through the written word. The emergence of proscription of representation in Muslim lands was patchy and tended to aniconism rather than iconoclasm.¹ My investigation also had to address the role played by Arab philosophers in the Muslim faith's development. First, there were the Mutazilites, proto philosophers of Islam, who debated the oneness and justness of God. Then there was the Greek-to-Arabic translation movement, which sought to import knowledge from another culture. Much of the imported knowledge was practical – in the fields of medicine, astronomy, the sciences and so on – but some of it was more esoteric and dealt with universal truths, which promoted intellectual debate and inquiry. How might the work of these philosophers have fed into and shaped Islamic attitudes to images and image-building within the larger regional context of the eastern Mediterranean? Could Byzantine iconoclasm, a struggle that started in the early seventh century and continued for more than a hundred years, have played a role in Muslims' growing opposition to representation? But the Byzantines were preoccupied with figural images and their worship, not with those created by the written word. The Muslims seemed to have learnt nothing from the Byzantines in this regard. So, where did the move to control the written word come from?

It is apparent that Al Farabi, routinely described as the Arab world's most original thinker, had hewed most closely among Muslim philosophers to Platonic principles. He had used Hellenic ideas to fashion a language of philosophy with

¹ Aniconism and iconoclasm will be discussed at length in Chapter 3. Briefly, aniconism refers to “cults where there is no iconic representation of the deity [anthropomorphic or theriomorphic] serving as the dominant or central cultic symbol...” (Mettinger, 2013: 19)

“The term iconoclasm carries many meanings—from a period in Byzantine history, via a set of events that are meant to have occurred at that time, to a form of activity involving damage to images at any time and place in human history”. (Elsner, 2012: 368-394)

Muslim characteristics. What's more he wrote copiously about this. Al Farabi's political treatises revealed his debt to Hellenic thinkers, and very particularly to Plato. In *The Harmonization of the Two Opinions of the Two Sages: Plato the Divine and Aristotle, On the Principles of the Opinions of the Inhabitants of the Virtuous City, Civil Polity, Philosophy of Plato, its Parts and the Order of its Parts, Selected Aphorisms*, and *Book of Religion*, Al Farabi addressed the key aspects of Platonic philosophy – communitarianism, virtue, justice, the ideal ruler, and the need to use reasoning to justify actions and opinions in a belief system (Al Farabi, 2001). Al Farabi believed the task of building a “virtuous city” required the control of images evoked by the word. In this he followed Plato's prescriptions in the *Republic* for the ideal state. I seemed to have found an answer to my question: it does indeed appear that Al Farabi was the point at which Plato most obviously influenced Muslim notions of artistic creativity. In his work, two cultures – nearly a millennium apart and in very different geographies – met in agreement. That meeting of minds between Al Farabi and Plato was probably one of the most significant across the ages. It has cast a long shadow, which we live with today.

But Al Farabi's legacy – with respect to controlling the word as per the Platonic prescription – has found almost no explicit mention in scholarly writings. Majid Fakhry writes in reference to *Philosophy of Plato, its Parts and the Order of its Parts*, that Al Farabi addresses Plato's inquiry: “...whether poetry, the art of versification or the faculty of reciting poetry, as well as understanding the meaning of poetic odes and the maxims they embody, can yield genuine knowledge or contribute to the pursuit of a virtuous mode of life. He [Plato] concludes in the *Ion*, we are told that the common poetic method is far from being able to lead to the attainment of these two goals, the rhetorical and the practical, but rather the contrary”. (Fakhry, 2002: 18) Fakhry goes on to say: “Al Farabi, however, does not dwell here or elsewhere, as far as we know on this critical assessment of the nature of poetry by Plato”. (ibid.) In his commentary on Al Farabi's summary of Plato's *Laws*, Fakhry does, however, write the following: “The lawgiver should thus regulate pleasurable pursuits, such as music and dancing, encourage whatever actions conduce to virtue and discourage whatever is conducive to vice”. (23) And Fakhry says in his Conclusion that Al Farabi was “a major link in the transmission of Greek philosophy to the Arab and Muslim worlds”. (151) But then he states: “The influence of Plato on

Al Farabi's thought is almost exclusively limited to his adoption of a utopian political model, in which the perfect state is made to correspond to the Islamic (Shiite) polity, in which the philosopher-king is identified with the Imam, and to some extent the Prophet". (152) We do not come away with the idea Al Farabi made common cause with Plato on control of writers.

Peter Adamson (podcast series) too has noted Al Farabi's debt to Plato, not least in the idea of a "virtuous city" somewhat like Plato's ideal state, his belief in a philosopher-king and the way revelations are received and processed by a prophet-ruler. While others have noted links between Plato's thought and Al Farabi's on many different levels, there is no explicit acknowledgement anywhere of a direct link between Muslim intolerance of views expressed by writers (which is to say, representation by the written word) and Plato's influence on Al Farabi. This prompts an urgent re-examination of whether the influence was real and meaningful. A re-reading of Al Farabi's *Selected Aphorisms* (2001) provides a substantial answer. Al Farabi was very clear about the need for "praiseworthy poems" and "virtuous" writing in the service of the ruler of the "virtuous city". He was also, like Plato in Book X of the *Republic*, intent on establishing an hierarchy of the arts. And he was resolute, like Plato, that bad communicators be "amputated". Bad communicators are those who portray bad things, which as Plato's Socrates said, engenders "laxity of morals among the young". Al Farabi writes: "...when a part of the city is touched by corruption of which communication to others is feared, it ought to be ostracized and sent away for the improvement of those remaining". (Al Farabi, 2001: loc 484) It was stirring stuff and almost seemed like a directional signpost from the mediaeval past of how Muslims' attitude to creative writing should develop.

In a sense, Al Farabi's rationalisation of creative control anticipates Khomeini's *fatwa*, ISIS's smashed statues and the attack on *Charlie Hebdo*'s editorial staff, as well as several other iconoclastic acts. But he is not cited in this context and his inspiration – Plato – is not mentioned either. Why?

There are two possible reasons. One, as Fakhry says, is that "Al Farabi has received very little attention in our time". (Fakhry, 2002: 5) In the West, discussion of Islamic philosophy has largely focussed on Avicenna (Ibn Sina) and Averroes (Ibn Rushd), with some mention of Al Ghazali and Ibn Arabi as well. Al Farabi is much

less known though he shouldn't be. In addition to that, Plato's influence on the Arab world is often ranked as much lower than that of Aristotle. This may have been true in one respect – Aristotle was widely read, and anything the Arabs translated could reliably be said to have a market if Aristotle's name was slapped on it. Accordingly, Arabic translations from Greek texts were sometimes inaccurately credited to Aristotle.²

Second, it does seem audacious to claim Plato as the inspiration for a violently iconoclastic interpretation of Islam via a tenth century Arab philosopher. In some ways, it could be said to give Islam a pass, seeming to shift the blame from Islamic interpretations to ancient Greek philosophy. This would leave Islam somehow redeemed and less responsible for those who claim to act in its name. But none of this can obscure a basic truth, which is evident from reading Al Farabi's words. He described Plato as “the Divine”, was heavily influenced by his arguments and incorporated these into his own view of managing the political project of Islam.

Al Farabi's writings show that ideas about controlling creative expression were in circulation in the mediaeval Arab world. It would be simplistic to say he was the single cause for those ideas becoming entrenched as Islamic orthodoxy. However, Al Farabi's work does provide evidence of the convergence of philosophy with ideas popular in the eastern Mediterranean at the time. Just as Islam was making its mark as a regional force, the Christian Byzantine empire next door was engaging in iconomachy, a struggle about the appropriate use of images on both the political and ecclesiastical levels. Developments in the Muslim caliphate do not reveal any direct or indirect influence of Byzantine iconomachy, but Christian iconophiles often identified Islam with trends injected into Byzantine life. It's fair to say that images – their use and veneration, or not – became one of the symbolic struggles between the Byzantine and Muslim rulers even as their armies faced-off on the battlefield. As Jas Elsner puts it, a “visual discourse” pervaded the “competition for imperial authority and religious doctrine (both within Christian factionalism and between Christianity and Islam)”. (Elsner, 2012: 376) There was a “polemic of images” on coinage between a Muslim caliph and a Byzantine emperor and by the end of the seventh

² Al Farabi refers to the *Uthulugia*, or *Book of Divinity*, “a spurious compilation of Plotinus's *Enneads IV, V and VI*, wrongly attributed to Aristotle”. (Fakhry, 2002: 151)

century, the Byzantine empire forcefully differentiated itself from the Muslim caliphate by means of a theological justification of icons and religious images. (374) Clearly, the issue of images was a charged, multi-faceted and geopolitically significant one in the eastern Mediterranean from the late seventh century.

One final point is worth noting. The eventual effect of his philosophical endeavours would probably have horrified Al Farabi. He was, by all accounts, a thinker who was a dreamer and his dreams included something far more ambitious than Plato's imagined city state. Al Farabi envisaged "a world state under a philosopher-king who is at the same time a prophet and a legislator". (Walzer, 1962: 244) This derived from Al Farabi's conception of a universal religion with many forms "of symbolic representation of ultimate truth". (20) The irony is that Al Farabi's idea of writers following the approved narrative, which most clearly joins his political philosophy with that of Plato, does not seem to have proved a social good for Muslims. Instead, it enabled the move to control creative expression and deny legitimacy to new interpretations within Islam.

In the first chapter, I examine the development of ideas about art, creativity and intellectual enquiry from the founding of Islam in 622 A.D. to the Abbasid age, the second Muslim dynasty. In the Islamic world, the Quran was seen as a literary marvel and it is significant that the Muslims regard a book as their community's most important possession. At the outset, this represented a break with the largely illiterate Arabian past and indicated a new appreciation of writing. Therefore, calligraphy became the non-mimetic medium of choice to represent the new faith even as Muslims developed their own artistic language and style. It's clear that the early Muslims took a relaxed view of art and representation in the secular space. The intellectual debates of the day – for instance, among the Mutazilites – did not revolve around issues to do with representational art but core Islamic concepts such as the oneness and justness of God. Over time, as the new faith grappled with change, philosophers writing in Arabic tried to use Hellenic wisdom to reaffirm the principles of Islamic revelation as well as to make the case for rational deliberation on religious issues. This was one consequence of the hugely expensive translation movement from Greek to Arabic from the mid-eighth to the mid-tenth century. Another was the

Platonic influence on thinkers such as Al Farabi, which would have implications for Islam's attitude to creative expression.

The second chapter looks closely at the Platonic influence on philosophers in the Muslim world, especially Al Farabi. I examine how widely Plato's ideas circulated in the Arab world during the formative period of Muslim philosophy and why they seemed to have so powerfully impressed Al Farabi. There was their shared temperament – both men cared little about money and creature comforts. But there was also their belief that a philosopher-king, or as Al Farabi called him, the “virtuous ruler” is essential for a political order to achieve human happiness. Perhaps most important of all, like Plato, Al Farabi makes the case for creative expression in service of the ideal ruler. This chapter also considers Al Farabi's influence on Muslim thought, not least the philosophical blurring of the lines between religion and politics in order to achieve the perfect political order.

In the third and final chapter, I explore the wider cultural developments in the eastern Mediterranean after the coming of Islam. Were the Christian Byzantines influenced by Muslim aniconism and did Byzantine iconoclasm influence Muslim attitudes to representation? In fact, the Byzantine debate on the rights and wrongs of religious imagery was one that had existed in some form or other from early Christian times. And such forms of representation were not a pressing issue for the early Muslims. The issue of images was viewed very differently by Byzantium's Christian rulers from their counterparts in the Muslim caliphate. For Muslims, the lack of figural image had become an image of Islam. They knew the power of the word, whether attributed to God or from Hellenic thinkers and experts. It's clear that Al Farabi was dealing with the power of representation through the written word and, like Plato, believed that writers had a responsibility to support social order.

CHAPTER 1

THE IDEA OF ART IN THE EARLY MUSLIM PERIOD

An examination of the early Muslims' ideas about art, creativity, reason and intellectual enquiry might sensibly and usefully start with the story of Islam itself. The Quran, the collected form of revelations received by Muhammad from God, means "the recitation". (Graham, 1984: 361) The first word of the Quran, which starts somewhat confusingly at the *surah* or chapter numbered 96, (Weil, 1895: 350) is "read". Clearly, the divine revelations delivered to Muhammad by the angel Gabriel from 610 A.D. embraced, at the outset, at least two methods of communication – recitation and reading. The first is a performance art and the second an exhortation to interpretation.

So, recitation and reading were part of the prescriptions – perhaps almost a solemn requirement – of the new faith. That the Quran was originally meant for recitation is clear from the recurring imperative "*Qul!*" (say) that introduces so many Quranic passages. *Qul* occurs more than 300 times in the Quran's 114 *surahs*. It is a constant reminder that these texts are intended to be recited aloud (Graham, 1984: 364) and that too in Arabic, which had been given "the divine seal of approval" (Adamson podcast, 2013: episode 120) because it is the language of the Quran. In this context it is worth reflecting on the status of the Quran itself, as a work of such exquisite linguistic rendering according to the Meccans who first heard Muhammad's revelations that they considered it to be poetry. (Margoliouth, 1925: 417-449) Taha Hussein has suggested that the Quran itself was the source of all Arabic poetry deemed pre-Islamic rather than the other way around. (Hussein, 1955: 4-18) By that token, the Quran may be seen as the very foundation of literary creativity and of the creative arts in the Islamic world, except that it was not considered by believing Muslims to owe anything to artifice. "The miracle of the Quran (*i'jaz al-Qur'an*) lies in the language itself". (Leaman, 1999: 6) Even though Muhammad disclaimed the power to work miracles, when asked for a sign, he "pointed to the Quran, asserting that men had tried to imitate it but failed". (Tritton, 1951: 21)

Reading the Quran became a reality when the revelations were compiled and organized, first by Abu Bakr, a companion of Muhammad, who became caliph or leader of the Muslims after the Prophet's death in 632. Uthman, the third caliph, made a second recension of the Quran and scholars are generally agreed that this became "the official codex". (Ruthven, 1997: 22) About a hundred years on, in the mid-eighth

century, the Chinese taught the Arabs the art of making paper – the first transfer of knowledge occurring via a Chinese prisoner in Samarqand. (Arnold, 1965)¹ It had “a transformative effect on medieval Islamic civilization, spurring an extraordinary burst of literary activity in virtually all subjects from theology to the natural sciences and literature”. (Bloom, 2001: 12)

Accordingly, it is reasonable to suppose that by the end of the eighth century, the Quran would have been, if not widely, then occasionally available in written form. In any case, the very existence of a book as the most important object in the Muslim world was a revolution of sorts. The holy book was more than a sacred text because believing Muslims held it to be “the speech of God”. (Ruthven, 1997: 21) “The very nature and existence of the Book represented a complete break with the largely illiterate Arabian past”. (Ettinghausen and Grabar, 1987: 22) The early Muslims recognized writing to be the only way that the authentic voice of God could be preserved and transmitted. (Belting, 2011) This is why calligraphy became the greatest of Muslim art forms.²

The Quran on creativity

But what lessons, if any, did converts to the new faith imbibe from the Quran about ways of expression other than recitation and reading (as well as writing)? Not many is the short answer. “On the aesthetics of painting, sculpture and other arts the Holy Book is silent”, write Ettinghausen and Grabar. (1987: 21-22) What it does say about creativity is, however, suffused with ambiguity. The Quran says: “O believers, wine and arrow-shuffling, / idols (*taswir*) and divining arrows are an abomination, / some of Satan’s work; then avoid it”.³ Clearly, “figuration is separate from idolatry, which is not the supreme abomination”. (Besancon, 2000: 77) Unlike the Jewish Torah, the prohibition against figuration is not explicit in the Quran; in fact, it is lumped in with other practices that are to be condemned. The one Quranic passage referring to the creation of a representational object is a statement attributed to Jesus, one of 26

¹ The 19th century American art journal *The Connoisseur* (Sept 1888: 35) wrote about a treatise, titled ‘Arabian Paper’, by one Dr Karabacek of Vienna: “The first paper from linen rags was made in Samarcand, in the year 751. The first paper-makers were Chinese workmen, who as early as 649 to 683 could make paper from the inner bark of certain plants and trees. In 940 paper was first made of linen rags in China. In 794 or 795 the second paper factory arose in Bagdad, and from that time the manufacture spread”.

² So high a value was placed on the art of calligraphy that the Ghaznavid Sultan Ibrahim Ibn Masud (1099) used to send a Quran copied out with his own hand every year to Mecca. (Arnold, 1965)

³ *Surah* 5:90.

prophets named in the Muslim holy book: “Indeed I have come to you with a sign from your Lord; I shall create for you from clay in the form of a bird; I shall blow into it and it will become a bird, by God’s leave”.⁴ The passage is considered to be an injunction on who can create what and why. The clay bird will draw breath as part of “a miraculous event, made possible only through God’s permission and for the purpose of persuading people of the truth of Jesus’s mission, but the act of bringing to life the representation of a living form was the only possible aim of its creation”. (Ettinghausen and Grabar, 1987: 21-22) Therefore, human beings should not delude themselves into imitating the Creator; it is futile, besides being, according to eminent thirteenth century Shia legist Al Hilli, “intrinsically unlawful” (Arnold, 1965: 12). It is important to note that this is an interpretation of a passage; the conclusions drawn are not self-evident and were articulated some considerable time after the lifetime of the Prophet.

A further reflection on the Quran’s relationship to poetry may be pertinent here. It has been noted that even though Arabian monarchs composed “their inscriptions in their own languages and dialects, the verses in which, according to the Moslem archaeologists, they frequently indulged were in the Arabic of the Quran”. (Margoliouth, 1925: 421) This suggests that the Quran itself is considered the legitimating foundation of the pre-eminence of poetry and the literary arts in Islamic societies.

Traditions of the Prophet

If the Quran offers limited guidance on creative pursuits and the plastic arts, various Hadith or the Traditions of the Prophet set up quite a cacophony on the subject. Not all the Hadith, which are really just anecdotes about what the Prophet said or did, are considered sound or authentic.⁵ This is because Hadith were not strictly “historical” but were considered to “preserve some material on the thinking of Muslims, if not precisely in the age of the Quran”. (Burton, 1994: 181) However, two oft-quoted Hadith on iconography have the Prophet declaring “An angel will not enter a house in which there is a dog or a painting” and “Those who make these pictures will be

⁴ *Surah* 3:49.

⁵ Six collections of Hadith came to acquire canonical status, of which two – the *sahihain* or ‘two sound ones’ of Al Bukhari (d. 870) and Muslim Ibn Al Hajjaj (d. 875) – are considered second in importance only to the Quran. (Ruthven, 1997: 40)

punished on the Day of Judgment by being told ‘make alive what you have created’.” (Irwin, 1997: 80-81) Hans Belting cites Rudi Paret on as many as 180 variations of the anecdotal “tradition” of prohibiting images. For instance, the Prophet ordered his wife to take down a curtain with images on it but had no problems with the same fabric being turned into a cushion cover. It was said that angels wouldn’t enter a house in which there are pictures unless they are merely decoration. Or that they wouldn’t enter if a house had a dog or a picture of a living creature. Or that the prohibition applies only to three-dimensional images that cast a shadow. Robert Irwin also notes that some Hadith suggest a limited tolerance of figurative imagery. (ibid.)

Further confusion ensues from some of the stories about the Prophet’s actions when confronted with representational art that go against Islam’s monotheistic basis. He is said to have destroyed all the images of gods in the pre-Islamic pagan shrine of Kaaba, but allowed a painting of the Virgin Mary and infant Jesus to remain.⁶ Ibn Sad, a companion of the Prophet, told a story about Muhammad’s last illness, which illustrates the ambiguity about representational art. Two of the Prophet’s wives had been to Abyssinia and were struck by its ecclesiastical art, upon which “Muhammed explains that it is the custom of the Abyssinians when a holy man dies, to build a house of prayer over his tomb and paint such pictures in it”. (Arnold, 1965: 6) The Prophet adds, or perhaps, says Arnold, “the traditionist puts the remark into his mouth, that such people are most wicked in the sight of God”. (7) The boundaries are further confused by the fact that the Prophet’s child bride Aisha was known to have played with dolls, so theologians allowed them as toys for little girls.⁷ Theologians also allowed the use of puppets in the shadow plays popular in Turkey, Egypt and Tunisia.⁸

In the years immediately after the Prophet’s death, his companions and close associates were said to be fairly relaxed about figural representation on items of personal and domestic use. Umar, the second caliph, used a censer with figures on it,

⁶ The Kaaba painting perished in 683 when a fire destroyed the building. (Arnold, 1965: 7)

⁷ One of the more unusual duties of the *Muhtasib*, “a kind of police officer and censor of morals”, was to check that dolls “were of such form and design as suitably to serve the purpose of encouraging the maternal instinct, but not of such verisimilitude as to serve as temptation to idolatry”. (Arnold, 1965: 13)

⁸ Theologians said that “since a hole had to be made in each figure in order that it might be suspended from a string and since the hole went right through it in a manner that would have been quite impossible in the case of a living human being, there was therefore clearly no irreverent or presumptuous attempt made here to rival the creative activity of God”. (Arnold, 1965: 14)

which he had brought from Syria. (Arnold, 1965)⁹ He subsequently gifted it to a mosque in Medina. In the home of Ibn Abbas, who is cited as an authority in support of the authenticity of Hadith, a visitor saw a chafing dish with figures on it. (ibid.) Marwan Ibn Al Hakam, a governor of Medina who is considered one of the Prophet's companions, had figures in his house. (ibid.) Al Tabari, the ninth century historian, describes a thanksgiving prayer held by Sad Ibn Abi Waqqas, one of the earliest converts to Islam, after the 637 battle of Ctesiphon. The Arab Muslim army had captured the Sasanian capital and the prayer was held in a Sasanian palace, with Waqqas paying no heed to the figures of men and horses on the walls. (ibid.)

Stories are even told of pictorial representation of the Prophet. One of the earliest features in historian Al Masudi's *Muruj adh Dhahab*. An Arab merchant named Ibn Habbar travelled to China in the ninth century and described an audience with the Emperor of China. The Emperor asked the merchant if he would like to see a picture of the Prophet. "An officer of the court brought in a box containing portraits of the Prophets of Islam, e.g. Noah in the ark, Moses with the Children of Israel, Jesus seated on an ass accompanied by the twelve Apostles and Muhammad on a camel surrounded by his Companions". (Arnold, 1965: 92-93)

Art, in its context

Within thirty years of the Prophet's death, art and creative expression took parallel paths depending on the context for which it was intended. There was art for the secular space, such as the palaces and bathhouses of the Umayyads (661-750), the first Muslim dynasty. And there was the art considered appropriate for religious spaces – mosques and shrines such as the Dome of the Rock (completed in 691), the first monument of the new faith. Oleg Grabar (1987) sees both as *tropaia*, symbolic appropriations of the territory conquered by the new faith but there were obvious – and deliberate – differences in the decoration used for the Dome of the Rock and say, an Umayyad desert palace. The denial that there was any distinction between creative works for secular and religious spaces appears to be a later development, to which I will return in due course.

⁹ Citing the tenth century Persian explorer Ibn Rustah's *Bibliotheca Geographorum Arabicorum*, Vol. VII.

The evidence for a more freewheeling attitude to art in the secular space comes mainly from three Umayyad palaces – Qusayr Amra in present-day eastern Jordan, Qasr Al Hayr West southwest of the Syrian city of Palmyra and Khirbat Al Mafjar, which is north of Jericho in the West Bank. These are full of frescoes and sculptures. For instance, at Qusayr Amra, a long-robed prince is shown, enthroned and haloed, an attendant with a flywhisk standing on one side, while a richly dressed dignitary is on the other. (Ettinghausen and Grabar, 1987) This desert castle also has the well-known Six Kings painting, intended to drive home the victorious advance of Muslim armies and the shrinking authority of six potentates – the emperor of Constantinople; the king of Persia; the last of the Sasanian house Yazdagird III; Roderic, last king of Spain’s Visigoths; the Negus of Abyssinia and two figures whose identity is uncertain. (Arnold, 1965) Some faded erotic scenes at Qusayr Amra indicate that the Umayyad rulers did not allow the strictures of faith, in whose name they ruled and conquered territory, to interfere with their private pleasures. (Ettinghausen and Grabar, 1987)

On the façade of Qasr Al Hayr West stands a crowned man dressed in Sasanian style. (ibid.) At the gate to the bathhouse of Khirbat Al Mafjar is a prince, dressed in Sasanian clothes, with two lions as his companions. (ibid.) The dome of a small room near the main bath hall has six human heads in a flower, supported by four winged horses and a procession of birds, which may have had “some kind of cosmic symbolism”. (61) Khirbat Al Mafjar is also rich in animal sculpture – partridges, goats, winged horses, monkeys, rabbits and pig-like animals. (ibid.)

The Abbasid dynasty (750-1258), which followed the Umayyads, also used the same sort of exuberant figural art in the decoration of palaces and houses. In continuation of the Iranian and Umayyad practice, “the walls of almost every house and every room in the palaces were covered with decorated and painted stucco (in addition to occasional marble panels)”. (102)

The Abbasid caliphs completed three major secular projects – the founding of the cities of Baghdad in 762, Raqqa in 772 and Samarra in 836. These monuments to their reign had striking examples of figural art. In the centre of Baghdad, for instance, atop a high dome, was a statue of a rider with a lance. (ibid.) It was an unusually prominent form of figural representation in public art, albeit in a secular space. In

Samarra, its original excavator E. Herzfeld found fragments of large murals in dwellings, bathhouses, the domed central hall, the harem, and in Jawsaq Al Khaqani palace. Their pictorial style, with lively animals, is reminiscent of the Persian tradition. One particularly notable fresco has rinceaux inhabited by human and animal figures. (124) The stucco-covered walls of the women's baths in the palace are decorated with paintings. Herzfeld surmises from the fragments that these were of semi-nude dancing girls and musicians and therefore much like the decoration of Qusayr Amra. (Arnold, 1965)

Abbasid caliphs also struck medals with figures, often themselves. Caliph Mutawakkil (847-861), known as persecutor of Christians and Jews and co-religionists he thought to be heretical, had a medal with his effigy on one side, with a man leading a camel on the other. Mutawakkil's indolent great-grandson Muqtadir (908-932) struck a medal that showed him "sitting cross-legged with a cup of wine in his right hand... On the obverse is a musician also sitting cross-legged". (Arnold, 1965: 125-126) This continued in the reign of Muqtadir's son, Radi, (934-940) and of Caliph Muti (946-974).

In the religious space, however, the Abbasids just like their predecessor Umayyads, employed great restraint. The Dome of the Rock, built by the Umayyads, is a good place to start. It followed Christian techniques of construction in its arches, wooden domes, grilled windows, stone and brick masonry. But the mosaics that decorate a vast span of about 280 square metres do not contain a single living creature, a significant change to what might have gone before. (Ettinghausen and Grabar, 1987) Instead, script – the writing running below the ceiling – is used as a decoration. Umayyad Caliph Abd Al Malik's inscription around the inner arcade refers to early datable Quranic quotations, the profession of faith, and exhorts people of the Book to tell the truth about God. This had enormous symbolic significance because the Dome was the first shrine of the new faith. "The monumental textual inscription in the Dome's magnificent interior, adorned with gold mosaics and marble, proclaims an agenda: the absence of representational images has become a program". (Belting, 2011: 61)

Similarly, the mosaics in the Great Mosque of Damascus, built in 707, are devoid of living figures and have large trees instead, an odd substitution until one

takes note of the Islamic theory of creation. Trees and plants are said to lack the “breath of life”, that is the ability to gaze, move and make sounds. (Belting, 2011: 62)

The exceptions among mosques of the early Muslim period were in two places roughly sixteen hundred miles from each other, Bukhara in Central Asia and Kufa in Iraq. In Bukhara, ruled by the Arab Muslim vice-regent Qutayba Ibn Muslim in the early eighth century, the first congregational mosque was built with doors taken as booty from the houses of non-believers. These had figural images of deities carved on them, so their “faces were expunged but the rest of the designs were allowed to stay”, according to Al Narshakhi (899-959), the first known historian of Central Asia. (Ruggles, 2011: 149) In one of the Umayyad mosques in Kufa, the columns were topped by re-purposed looted Persian capitals that featured monsters, heads and other figurative imagery. (Irwin, 1997)

By and large though, in the Umayyad period, as in the Abbasid that followed, mosques were decorated in a sober, non-figural fashion. A mosque in Samarra built under the Abbasid Caliph Al Mutawakkil (847-61) is considered a typical example. So is the Great Mosque in Kairouan, originally built around 670, then re-built in the early ninth century on the watch of the Aghlabid governors who were semi-independent of the Abbasid caliphate. Whatever the Aghlabid politics, they followed the Abbasid grammar of art for the religious space. Decorative themes were subordinate to structural forms and architectural lines were emphasized.

The strict divide between art for the secular space and for the religious may be clearest from Mshatta, an Umayyad desert palace in present-day Jordan. On three of the four walls, animals move amid the carved stone foliage. But on the fourth, the *qibla* wall that indicates the direction in which a Muslim should face in prayer, there is only vegetation, no living creature. (Irwin, 1997)

That Muslim rulers felt an obligation to represent their faith differently from pre-Islamic empires was apparent in two formal acts of state. The minting of coins and the embroidered stamp on *tiraz*, robes officially manufactured to honour courtiers, ambassadors and others. Coinage changed in the late seventh century, more than fifty years after the Prophet had passed. Umayyad Caliph Abd Al Malik (685-705) had his coins inscribed with the phrases “ruler of the orthodox” and

“representative [caliph] of Allah”, starting with gold in 695 and silver in 698. (Elsner, 2012) Until then – it’s worth noting that the Umayyads had been ruling more than three decades when they made the change – the first Muslim dynasty’s coinage had been much like that of the rival Byzantines, with a portrait of the ruler. The changeover for *tiraz* may have occurred at the same time as for coinage. Ibrahim Bin Muhammad Al Bayhaqi, of whom nothing is known except that he wrote a book on etiquette (*adab*) during the first third of the tenth century, gives an account of Caliph Abd Al Malik’s displeasure with the stamp (*tarraza*) in Greek on some paper because it said “Father, Son and Holy Ghost”. The caliph reportedly asked for the “heathen” stamp to be cancelled on “garments, paper and curtains etc...and (had) the manufacturers of paper stamp it with the Chapter of Unity ‘God testifies that he is God alone’.” (Ruggles, 2011: 57-58)

In real terms, the austere new textual stamp on coinage and robes must have had the same effect as the non-pictorial décor of the Dome of the Rock. It had become an instrument of the new faith, for though coins and robes were in the secular sphere, they represented the Muslim rulers and distinguished them from pre-Islamic ones. (Belting, 2011)

Art in daily life

Just as in the secular space, notables of the early Muslim period did not let their faith restrict their enjoyment of domestic objects that artistically (and often, realistically) portrayed living creatures. An Umayyad poet records a curtain of red brocade embroidered with figures of gold in the tent of a royal princess making the pilgrimage to Mecca. (20) Abbasid Caliph Amin (809-813) had boats made in the shape of various animals, such as a lion, an eagle and a dolphin for his pleasure parties on the Tigris. There are multiple accounts of Abbasid Caliph Muqtadir’s (908-932) spectacular tree of gold and silver with twittering birds surely made to seem life-like. The set-up awed Byzantine diplomats visiting to negotiate a difficult deal. Chinese artists were employed by a prince of the Sunni Iranian Samanid dynasty (819-999) to illustrate poems of *Rudagi*, a version of *Kalilah wa Dimnah*, animal tales. (Arnold, 1965)

Yellow bronze incense burners in the shape of a bird of prey were characteristic in the Umayyad period. (Ettinghausen and Grabar, 1987) But one of the most bizarre zoomorphic objects in the hands of a Muslim ruler has to be the gift received by Umayyad Caliph Hisham Bin Abd Al Malik (724-43). It was the jewelled figure of a she-camel on silver wheels, its udders full of seed pearls and its throat filled with rubies. “When its udders were pierced the pearls poured out like milk; when its throat was slit the rubies poured out like blood”. (Piotrovsky and Rogers, 2004: 32)

In the late ninth century, Baghdad maintained a non-judgmental, if open-mouthed appreciation of pagan displays of faith as is clear from the exhibition of a brass statue of a Hindu goddess from India. Al Masudi noted that “the people nicknamed the idol Shughl – ‘a Hard Day’s work’ – because everyone stopped what work they were doing to go and see it during the days it was on view’.” (Irwin, 1997: 229)

The hardening of opinion

Despite the two-track, secular-religious policy on figural art and creative expression, there was a gradual, if patchy, hardening of opinion towards aniconism. A pious Umayyad caliph, Umar Ibn Abd Al Aziz (717-720) had a picture he found in a bathroom rubbed out and declared that he would have the artist “well beaten” if he could find him. (Arnold, 1965: 46) Yet another Umayyad ruler, Yazid II (720-24) ordered pre-Islamic pagan relics in Egypt to be destroyed. (Irwin, 1997)¹⁰ In 783, a governor of Medina erased the figures on the censer that Umar had gifted to the mosque in Medina many decades before. (Arnold, 1965)¹¹ Abbasid Caliph Muhtadi (869-70) ordered the paintings in Samarra’s Jawsaq Al Khaqani palace to be destroyed. (Irwin, 1997: 89) Mahmud of Ghazni (998-1030) sent officials to inspect a pavilion that his son was said to have decorated with paintings from Arabic or Persian versions of the Sanskrit erotic manual *Kamasutra*. (Arnold, 1965) The high drama

¹⁰ Among the statues destroyed was the so-called idol of the bath of Zabban, public art probably in Alexandria, according to Al Kindi, *The Governors and Judges of Egypt*, ed. R. Guest. (Arnold, 1965: 85)

¹¹ The governor “apparently could not tolerate what the most devoted Companion of the Prophet, the revered model for later generations, had regarded with indifference”. (Arnold, 1965: 9)

ended rather tamely. The errant son got wind of the impending inspection and had the paintings erased.

So, the question is why this happened and where ideas that sought to justify the erasure of the secular-religious distinction might have come from. Arnold and Irwin posit that it was part of a trend from before the rise of Islam. “The drift away from representational art and a corresponding preference for geometric and stylized vegetal decoration” had already begun in sixth century Byzantine art, as artists made less use of portraiture and depicted human figures, if any, as “types” rather than real people. (Irwin, 1997: 22) Arnold (1965) sees it as a “reaction against the naturalism and verisimilitude of Hellenic art, which had been manifesting itself in the Nearer East for some time before the rise of Islam”. (9) This notion of a trend may go some way towards explaining a reported outbreak of iconoclasm against Christian images by Armenian priests. (Elsner, 2012) That it is said to have occurred in the Byzantine empire in the late sixth or early seventh century, before the coming of Islam, is significant. As we shall see in Chapter 3, antagonism to images within eastern Christianity was a manifestation of a much older debate. When in 730, Byzantium’s church leaders no less, adopted Islam’s antagonistic attitude towards pictorial art for several decades, they may have been responding to a cultural shift favouring abstract decoration. (Belting, 2011) It may have been accelerated by Islam’s founding and spread but Islam was not the trigger.¹²

There are other theories too about Muslim society’s increased disapproval of pictorial representation of living beings. Arnold (1965) suggests that it reflected “the influence of Jewish converts to Islam”, (10) justifying his assertion by pointing to the large Jewish population in Medina at the time of Hijrah or the Prophet’s migration from Mecca to Medina.¹³ It is true the three clans¹⁴ that dominated Yathrib, the oasis later renamed Medina, had adopted a form of Judaism. However, any Jewish influence on the Muslim attitude towards pictorial representation would not explain

¹² Deborah Freeman Fahid (2018) offers an interesting take. The changing design of chess pieces from figural to more abstract was not simply a religious aversion to figurative forms. “There’s been an assumption this was the result of iconoclasm, and there is probably an element of that. But in a part of the world where making small-scale figural sculptures was not part of cultural heritage, as it was in India, it may simple have been easier to make abstract-style pieces”.

¹³ Eugen Mittwoch’s *Zur Entstehungsgeschichte des islamischen Gebets und Kultus*, Berlin, 1913, illustrated the influence of Jewish prayer and liturgy on Islam. (Arnold, 1965: 10)

¹⁴ Banu Quraiza, Banu Qainuq, Banu Nadir.

why it took so many decades after the founding of Islam to harden, rather than in the formative years when the Prophet interacted with Medina's Jewry.

Perhaps the hardening has a simpler explanation – a cultural shift over time. The Arabs of pre-Islamic Arabia, as Piotrovsky tells it, were used to the colourful Byzantine mosaics they saw in churches and houses in Syria. These were “one of the most important impressions the Arab travellers carried home”. Arab merchants bought Byzantine and Sasanian fabrics “stitched in gold and silver thread depicting fantastic beasts peering out at the spectator...” and Sasanian dishes decorated with “strange beasts, gods and splendid scenes of hunting and feasting rulers”. (Piotrovsky and Rogers, 2004: 18) But with the advent and spread of Islam, the artistic vocabulary of the region started to change, as well as the objects made and sold. Belting asserts that by the time the Islamic religion was fully developed, “Arabic culture was nonpictorial”. (Belting, 2011: 57). Therefore, a fatwa by the scholar Nawawi in the early Abbasid period stated: “the great teachers of our school have determined that painted pictures of every kind of living creature are strictly forbidden and constitute one of the mortal sins”. (65) Nawawi went on to say it is equally forbidden to make any object on which a living creature is depicted, be it hung on a wall or worn on a piece of clothing. In this matter, he declared, there is no difference between what casts a shadow and what does not cast a shadow. Some scholars say non-pictorialism was somehow intrinsic to Islam and “the image becomes inconceivable because of the metaphysical notion of God”. (Besancon, 2000: 78) But it is generally agreed there are “few religious texts from Islamic antiquity that positively advise against representation. They do not have the authority of the Koran”. (ibid.) It would consequently be reasonable to say non-pictorialism was not intrinsic to Islam and the theological justification and legal injunctions followed rather than initiated Muslim cultural practice. As we shall see, Muslim philosophers helped make the arguments for the wider cultural shift to non-pictorialism, which had, in any case, developed a different artistic language to convey the word of God.

Calligraphy, an “image of the word”, made writing the non-mimetic medium of choice. (Belting, 2011: 69)¹⁵ Almost in parallel, an artistic language and style was being developed for the new faith, one that delighted in “ornamental meditation and

¹⁵ The phrase came from Erica C. Dodd and Shireen Khairallah (1982).

aesthetic exercise, which has been called arabesque”. (Ettinghausen and Grabar, 1987: 104) The first and perhaps, according to Ettinghausen and Grabar, the purest, example of arabesque is stucco moulding in Samarra, the city built by the Abbasids. Its characteristics – rhythmic repetition, abstract themes rather than vegetal or animal and symmetry – would go on to define Muslim artistic style.

Why did this new artistic language involve an increasing antipathy to figural representation? Grabar cites French scholar Louis Massignon’s argument that the withdrawal from “a recreation of tangible or visible reality...expressed the impermanence of tangible or visible reality, an alleged tenet of the Muslim ethos”. (Grabar, 1992: 19) Also, not only did calligraphy and arabesque guard against idolatry – a fundamental principle for a monotheistic faith – they served as a means of differentiation from Christianity and an articulation of political strength, especially in the context of rivalry with Byzantium. These considerations increasingly became bound up with philosophical inquiry and reflection. In the process of defending Islam from its detractors, its first philosophers, the Mutazilites, assisted the process of concretizing views on imagery.

A philosophy of faith

Islam faced great challenges in the management of change after the Prophet’s death. Success itself posed a problem. It spread rapidly under the Rashidun, the four Rightly-Guided caliphs who successively took charge after Muhammad – Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman and Ali. As Muslim armies took Islam into Greek-speaking areas populated by Christians and Jews, a balance had to be struck between religious and political control. The balance had to be further fine-tuned as lands where Zoroastrians were numerous came under Muslim rule. (Adamson podcast and book, 2015) The “venture of Islam” (Hodgson, 1974) was testing and bound to be tricky because it sought to develop a common trading area between the Nile and Oxus rivers “based on the shared values of justice and fair dealings under God”. (Ruthven, 1997: 13) In any case, the Muslims themselves struggled with twin questions after the Prophet’s death – the political legitimacy of his successors and religious authority. Who would guide believers and who could be trusted to interpret the Quran? How to solve any problems that might arise, which are not dealt with in the Quran and Hadith?

The Mutazilites pondered these issues as part of *ilm al kalam* or the science of the word. This attempt to understand the word of God is often called Rational Theology. (Adamson podcast, 2013: episode 121) During the early Abbasid period, Islam's second century, the Mutazilites were busy debating core concepts of the new faith, including the oneness and justness of God. It stood to reason, they argued, that the Quran must have been created by God for if it were divine and co-terminus with God, that would go against monotheism. They further said that man must have free will, for a just God could hardly punish him for his sins if he had no choice in his actions. (ibid.)

Mutazilite ideas proved unexpectedly influential in Muslim history, but not exactly in the ways they might have intended. The argument about the 'created Quran' was taken up by the seventh Abbasid Caliph Al Mamun (813-833) and adopted as state dogma. This had less to do with religion than with political expediency. Al Mamun faced a crisis of legitimacy having been linked to the first regicide in Abbasid history, the execution of his brother, the Caliph Amin. (Gutas, 1998) Al Mamun consequently decided to present himself as the Islamic emperor and adopted the title 'God's caliph' three or four years after taking power. He instituted the *mihna* or inquisition to try recalcitrant clerics who refused to acknowledge that the Quran was 'created', an offence that was punished by flogging or imprisonment. He also initiated an imperialist war against the Byzantines to expand Muslim territory.

Alongside this ran a sustained propaganda campaign that portrayed the Byzantines as "culturally defunct" infidels, inferior to Muslims on account of their deliberate ignorance of the ancient Greek sciences, and prone to irrational religious beliefs such as the Christian trinity and the divinity of Jesus. (90) Perhaps most controversially, Al Mamun sought to shore up his authority by arrogating to the caliph the ultimate authority in interpreting Islam. He wanted that the caliph and "an organic intellectual elite (employ) reason, debate, dialectical argumentation...to decide religious questions rather than (by means of) dogmatic statements of religious leaders based on transmitted authority". (82)

In support all of these aims Al Mamun enthusiastically championed the Greek-to-Arabic translation movement of Hellenic texts begun under the second Abbasid Caliph Al Mansur (754-775) nearly eighty years previously and continued by Al

Mansur's son and successor Caliph Al Mahdi. Under Al Mamun, the Greek sciences were even more energetically promoted as "a cultural good" and Islam's superiority over Christians was seen to be "based on the Muslim acceptance of the fruits of the translation movement". (90) Gutas notes that Al Mamun's overall policy "enforced a specific religious dogma". (158) In a sense this struck at the roots of the pluralism that had been practiced by Muslim communities in different parts of the empire. In this context, it is worth noting the rebuff suffered by Caliph Al Mansur (754-775) when he tried to centralize control, albeit more gently than Al Mamun. Al Mansur asked Malik Ibn Anas, founder of the Maliki school of law, to have his book *Al Muwatta* adopted as the standard of acceptable Hadith. Malik declined, not wishing to disturb Muslim pluralism in different cities and Al Mansur dropped the matter. (ibid.) But Al Mansur could not have foreseen the social consequences of other policies he was able to put in place, not least the inclusive projection of a Muslim "commonwealth". (62) This resulted in a rise in converts to Islam as well as a rise in hostility towards it from other faiths. Judaism and Christianity felt the effects, so much so that the Melkite church was faced with such a severe decline in knowledge of the Greek language in the Syro-Palestine population that it was compelled to switch to Arabic even for liturgical purposes. (ibid.)

Meanwhile, a sustained and hugely expensive translation movement from Greek to Arabic was underway. Lasting from the mid-eighth to the mid-tenth century, it triggered scholarship in such fields as the sciences, medicine, astronomy, astrology and philosophy, and inculcated a spirit of inquiry in others. Intellectual debate became the order of the day (ibid.) so much so that even the ladies of the Abbasid court commissioned translations of Greek works, not least Caliph Al Mutawakkil's (847-861) slave concubine's order of a book on eight-month embryos. (ibid.) A further result was that philosophers writing in Arabic – the first of whom was Al Kindi (801-873) – tried to use Hellenic wisdom to reaffirm the principles of Islamic revelation. Strenuous attempts to make them agree with each other sometimes worked, often by means of the translators taking "startling liberties" with the Greek texts. (Adamson podcast, 2013: episode 122)¹⁶ The philosopher Al Farabi (870-950), who was called

¹⁶ Adamson uses the phrase "startling liberties" to describe the manner in which Al Kindi Circle dealt with Plotinus's *Enneads*. Plotinus says to understand the First cause or One, take away everything. It is beyond anything we can say or think. But the Arabic Plotinus refers to the One as "the Creator", thus using terminology from the Abrahamic faith.

in the Arabic tradition ‘the Second Master’ (after Aristotle), became “the first system-builder in the history of Arab-Islamic thought”. (Fakhry, 2002: 2) He rationalized Quranic concepts and elaborated on a political model – that he called “the virtuous city” – reminiscent of Plato’s utopian model. The implications of Al Farabi’s work for Muslims’ attitude to creative expression are explored in the next chapter.

The case for rational deliberation and dialectical debate on religious issues may have been harmed by Al Mamun’s draconian implementation – unlike any Muslim ruler until then – of religious orthodoxy. The *mihna*, which continued until 850 under Al Mamun’s brother and successor Caliph Al Mutasim, created a profound resentment against Rational Theology. Such questioning would henceforth be assailed as heresy by traditionists. The Asharite school of *kalam* – founded by a former Mutazilite Al Ashari (d.935/36) rejected the idea of human free will because it cut at God’s omnipotence. The Asharites “endorsed a ‘divine command’ theory of morality, whereas the Mutazilites thought that even God must adhere to certain moral principles”. (Adamson, 2015: 20)

These and other arguments about causes and effects and the relevance of philosophy to believers continued well into the tenth century. (Leaman, 1999) As we shall see in the next chapter, the work of the Mutazalites and other philosophers like them – and the controversies that surrounded them – may have played an important, perhaps even ironic role in the shift away from figural representation.

“Some translations were deliberately not literal because they were made for a specific purpose...” (Gutas, 1998: 146)

CHAPTER 2

THE PLATONIC INFLUENCE ON EARLY MUSLIM PHILOSOPHERS

In the ninth century, Aristotle became “the most widely read Hellenic thinker in Arabic translation”. (Adamson podcast, 2013: episode 123) But even before the translation movement began in Baghdad in the eighth century, picking up its pace in the ninth, Aristotle had an exalted place in the pantheon of Greek philosophers studied by Christian theologians, philosophers and philologists in the eastern part of the Roman empire. This is hardly surprising because the typical syllabus of philosophical learning after 500 A.D. was based on Aristotle’s lecture courses. (Walzer, 1962) “The authors best known to the Arabs were Aristotle and his commentators...(and) a thorough knowledge of Aristotle’s thought, as the late Neoplatonists understood it, is common to all Arabic philosophers from Al Kindi in the ninth to Ibn Rushd in the twelfth century”. (5) One of the first philosophical works available to writers in Arabic was Aristotle’s *Categories* because logic was regarded as the starting point of philosophical thought. (Adamson and Pormann, 2009)

But Plato had enormous influence too. This should not be particularly surprising. As the logician Alfred North Whitehead has said, the history of philosophy is but a series of footnotes to Plato. The remark is quoted so often it has become a cliché and Whitehead was primarily talking about western philosophy. However, it can serve in the context of Arab thinkers too. They also drew on Plato but perhaps less obviously than on Aristotle¹ and their debt has not been properly recorded or widely recognized. But any syllabus that had Aristotle also contained selections from Plato. (Walzer, 1962) In Arabic translation, we find “unknown treatises on Platonic philosophy” along with the obligatory Greek commentaries on Aristotle. (5) “Plato’s *Timaeus*, *Republic* and *Laws* were available and were studied” but there are differing views on this. (ibid.) Some doubts have been raised that a full Arabic translation of the last two ever existed and certainly not by the early tenth century when Al Farabi, one of the Arab world’s most original thinkers, was making his contribution to logic,

¹ The situation of Plato and Aristotle was “markedly different” in the Arabic-speaking world. “Where the works of the latter were carefully translated and retranslated with improvements and commentaries, those of Plato remained shrouded in obscurity – an obscurity which continues to perplex and baffle modern investigators of Platonic influences on Arabic thought. It is a striking fact that none of the dialogues of Plato in an Arabic translation survives from the period which saw the entire corpus (minus the *Politics*) of Aristotle so assiduously collected, collated and translated. Where there sometimes exist two different versions in Arabic of a work of Aristotle, there is no firm, unambiguous evidence of a single translation of the whole or even a substantial portion of a text by Plato. This curious paradox has never been adequately explained although some have suggested that the translators found Plato hard to render in Arabic because of his symbolic and metaphoric language. Another reason given is that while there was a high regard for him in general neither the dialogue form itself nor its relatively informal, conversational method appealed to the Arabic audience”. (Walker, 1994: 5)

political theory, metaphysics and music.² And yet, it's obvious Al Farabi felt he owed an enormous debt to Plato. The very title of Al Farabi's *The Harmonization of the Two Opinions of the Two Sages: Plato the Divine and Aristotle*, shows how these philosophers are ranked by the writer. Al Farabi calls Plato "Divine". Charles E. Butterworth says that Al Farabi may have done so because Plato's teaching, compared to Aristotle's "is closer to what is readily accepted in the community, and a defense of philosophy for the community must therefore be couched in terms that show all of philosophy to follow upon and develop his procedures and explanations". (Al Farabi, 2001: loc 2287)

As we shall see later, there were sound reasons for Al Farabi's inclination to Plato. There was the great political churning in the Abbasid empire in which Al Farabi lived, a crisis of moral authority within the relatively young Islamic faith, and there was Al Farabi's own conviction that political philosophy was the key to the final truth about the human condition. At a more personal level, there may have been an affinity down the arches of the centuries. Al Farabi, who worked in a garden and vineyard in Damascus as a labourer before settling in Baghdad, apparently lived on a frugal diet of water mixed with sweet basil juice and lambs' hearts.³ That he would have found Plato's chosen way of life appealing is hardly surprising. In *The Harmonization of the Two Opinions*, Al Farabi notes "Plato's withdrawal from most worldly concerns, rejection of them, warning against them in many of his statements, and predilection for shunning them". (Al Farabi, 2001: loc 2383) He contrasts this with "Aristotle's involvement with what Plato had fled ...he possessed much property, married, procreated, served Alexander [the Great] as a vizier, and embraced worldly concerns..." (loc 2385) That is not disapproval of Aristotle exactly, but neither is it a ringing endorsement. Fundamentally though, Al Farabi shared Plato's urge to inquire into human perfection and thereby achieve the ultimate goal, human happiness.

² Al Farabi's "brief and idiosyncratic summary of the *Cratylus* in his *Philosophy of Plato* (Rosenthal & Walzer, ch iii; Mahdi, p. 56) does not prove direct knowledge of the text...One is very strongly tempted to assume that he [Al Farabi] never came across a true Platonic text, no matter in what language...This may be taking scepticism too far... Inadequate translations made for erratic modes of assimilation. But it is certainly true that his *Harmony between Plato and Aristotle* displays more direct knowledge of Aristotle than of Plato". (Zimmermann, 1981: lxxx-lxxxii)

³ Professor G. Makdisi on Al Farabi's brown Sufi garb: "People of this kind are often what we may call nowadays militant intellectuals. They accept no one's patronage, they are afraid of compromising their independence by becoming connected with men of wealth and power and prefer to remain self-employed and are content with living on a mere subsistence level". (Walzer, 1985: 4)

Al Farabi and Plato

Al Farabi (d. 950 or 951), the greatest Islamic logician of his day, earned the informal title from the Arabs of ‘the Second Master’ (after Aristotle). He wrote at least four treatises that made specific reference to Plato and/or to his treatment of questions of metaphysics, ethics and politics. These are: *The Harmonization of the Two Opinions of the Two Sages: Plato the Divine and Aristotle*; *On the Principles of the Opinions of the Inhabitants of the Virtuous City*; *Civil Polity* (which includes an *Epitome of Plato’s Laws*), and *Philosophy of Plato, its Parts and the Order of its Parts*.

But did he have access to Arabic translations of Plato? Despite F. W. Zimmermann’s scepticism, there are indications that some of Plato’s works were available in Arabic by the ninth and tenth centuries. A large number of Plato’s 32 *Dialogues*⁴ are reported to have been translated into Arabic – the *Timaeus* and the *Laws* by Yahia Ibn Al-Bitriq and subsequently by Hunayn Ibn Ishaq and Yahia Ibn Adi; the *Crito*, the *Parmenides*, the *Republic*, the *Phaedo*, the *Cratylus*, the *Euthydemus* and the *Sophist* by Hunayn Ibn Ishaq and Isa Ibn Yahia. (Fakhry, 2002) However, “most of these translations have not survived, except for the *Laws*, the *Timaeus*, and fragments from the *Phaedo*, the *Apology* and the *Crito*”. (17)

Whatever the uncertainty over the quantity and availability of Plato’s works in Arabic, one thing at least is clear. There must have been enough translated material or summaries available for Al Farabi to write numerous treatises that draw upon Platonic thought. Al Farabi’s “small work *On Plato’s Philosophy* gives an account of all the Platonic dialogues, arranged in an order both systematically and chronologically different from every arrangement hitherto known: starting with the *Major Alcibiades* and finishing with the *Letters*. With the exception of the *Minos*, all the dialogues to be found in the Alexandrian tetralogical edition are mentioned and characterized”. (Walzer, 1962: 31) Al Farabi concludes his treatise *Philosophy of Plato, its Parts and the Order of its Parts* with a reference to Plato’s *Letters*. His apparent familiarity with the *Dialogues* and *Letters* has excited comment because not all of the *Dialogues* and none of the *Letters* had been translated into Arabic. Fakhry offers a possible explanation, namely, that Al Farabi “had access to some summary in Arabic, which

⁴ In fact, there is some doubt if Plato really wrote 32 Dialogues. “Nowadays, though, we accept only between twenty-five and thirty dialogues as being authentic”. (Adamson, 2014: 107)

listed the works of Plato and discussed them briefly and is now no longer extant; or that he came into contact with some Syriac scholar fluent in Greek who initiated him into the secrets of Plato's philosophy". (Fakhry, 2002: 22)

Platonic thought

What were the secrets of Plato's philosophy? Before we consider their impact on Al Farabi as well as on other Muslim thinkers, it may be useful to delve into some of those Platonic concepts themselves. The Platonic ideas that influenced Al Farabi can be broadly categorized as follows: communitarianism as a social and organizational need; the indispensability of virtue; the choice-worthiness of justice; the need for philosophers to serve as "guardians" or rulers of the ideal state and the necessity to recognize reality only by means of "solid, certified knowledge" rather than the beliefs induced by "unworthy representations of the gods" and "wholly imitative...mimetic art". (Adamson, 2014: 158; Plato, 2012: 166, 174)⁵

Plato emphasized the perils of allowing imaginative artists to tell stories that may be used "in the instruction of the young". Untrue descriptions, his protagonist Socrates declares, "will do harm to our future warriors". (Plato, 2012: 166, 174, 161, 163) Plato does not oppose all representation, only that which depicts vice, the wickedness of the gods and suchlike. His indictment of poetry "is accomplished by way of analytic separation of mimesis as representation from mimesis as performative imitation and audience identification". (Haskins, 2000: 7) Plato distrusted a performance-centred culture and its impact on the audience. His Socrates is clear that it is not just the poets who must be stopped from expressing thoughts that promote "moral deformity" among the guardians and which imperil the young. Other creative artists too must be prevented from depicting moral deformity. (Plato, 2012: 184)

It is clear that Plato sees the truly good as unchanging and seeks to raise the children of the ideal city on an unvarying diet of celebration of that good. Not only must they be innocent of bad things but also innocent of representations of bad things. The dangers of misrepresentation by certain forms and methods of representation are

⁵ Relevant passages from Plato's *Republic* are provided in Appendix A.

a running theme in the *Republic*, as is the interlinked concept of a just and virtuous ideal state. (Blackburn, 2006) Without true representation, by which Socrates seems to mean sticking to an approved narrative in which the gods are perfect, the ideal city will fall into chaos and disorder. Socrates describes the “fault of telling a lie” as “most serious” and says the fault is committed “whenever an erroneous representation is made of the nature of gods and heroes, — as when a painter paints a portrait not having the shadow of a likeness to the original”. (Plato, 2012: 153) That reference to “the original” is significant. For Plato, the divine nature is perfect and unchanging, a transcendent truth always to be portrayed in its “original” form, and woe to any external creative agency that seeks to present it as anything different. In Book II, Socrates declares: “Then it is impossible that God should ever be willing to change; being, as is supposed, the fairest and best that is conceivable, every god remains absolutely and for ever in his own form”. (158) This suggests entrenched opposition to innovation of any sort and sure enough, in Book IV, Socrates issues the following injunction:

This is the point to which, above all, the attention of our rulers should be directed, — that music and gymnastic be preserved in their original form, and no innovation made...any musical innovation is full of danger to the whole State, and ought to be prohibited. (211)

This notion of protecting a transcendent truth from innovation and creative license may have been attractive to Al Farabi considering he was “the first philosopher within the tradition of Islam to explore the challenge to traditional philosophy presented by revealed religion”.⁶ How was demonstrative philosophy to be reconciled with religious discourse without seeming to be an innovative and consequently, possibly dangerous misrepresentation of the word of God as handed down by the prophet of Islam?⁷ As we shall see, Al Farabi tried to resolve the matter by contending that imam or religious guide, philosopher and lawgiver are one and the same (though he does not explicitly allude to Islam or Prophet Muhammad) and that it was Plato and Aristotle who had the idea first. (Butterworth and Pangle, 1962)

⁶ “In the first part of the *Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*—that is, in the *Attainment of Happiness*—he [Al Farabi] seeks to pinpoint the common concerns that link Islam and its revealed law with pagan philosophy in its highest form”. (Al Farabi, 2001: loc 39)

⁷ “Islam, like all religions, is conservative and ‘innovation’ is one name for heresy; yet if a practice or belief has been adopted by the community, it is good Islam”. (Tritton, 1951: 62)

One of Plato's other ideas was to proscribe "bad" representation. Not content just to prescribe in Book II, Socrates lays out the first steps in the creation of an imaginary ideal state: "Then the first thing will be to establish a censorship of the writers of fiction, and let the censors receive any tale of fiction which is good, and reject the bad". (Plato, 2012: 153) And again, he says: "Then we must assume a control over the narrators of this class of tales as well as over the others..." (163) Yet again, in Book III, Socrates says:

...we must come to an understanding about the mimetic art, – whether the poets, in narrating their stories, are to be allowed by us to imitate, and if so, whether in whole or in part, and if the latter, in what parts; or should all imitation be prohibited? (174)

The poets, says Plato's Socrates, must not be "angry" about censorship, which is meant to protect "boys and men who are meant to be free". (Plato, 2012: 164)⁸ One of Plato's chief objections to "bad" representation is that it reduces "sympathy with the beauty of reason", when it is reason that produces the capacity for justice. Justice is, as Adamson notes, the whole point of the *Republic*. Clearly, there is a triangular inter-linked relationship between freedom, reason and justice; without one, there cannot be the other. Socrates' project in the *Republic* "is to establish a city governed by perfect justice. So the ruler will have to be the person who grasps the nature of justice". (Adamson, 2014: 154) This can only happen if the ruler knows how to distinguish truth from untrue representations, because in Simon Blackburn's interpretation of Plato's views, "theatregoers and sightseers live in a dream world...the philosopher...lives in the real world...the philosopher has knowledge, the others have beliefs... Knowledge is infallible and belief is not". (Blackburn, 2006: 89) In other words, the real world is one of reason, not of the senses. This is why Plato further rejects dramatic artistry among the ideal state's guardian class. The principle of

⁸ Al Farabi also made the link between freedom and reason, as well as justice.

The linkage was also more generally accepted at the time. Al Masudi approvingly noted the role of reason in just and well-ordered faraway societies such as the Khazar kingdom, which served as a buffer state between the Byzantine empire and both the nomads of the northern steppes and the caliphate. Pagan law "is the product of natural reason", he wrote, adding that reason was prized by Muslims: "...there are a certain number of Muslim merchants and artisans who have emigrated to this country because of the justice and security with which the [Khazar] king rules". (Lunde and Stone, 2007: 23)

specialization applies – that each person is good for only one thing and a just and virtuous man can and should only voice just and virtuous thoughts.⁹

Reason and virtue allow for the attainment of knowledge, especially of the Form of the Good, the highest principle, the truth on which all other truths are founded. Plato creates two powerful images to illustrate the natural fitness of those with knowledge to rule. In the first image, Socrates says a city may be like a ship. It has a stupid ship-owner and a crowd of sailors, all of whom are seeking to steer the vessel even as they disdain the expertise of the one man onboard who actually understands navigation. The man who should be captain is meant to represent the philosopher, whose superior knowledge fits him to rule the city. The second word picture painted by Plato is the allegory of the cave, “the most popular image in all of ancient philosophy”. (Adamson, 2014: 152) Socrates asks his interlocutors to imagine a group of prisoners chained at the bottom of a cave with a low wall behind them and beyond the wall a fire. The firelight throws shadows on to the wall and the prisoners see their own shadows and those of people carrying “all sorts of vessels, and statues and figures of animals made of wood and stone and various materials” as they pass along the wall. (Plato, 2012: 326) To the prisoners, says Socrates, “the truth would be literally nothing but the shadows of the images”. (327) But what, says Socrates, would happen if one prisoner were freed and made the painful ascent into the outside world, eyes dazzled and unable “to see anything at all of what are now called realities”? (ibid.) The sunlight would illuminate the real things in the world and gradually he would be able to see the “idea of good”. (329) Socrates goes on to admit that “the prison-house is the world of sight, the light of the fire is the sun...and [the prisoner’s] journey upwards to be the ascent of the soul into the intellectual world”. (ibid.) So the freed prisoner is the philosopher and Socrates says he must, in the interests of justice, descend once more into the cave in order to rule. It’s obvious that the ascent from the cave, where nothing real is seen, known, or can ever be known, marks the journey from a fallen world to one where truth and goodness prevail. The reverse journey, back into the fallen world, seems to show that the philosopher must deal with imperfection. He is duty-bound to take charge for only he is fit for the task

⁹ Plato may be basing his view on “a principle of purity: a monolithic view about integrity in the self, seeing pure unspotted integrity as inconsistent with even the temporary ability to act or voice anything other than its own nature”. (Blackburn, 2006: 61)

and as a philosopher-king he must raise up a defective society and establish a city governed by perfect justice. But the allegory of the cave could also be said to offer yet another perspective, and this is to do with Plato's pet peeve – bad representation or images that lie. Adamson points out that the shadows seen by the prisoners in the cave are “shadows of statues; and the statues are representations of the things outside the cave...The shadows are second-hand images of reality”. (Adamson, 2014: 158) Could Plato then be hammering on a point he makes in Book X of the *Republic*, where the creation of a bed by disparate entities is compared and ranked? Could the kinds of creativity – their authenticity deriving from organic closeness to the original – be at issue here, not the actual act of creation? As Socrates says, there is the work of God, the natural author or maker of the bed (its Form or its essence) and there is the work of a carpenter and of a painter. The carpenter is also a “maker”, says Socrates but his bed is a copy of the Form and the painter's bed is a copy of a copy or an image of an image. The painter, therefore, is not a creator and maker but the “imitator”. (Plato, 2012: 433) Adamson suggests that the cave with its flickering shadows and the ascent from it may be “two different ways of seeing one and the same reality” – one, by means of belief, the other with certified knowledge. (Adamson, 2014: 158)

The ascent to the sunlit world and the “idea of the good” was given a religious interpretation by some Christian, Jewish and Muslim philosophers. It was portrayed as a journey to the transcendental world by Philo of Alexandria in the first century, Plotinus in the second, Augustine in the fourth and Boethius in the fifth. (Blackburn, 2006) The allegory of the cave would find resonance in the writings of a tenth or eleventh century group of mediaeval Islamic philosophers the Ikhwan Al Safa or Brethren of Purity,¹⁰ in Basra, present-day Iraq. (Netton, 2009) The writings of the Ikhwan are collated in 52 eclectic Epistles (*Rasail*) and some of their ideas may have come from Al Farabi's writings, which built upon Platonic concepts, as we shall see. As in Plato's allegory of the cave, the Ikhwan have the Simile of the Two Islands. Residents of a harmonious mountain city full of abundant flora and fauna set sail for the wider world. They are shipwrecked on an island of monkeys where a huge bird of prey attacks the monkeys every now and then. The shipwrecked gradually forget their

¹⁰ “...the Ikhwan note that the Prophet claimed in a tradition that Aristotle would certainly have become a Muslim had he lived in the Age of Muhammad”. (Netton, 2009: 109) Despite the reference to Aristotle, the Platonic influence on 44 of the Ikhwan's 52 epistles is striking.

real homeland as “greed, competition, envy and war become commonplace”. (ibid., 116) But one of the shipwrecked returns in a dream to his native land, and on awaking is overwhelmed by sadness. He gets some of his compatriots to help build a boat to return home but is swooped upon by the great bird when the task is on the point of completion. The bird drops the man on the roof of a house in his native city but the shipwrecked on the island don’t know his happy fate and weep for him. Ian Richard Netton says the Ikhwan simile counsels brethren to wake “from the sleep of negligence and the slumber of ignorance”. (117) Like the cave allegory, the Simile of the Two Islands illustrates the difference “between shadow and reality and between hidden private vision of confused sensory perception and the open public vision of an enlightened intellect”. (118) The shipwrecked men could easily be *falasifa* or philosophers, since they have a prior knowledge or *hikma* concerning a better state. (ibid.)

The Platonic soul

Plato also had an influence on the early debate among Muslim theologians over a knotty issue – the unitary nature of the human body. In Islam’s second century, the Mutazilites or school of Rational Theology, “were reluctant to adopt the Greek concept of the soul, which expresses a clear duality between the soul and body”. (Elkaisy-Friemuth and Dillon, 2009: 8) But Al Kindi (d. 870), who is often called ‘the First Philosopher of the Arabs’, assimilated Greek philosophy in a way that reconciled soul-body dualism with the notion of the immateriality of the human soul. To do this Al Kindi ostensibly drew on Aristotle’s *Categories* and explained that the human soul is a secondary substance. His reasoning was flawed, with Adamson and Pormann aghast at the assertion, for instance, that “my soul is the same as my species”. (2009: 98) However, they see Al Kindi’s attempt to argue on both sides and still arrive at one conclusion as a sign “he is straining to demonstrate a standard Platonic doctrine – the immateriality of soul – using rather impoverished Aristotelian materials”. (ibid.) This suggests that Al Kindi was seeking to integrate the Platonic idea of the soul, which had a clear tripartite division, into an analysis that referenced Aristotle. This was an important development in terms of Muslim psychology and philosophy. Until then, “Muslim theologians thought the human to be the body with its different faculties, which will resurrect and be judged with reward or punishment”. (Elkaisy-Friemuth

and Dillon, 2009: 13) But Al Kindi's assimilation of Greek philosophy led them to accept that the human has an immaterial element, which is the soul. Along with Christian and Jewish thinkers, Muslims also agreed that the rational soul is the closest to the divine world.

The notion of the immaterial soul is embraced by Al Farabi, who sees it continuing in the afterlife, in conditions that are set by the actions of the human being before the soul separates from the body. In *Book of Religion*, Al Farabi writes about the "opinions" on religion and notes that these encompass:

the prophets, the most virtuous kings, the righteous rulers, and the leaders of the right way and of truth who succeeded one another in former times; and those that relate what they had in common, what good actions were characteristic of each one, and where their souls and the souls of those who followed and emulated them in cities and nations ended up in the afterlife. (Al Farabi, 2001: loc 1789)

The "opinions" Al Farabi describes also cover the souls of those who commit "evil actions...the most depraved kings, the profligate rulers exercising authority over the inhabitants of ignorant communities, and the leaders of the errant way". (loc 1791) In this manner Al Farabi appears to suggest that bad actions lead to bad ends and good ones to a good afterlife for that key part of the human being, the soul. In *Selected Aphorisms* he writes that "the soul particularly characteristic of the human being, namely the theoretical intellect" is a very particular "state". (loc 968) Addressing the separation of the soul from the body – "that is death", he remarks – Al Farabi asks whether the soul's being united with the body is a "constraint". (loc 955, 957) Would a man who is not wise become wise after the separation of soul from body? Is an evil human being evil only because the soul is united with the body? He doesn't provide a clear answer to the question right away but at various points in *Selected Aphorisms* states his belief that virtue and vice reside in the soul. He writes:

Evils are made to cease in cities either by virtues that are established in the souls of the people or by their becoming self-restrained. Any human being whose evil cannot be made to cease by a virtue being established in his soul or by self-restraint is to be put outside of cities. (loc 396)

There are echoes of Socrates' assertion in Book IV of the *Republic* "that in the human soul there is a better and also a worse principle; and when the better has the worse under control, then a man is said to be master of himself". (Plato, 2012: 221)

Al Farabi notes the soul's persistence as an entity in the afterlife. As to what the soul is exactly, Al Farabi says it has five major parts and faculties – the nutritive; the sense perceptive; the imaginative; the appetitive and the rational. The nutritive covers "digestive, growing, procreative, attracting, retentive, distinguishing and expelling faculties". (loc 307) The sense perceptive faculty "perceives by means of one of the five senses" and the imaginative "preserves the traces of sense perceptions after their absence from the contact of the senses". (loc 320-321) Both the imaginative and nutritive faculties can be active in sleep, he says. The appetitive faculty produces "longing for something, loathing for it, seeking and fleeing, preference and avoidance, anger and contentedness, fear and boldness, harshness and compassion, love and hatred, passion, desire and the rest of the accidents of the soul". The rational faculty is that by which "a human being intellects, carries out deliberation, acquires the sciences and arts, and distinguishes between noble and base actions". (loc 325, 329) Al Farabi's understanding of the soul chimes with that of Plato's Socrates, who says the soul has three parts: reason, spirit, and appetite. All parts have desires, but desire in the appetitive and spirited parts does not arise out of any belief about good or bad.

Just as Plato declares that the principles of a just state can also be found in a "temperate and valiant and wise" individual, Al Farabi extends his idea of the soul to the ideal political order. (Plato, 2012: 227) Butterworth writes:

Al Farabi calls upon Plato and Aristotle in the *Aphorisms* to identify the political order that will achieve human happiness. The individual who succeeds in understanding how a political community can be well-ordered – whether this person is a statesman or a king – will do for the citizens what the physician does for individual sick persons and will accomplish for the citizens who follow his rules what the prophet accomplishes for those who follow his. To attain such an understanding, one must first be fully acquainted with the soul as well as with political life. (Al Farabi, 2001, loc 2231)¹¹

¹¹ Plato also likened the lawgiver to a doctor. In *Laws*, the unnamed Athenian says a legislator should be like a doctor who uses both persuasion and compulsion in treating patients.

And again, he says: “[with the] soul as well as with political life. More precisely, the virtuous political regime is the one in which the souls of all the inhabitants are as healthy as possible: ‘the one who cures souls is the statesman, and he is also called the king’.” (loc 182) Clearly the soul for Al Farabi is a metaphor for the political ecosystem, a carefully calibrated part that is sensitive to stimulus from the guiding force, which is the ruler. It’s worth noting that even though of uncertain authenticity, the prefatory passages of two manuscripts of the work now known as *Selected Aphorisms* make explicit reference to the soul. These manuscripts are in Tehran and their prefatory passages read as follows:

These are the sentences and aphorisms chosen from the science of morals [and] comprise: acquiring the virtues of the human soul, avoiding its vices, moving the human being himself from his bad habits to fine habits, making firm the virtuous city, and making firm the household and the rulership over its inhabitants. They are all brought together in this epistle. (loc 151)

The Tehran manuscripts’ authenticity may be in doubt but what isn’t uncertain is where Al Farabi is going with his emphasis on the soul and its place in a well-ordered political system. The first word of the *Selected Aphorisms* is “soul” and the last is “virtue”. In the 96 aphorisms that separate the two words, Al Farabi first enters upon a detailed examination of the soul and then explains how a well-ordered political system can enable the soul to attain “final perfection...and that is ultimate happiness, which is the good without qualification”. (loc 509)

Al Farabi’s Platonic political philosophy

Some scholars call Al Farabi an Islamic Aristotelian but then go on to note that his political philosophy is also strongly flavoured by Platonism. Indeed, Al Farabi belonged to the Baghdad school of Peripatetics, a group of mostly Christian thinkers who staged a revival of the philosophical activities of late ancient Alexandria by drawing upon texts of the Aristotelian tradition. (Adamson podcast, 2013: episode 129) But Al Farabi’s principal political treatises as well as his epistemology had distinct Platonic elements.¹² How much exactly is clear from *The Harmonization of*

¹² “A predominant strand in al-Farabi’s logic and epistemology is the adoption of a hierarchical interpretation of the syllogistic arts (including rhetoric and poetics), in which demonstration is identified as the proper method of

the Two Opinions of the Two Sages: Plato the Divine and Aristotle; On the Principles of the Opinions of the Inhabitants of the Virtuous City; Civil Polity; Philosophy of Plato, its Parts and the Order of its Parts; Selected Aphorisms and Book of Religion. In the first five he mentions Plato by name; in *Book of Religion* he doesn't. But in each of these works, in varying ways, Al Farabi addresses the key aspects of Platonic philosophy we have already identified – communitarianism, virtue, justice, the ideal ruler, and the need to use practical and theoretical philosophy – which is to say reasoning – to justify actions and opinions in a belief system.¹³

Just like Plato visualized an ideal state, Al Farabi imagines a virtuous city, governed by a philosopher-king. Like Plato, Al Farabi notes the need for specialization of endeavour in the virtuous city. Like Plato too, he creates an hierarchy of occupations, seeing it as the best way to bolster a well-ordered system to achieve the goal of human happiness. And perhaps most important of all, like Plato, Al Farabi makes the case for creative expression in service of the ideal ruler and thence, of the virtuous city and of the status quo. It is this idea of writers following the approved narrative that most startlingly joins Al Farabi's political philosophy to that of the man he called Plato the "Divine".

In considering the sort of ideal society he wants to build, Al Farabi, like Plato, focuses on the affairs of a city. The city is *polis* in the Greek language and the related word *polites*, meaning citizen, gives us politics. Interestingly, the etymology works in Arabic too. Al Farabi's term for political affairs – *madani* – shares the root for the Arabic word *medina*, which means city. Al Farabi is clear about the hierarchy essential in his virtuous city:

There are five parts of the virtuous city: the virtuous, the linguists, the assessors, the warriors, and the moneymakers. The virtuous are the wise, the prudent, and those who have opinions about major matters. Then there are the transmitters of the creed and the linguists: they are the rhetoricians, the eloquent, the poets, the musicians, the scribes, and those who act in the same way as they do and are among their number. (Al Farabi, 2001: loc 701)

philosophy, and all the other methods are relegated to the status of tools for non-philosophical communication". (Black, 2001: 181)

¹³ Relevant passages from Al Farabi's treatises are provided in Appendix B.

It's worth noting that Al Farabi puts the virtuous and the linguists in different categories. In this, he is working slightly differently from Plato who never mentions his equivalent of the "linguists" when dividing up the ideal state into classes. Other than that, the main difference between the parts of Al Farabi's ideal city and that of Plato is numerical. Al Farabi has five and Plato just three major classes – the guardians, who are philosophers, govern the city; the auxiliaries are soldiers who defend it; and the lowest class comprises the producers (farmers, artisans, etc). But Al Farabi seems to be doing no more, in this instance, than to flesh out Plato's three basic categories. Whereas Plato explicitly mentions the wise guardians and the soldiers, and relegates everyone else to the last, lowest class of producers, Al Farabi names the occupations that would surely be in Plato's third category, even if left unmentioned – poets, musicians, scribes, accountants, engineers, doctors, astronomers, farmers, herders, and merchants. All of these would have to be part of any functioning city and Al Farabi simply seems to be recognizing that reality.

Soon after he lists the occupations, Al Farabi, like Plato, stresses the need for specialization:

Each one in the virtuous city ought to be assigned a single art to which he devotes himself and a single work he undertakes, either in the rank of servitude or in the rank of rulership, but not extending beyond it. For three reasons, not one of them is to be left to pursue many works nor more than a single art. (loc 799)

The reasons he offers for specialization are profoundly practical: "It does not always happen that every human being is suited for every work and for every art"; the more often one type of work or art is done, the "more skilled and wiser" does the human being get at it; and finally, a twin focus may be distracting and the time for completion of any one task may "slip away". (loc 801, 803, 807)

This is the context in which Al Farabi makes a conscious attempt to classify different forms of knowledge. With respect to epistemology or the theory of knowledge, Al Farabi ranks lesser modes of cognition – the logical arts, such as dialectic, poetics and rhetoric – relative to the ideal of demonstration. This is reminiscent of the hierarchical view of knowledge taken by Plato in Books IV, VI and

VII of the *Republic*.¹⁴ In Book IV, Socrates commends “the united influence of music and gymnastic” on young citizens of the ideal state. (Plato, 2012: 237) These, he says, “will bring them into accord, nerving and sustaining the reason with noble words and lessons, and moderating and soothing and civilizing the wildness of passion by harmony and rhythm”. (ibid.) In Book VI, Socrates gives philosophy a high place compared to other disciplines: “...there remains a dignity about her which is not to be found in the arts”. (304) And in Book VII, Socrates makes the case for arithmetic. For the guardians or rulers of the ideal state to be both warrior and philosopher, they must “go and learn arithmetic, not as amateurs, but they must carry on the study until they see the nature of numbers with the mind only; nor again, like merchants or retail-traders, with a view to buying or selling, but for the sake of their military use, and of the soul herself...” (340) He further stresses “arithmetic is a kind of knowledge in which the best natures should be trained...” (341) Also in Book VII, Plato’s Socrates recommends the teaching of geometry, which “aims at “knowledge of the eternal, and not of aught perishing and transient” and will “draw the soul towards truth, and create the spirit of philosophy”. (342) He commends astronomy – “The spangled heavens should be used as a pattern and with a view to that higher knowledge”. (345) And he argues for dialectic. For, Socrates makes clear that “the arts in general are concerned with the desires or opinions of men...the mathematical sciences...have some apprehension of true being...[but] dialectic alone, goes directly to the first principle”. (349) Al Farabi too commends dialectic, though not in the full-throated way of Plato. In *Book of Religion*, Al Farabi says: “Dialectic yields strong presumption about all or most of what demonstrative proofs yield certainty about, and rhetoric persuades most of what is not such as to be proven by demonstration or looked into by dialectic”. (Al Farabi, 2001: loc 1837) As we shall see, demonstrative proof was an important consideration for a revealed religion, or as Al Farabi describes it, “virtuous religion”.

Al Farabi does not offer quite as much detail as Plato about the ideal curriculum for young citizens of the virtuous city. However, he does indicate his preferred path to, of, and for learning. As an aside, Al Farabi himself “was a practical

¹⁴ “One of the overriding concerns of al-Farabi’s logical writings is to delineate precisely the relationship between philosophical logic and the grammar of ordinary language...The historical reality of the importation of philosophy into Arabic from a foreign language and culture, that of ancient Greece, and the attendant difficulties created by the need to invent a philosophical vocabulary in Arabic, had made this issue of paramount importance for the earliest Arabic philosophers, including al-Farabi’s own teachers and pupils”. (Black, 2001: 179)

musician of no mean reputation”. (Farmer, 1932: 563) His *Kitab al musiqi al kabir* makes him “probably the greatest writer on the theory of music during the Middle Ages...in Western Europe he had no peer as an independent thinker until Ramos de Pareja (c. 1440-1521) made his appearance”. (562)¹⁵ Musical talents notwithstanding, Al Farabi takes a fairly broad, Platonic view of the desirable curriculum for young citizens of his virtuous city. It goes beyond music. In the introduction to *Enumeration of Sciences* Al Farabi explains that he wants to enumerate each of “the well-known sciences”, and he groups them as follows: the science of language and its parts; the science of logic and its parts; the sciences of mathematics, by which he means arithmetic, geometry, optics, astronomy, music, measuring, and engineering; physical science and its parts as well as divine science and its parts; and, finally, political science and its parts, plus the sciences of jurisprudence and dialectical theology. (Al Farabi, 2001: loc 1416) Like Plato, Al Farabi sees a clear difference between art forms. In *Opinions of the Inhabitants of the Virtuous City*, he offers the following commentary:

The arts differ in excellence according to their species, in the way in which arts varying in species exist, one being more excellent than the other: as, for example, weaving and the art of drapery; the art of making perfumes and drugs and the art of sweeping; the art of dancing and the art of jurisprudence; philosophy and rhetoric. In this respect, then, the arts which vary in species are unequal in excellence. Moreover the people who practice the arts which belong to the same species are unequal in excellence with regard to the quantity of their knowledge. (Walzer, 1985: 267)

Al Farabi appears to be establishing an hierarchy of the arts, something akin to Plato’s in Book X of the *Republic*, where the creation of a bed by disparate entities is ranked. He is doubtful about rhetoric, which he describes in *Selected Aphorisms* as “the ability to speak to others by means of statements that are excellent in persuading about each and every one of the possible matters that are such as to be preferred or avoided”. (Al Farabi, 2001: loc 674) He concedes: “However, the virtuous

¹⁵ Ramos de Pareja was a Spanish music theorist. Al Farabi’s *Kitab al musiqi al Kabir* is “looked upon as the most authoritative work of its kind in the East, and all the great Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and even Indian writers on music, from Ibn Sina in the eleventh century to Tantawi in the twentieth century, make their obeisance to the name of Al Farabi...” (Farmer, 1960: 5-6)

practitioners of this faculty use it with respect to good things, while those who are cunning use it with respect to evil ones”. (loc 676) He seems to class rhetoric with what he calls “practical things”, which is to say “sophistry, dialectic and the poetic art”. (loc 1068, 1069) Al Farabi appears to see in all of these forms of expression a basic malleability rather than core truthfulness. The malleability allows them to be used for good or ill, depending on who is engaged in the task. But he finds nothing intrinsically good about rhetoric, sophistry, dialectic, and poetry, and certainly nothing to compare with philosophy, the universal truth. All of these forms of expression can use linguistic trickery and demagoguery to make a case for any side. They are not instinctively and solely in service of the universal, unchallengeable good. In *Book of Religion*, Al Farabi notes the uses of rhetoric in defence of the virtuous religion. Seemingly using the principle of it takes a thief to catch a thief, Al Farabi explicitly suggests rhetoric can be used as an effective verbal weapon against rhetorical arguments that seek to lead believers astray:

...both dialectic and rhetoric are of major value for verifying the opinions of religion for the citizens and for defending, supporting, and establishing opinions in their souls, as well as for defending those opinions when someone appears who desires to deceive the followers of the religion by means of argument, lead them into error, and contend against the religion. (loc 1842)

Al Farabi also finds another use for rhetoric. The ideal ruler and lawgiver, a figure in Al Farabi’s virtuous city reminiscent of Plato’s philosopher-king in the ideal state, “must assume public responsibilities”¹⁶ and must prepare for these by learning the use of rhetoric. Like Plato in Book X of the *Republic*, Al Farabi seems to be saying, ‘there is an ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry’. But Al Farabi, far more than Plato, is also willing to concede the uses of practical things such as rhetoric.

The overlap in Al Farabi and Plato’s attitude to creative arts such as poetry and writing is marked. Just as Plato demanded that poets in the ideal state tell stories

¹⁶ “Why should the philosopher who has been instructed by Aristotle in ‘the certain science’ also take the trouble to learn from him how to acquire ‘the faculty for instructing whoever is not to use the science of logic or to be given the certain science’? The answer emerges clearly when we look at al-Farabi’s works on *The Attainment of Happiness* and *The Philosophy of Plato*, the first two members of the trilogy completed by *The Philosophy of Aristotle*. In the first of them we learn that ‘the idea of the Philosopher, Supreme Ruler, Prince, Legislator, and Imam is but a single idea’. The true philosopher thus cannot remain a private individual, but must assume public responsibilities”. (Watt, 1995: 21)

of unvarying good, especially about the gods, Al Farabi writes of “praiseworthy” poems, melodies and songs and “wicked opinions” about Him, the one God.¹⁷

Clearly, Al Farabi is adopting the Platonic prescription for citizens of the virtuous city, as described by Blackburn: not only should they be innocent of bad things but also innocent of representations of bad things. In *Selected Aphorisms*, he suggests bad communicators be “amputated”, as one would a diseased organ of the body of state. (Al Farabi, 2001: loc 484) He writes:

When a single member [of the body] is touched by corruption of which it is feared that it will be communicated to the rest of the other members adjacent to it, it is amputated and done away with for the sake of preserving those others. So, too, when a part of the city is touched by corruption of which communication to others is feared, it ought to be ostracized and sent away for the improvement of those remaining. (ibid.)

And he distinguished between various kinds of writing, saying it “differs according to the arts in which it is used and those who use it”. (loc 1081) Then he commends the writing used for governing virtuous cities. This sort of writing “is very virtuous”, he says and “the most venerable of the sorts of writing is that used in the service of the supreme ruler and the virtuous king”. (loc 1082) It is clear that like Plato, Al Farabi believes creative work has immense power – for good or ill – and holds creative individuals responsible for what they produce. Words are tools, to be used to good end or bad. As we shall see, Al Farabi’s rationalization of controlled creative writing in the Muslim world would prove to be an important development. This is in accord not just with Plato’s views but with classical Greek culture. The closest Greek term for art is *techne*, which denotes all kinds of human skills, craft or even knowledge. (Barasch, 2000) *Techne* is more deliberate than *physis*, the Greek word for nature, from which came physics, the knowledge of nature. As Moshe Barasch explains, “nature acts out of sheer necessity, *techne* involves a deliberate human choice”. (3) Accordingly, why would poets not be blamed for writing what they should not? Unsurprisingly then, Al Farabi deems it necessary for creative expression to support wise governance, virtue, justice, and thereby, the attainment of human happiness. To

¹⁷ Appendix B

do anything else would sow confusion, bring about chaos and eventually pull down the system. This point of agreement between Al Farabi and Plato is probably one of the most significant meetings of minds across the ages. As we shall see, it cast a long shadow, one that we live with even today.

Al Farabi's Platonic ideal

It is hardly surprising Al Farabi was so impressed by Plato's imaginary ideal state he fashioned a political philosophy that naturalised the concept for the world to which he belonged. (Walzer, 1985) The "largeness of view", Benjamin Jowett says of the *Republic* made Plato the "captain or leader of a goodly band of followers; for in the *Republic* is to be found the original of Cicero's *De re publica*, of St. Augustine's *City of God*, of the *Utopia* of Sir Thomas More, and of the numerous other imaginary States which are framed upon the same model. The extent to which Aristotle or the Aristotelian school were indebted to him in the *Politics* has been little recognised, and the recognition is the more necessary because it is not made by Aristotle himself". (Jowett, 1892: 1) Jowett does not mention Al Farabi – as we will subsequently discuss, the greatest Islamic logician of his day is not given the lay recognition his successors have achieved both within the Arab world and beyond – but the reference to Plato's "band of followers" does at least explain the imaginary ideal state's appeal to thinkers in every age and across geographical divides.

That said, Al Farabi's focus on the city-state can rightly be regarded as quite extraordinary. He lived in an enormous empire ruled by the Abbasids, not "in a Greek city state such as fourth century B.C. Athens nor in a nation state such as Hellenistic Ptolemaic Egypt, nor in republican Rome nor in the Roman Empire". (Walzer, 1985: 8) So, why did he labour over an Arab construction of Plato's ideal state? Walzer says Al Farabi's *Mabadi ara ahl al Madina al fadila* or *The Principles of the Opinions of the Inhabitants of the Virtuous City* marked a "remarkable revival in the Muslim world of Plato's message of the philosopher-king", offering what this Arab philosopher must have thought was a new and "in his view, the best – answer to the intellectual as well as the religious and political questions of his century". (ibid.) Some scholars say that Al Farabi saw the "genuine Islamic problems of his day" and Plato's ideas "enabled him to find an original and impressive solution". (Walzer, 1962: 19) If so, what were the genuine Islamic problems of Al Farabi's time?

They can be divided into two groups – the temporal and the theological. By the tenth century, when Al Farabi would have been pondering some of his key theories, the Abbasid caliphate was clearly in decline. Consider the events that occurred towards the end of the ninth century and in the first decades of the tenth. In 895, thirteen-year-old Muqtadir had become the youngest caliph of the Abbasid dynasty. The difficulties of Muqtadir’s situation became apparent in 908, when he was deposed by a coup that installed the poet and litterateur Abdallah bin Al Mutazz as caliph for just one day. A contemporaneous account of these events is provided by the scholar Abu Jafar Muhammad b. Jarir Al Tabari in *The History of Prophets and Kings (Tarikh ak rusul wa’l muluk)*. Al Tabari describes these events in a dry and factual manner – Franz Rosenthal notes the “terseness” of Al Tabari’s report on “this most dramatic event”. (Rosenthal, 1985: xviii, 189) In fact, Al Tabari even neglects to mention that Al Mutazz lost his life during the coup. Whatever the compulsions for Al Tabari’s selectiveness towards the facts, he does mention that “a number of officers, civilians and qadis” agreed to depose the young caliph. (189) This may have been an indication of the crisis of authority increasingly faced by Abbasid caliphs. At the time, Al Farabi would have been in his late thirties – old enough to have a sense of how things change, but young enough to be able to watch the rest of the saga unfold. Within a half-century of Caliph Muqtadir’s day-long overthrow, his successors had an even more tenuous hold on power. The Shia Buyids – warlords from northern Iran who claimed they were protectors of the Abbasid caliphate – took control of Baghdad in 945 but allowed the Abbasids to stay on the throne. (Silverstein, 2010) Al Farabi must have been acutely aware of the Abbasid caliphate’s shrunken state and its internal crisis of authority. Although Al Farabi is said to have been wary of accepting patronage, he accepted the Shia warlord Sayf Al Dawla’s invitation to join his court in Aleppo. Sayf Al Dawla was heavily involved in early efforts to establish control over the Abbasid government in Baghdad and this may have struck a chord with Al Farabi. For “he disagreed with the Abbasid caliphate in Baghdad and felt like an exile and an alien while living in the ‘City of Peace’. The attitude of the Hamdanids in Aleppo appealed to him and the Imami sympathies of the Buwayhids who finally entered Baghdad in 945 (after he had left) were most probably to his liking”. (Walzer, 1985: 17)¹⁸ In the circumstances, it would make sense if a thinker like Al Farabi

¹⁸ Even so, Al Farabi “did not change the ‘Sufi’ way of life when he voluntarily accepted the amir Sayf al-Dawla’s invitation to join the society of his court and to transfer his residence from the capital of the Muslim world to a

extrapolated from topical temporal matters the key issues confronting Islam and its expanding and diverse dominions a few centuries after the Prophet's death.

Accordingly, Al Farabi tackles the issue of leadership and authority in *Book of Religion*. He avoids any explicit allusions to Islam or any other faith, but it's obvious Al Farabi is thinking of Muhammad when he describes the ideal philosopher-ruler as a prophet or one who receives a revelation and thereby, guidance, directly from God. He writes, "Now the craft of the virtuous first ruler is kingly and joined with revelation from God. Indeed, he determines the actions and opinions in the virtuous religion by means of revelation". (Al Farabi, 2001: loc 1771) The reference to the "first ruler" heightens the impression of a prophet such as Muhammad, who founded a new faith and ruled a state run on the principles of the divine revelation. Al Farabi speaks of the ideal ruler interchangeably with "the prophets, the most virtuous kings, the righteous rulers and the leaders of the right way and of truth". (loc 1789) Al Farabi's focus on the qualities that can make a success of kingship and of the state, are an obvious response to the way things were in his day. The consequences of not having an ideal ruler had long been on display in the Abbasid caliphate. By the time of the Buyid takeover, the Abbasid empire – 6,500 kilometres from east to west (Silverstein, 2010) – was a weakened version of itself. It had been suffering political reverses since the late eighth century, with its western provinces – Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt – gradually breaking away.¹⁹ The caliphate's revenues had also started to decline from the second half of the ninth century (some say even earlier, right after the death in 809 of Harun Al Rashid).²⁰ The fall in revenue was because of a Kharijite-inspired²¹ revolt (869-83) among East African slaves in Basra; distant governors' decision to invest taxes locally, and the rise in conversion among non-Arab subjects to Islam, which reduced the poll-tax collected. According to some

major provincial town, Aleppo. He was content to live on a salary of four silver dirhams a day – this is, as I learn from numismatist friend Mrs. H. Mitchell-Brown, 'well above subsistence level for a peasant (who could probably manage on two dirhams per month)' but not enough to cut a respectable figure as a member of the middle or upper classes". (Walzer, 1985: 4-5)

¹⁹ The Idrisids ruled Morocco from 789, the rest of North Africa was under the Aghlabids from 800 and Egypt was under the Tulunids from 868. The Fatimid caliphs took charge of North Africa, Egypt and Syria from 909, the year after the coup that deposed Caliph Muqtadir for a day.

²⁰ In *Muqaddima*, Ibn Khaldun notes that in the generation that followed the reign of Harun Al Rashid nothing remained of the caliphate but its name.

²¹ There were differing views among Arabs of the Kharijites. "Those holding a positive image maintain that the Kharijites were pious Muslims who were fighting for a noble cause consistent with the teachings of the Qur'an. Not all Arab writers, however, hold such a positive image, some arguing that the Kharijites were bandits with no philosophical or political program and that they would have been a constant threat to any civilization". (Ahsen, 2010: 311)

accounts, imperial revenues had halved or worse in the 127 years that separate the opening period of Harun Al Rashid's reign to the mid-point of young Al Muqtadir's caliphate.²²

Just as Plato was writing during a period of "Athenian upheaval, revolution, experiment, war and eventual decline", Al Farabi was formulating his theories against the backdrop of growing dysfunction within the Abbasid caliphate. (Blackburn, 2006: 28) Perhaps he dealt with what he was seeing by addressing the fundamental logic for preserving and extending so unusual a project as the caliphate. It was a Muslim commonwealth, a multi-ethnic empire ruled by the religious and secular successor to a prophet who Muslims believed, had brought the word of God. Al Farabi set about showing that the practice of virtuous religion, which he likens to a political science based on philosophical truths, can deliver justice and happiness for the ideal ruler's subjects. Butterworth notes, "By describing religion as though it were political in character, Al Farabi approaches the subject from a perspective broader than that normally taken by the worshipper". (Al Farabi, 2001: loc 1709) In fact, in *Enumeration of the Sciences* Al Farabi says even-handedly "every religion has opinions and actions", and only mildly makes the case for a revealed faith: "Moreover, a human being is such that by revelation religions provide him with what he is not wont to perceive by his intellect and what his intellect is too languid [to grasp]". (loc 1557, 1571)

Clearly, Al Farabi thought it important to formulate for Muslim readers his views on the ideal caliph. He did this by using an "otherwise unknown account of Plato's philosophy, which did full justice to the political side of his work, an equally unknown commentary on Plato's *Republic* and a paraphrase of Plato's *Laws*" and by concentrating on Plato's scheme of an ideal state, astutely tailoring the material for the Arabic-reading public. (Walzer, 1962: 19) Al Farabi's *Opinions of the Inhabitants of the Virtuous City* offers a philosophy of man's role in building an organized society and sustaining it. It takes care not to rank religion and philosophy:

²² Even though revenues were decreasing, "the period of relatively greatest decrease appears to have been the latter half of the 3rd/9th century. Some of the decrease during this period could be accounted for by the detachment of Egypt under the Tulunids and Khurasan under the Samanids from direct control of the caliphs' government". (Waines, 1977: 285)

Thus, virtuous religion is similar to philosophy. Just as philosophy is partly theoretical and partly practical, so it is with religion: the calculative theoretical part is what a human being is not able to do when he knows it, whereas the practical part is what a human being is able to do when he knows it. (Al Farabi, 2001: loc 1821)

He draws repeatedly on the *Republic* but for Arab readers. As has been noted, he tended to avoid specific Islamic terms even though he used, almost exclusively, Arabic philosophical language to contribute to the discussion of the qualities required in the successor of the Prophet, the head of the Muslim community.

In *Book of Religion*, Al Farabi ponders the question of what a virtuous society should do when the prophet-ruler is no longer alive. “Ideally, he would be replaced by another such ruler, or failing that, a group of people who collectively have the traits the prophet-ruler combines in his single and singular person. When the gifts of universal understanding, excellence and deliberation about particulars and revelation are possessed by no individual or group of leaders, the citizens must adhere to the laws previously laid down by the perfect ruler or rulers”. (Adamson podcast, 2013: episode 130) The ideological heritage of Al Farabi’s thinking was clear. For instance, he wrote:

If at a given time it happens that philosophy has no share in the government, though every other qualification for rule may be present, the perfect state will remain rulerless, the actual head of the state will be no true king and the state will head for destruction; and if no wise man is to be found and associated with the acting head of the state, then after a certain interval the state will undoubtedly perish. (Walzer, 1962: 22)

It is almost exactly the sentiment expressed by Plato in his seventh *Letter*. Walzer notes “The problems of political authority with which this society was confronted were as fascinating as they were difficult, and the Greek legacy turned out to be very useful for the Muslim newcomers”. (Walzer, 1985: 8)²³

²³ “Muhammad was a preacher not a theologian, so it was left to his followers to reduce his ideas to a system”. (Tritton, 1951: 36)

Greeks bearing gifts

What purpose did the Greek legacy serve for Arab Muslim philosophers, their rulers and patrons and the Arabic-reading public in the first 300 years of Islam? The most obvious answer is it created an interest in intellectual pursuits and the study of the sciences and fostered a taste for logic and debate. “Their minds awoke from their sleep”, commented Andalusian historian Said Al Andalusi (d.1070) about the Arabs. (Gutas, 1998: 31) But the Abbasid-sponsored translation movement of Greek texts was never just an upliftment project.

The Greek legacy proved to be complex and many-layered for Muslims. In many ways, it was the gift that kept on giving. In the early days of the 200-year translation movement, the study of Greek texts accomplished key political and ideological aims for Islam’s second ruling dynasty, the Abbasids. The second Abbasid caliph, Al Mansur (754-775), who “is generally credited by Arabic authors with initiating and promoting the translation movement” was able to fight revivalist Persian and Zoroastrian movements by portraying the translation of Greek texts as a way of recovering ancient Persian knowledge. (29) This, because Greek books were thought to be part of the Zoroastrian canon, taken as a result of Alexander’s pillage of Iran. Astrologer Abu Sahl, whose father had been Al Mansur’s astrologer, said the very stars had decreed it was the Abbasids’ turn to renew the sciences and spread knowledge. (ibid.)

Al Mansur’s son and successor, Al Mahdi (775-785) commissioned the translation of Aristotle’s *Topics* into Arabic to learn about *gadal*, the art of argumentation on a systematic basis. (ibid.) This illustrates the second purpose achieved by means of the Greek texts. Al Mahdi’s study of *Topics* enabled him to become the first Muslim to defend Islam in an extant debate with a Christian, the Nestorian patriarch Timothy I.²⁴ According to Gutas, it introduced into the Muslim world “both the method and the social attitude of disputation for settling or promoting religio-political debates. This had far-reaching consequences, the most significant of which would appear to be, in subsequent centuries, the rise of law as the dominant social expression of Islam as a religion”. (Gutas, 1998: 69)

²⁴ Interestingly, it was Timothy I who translated *Topics* for Al Mahdi!

Caliph Al Mahdi's grandson, Al Mamun, is often most associated with the Greek translation movement because he conspicuously used its legacy in various ways. But Al Mamun, the son of the fabled Caliph Harun Al Rashid, had a troubled and contested journey to the throne, as mentioned in Chapter 1. In order to garner public support, he presented himself as the champion of Islam and began a military and propaganda campaign against the Byzantines. Arabic translations of Greek texts were handy in Al Mamun's portrayal of the Byzantines as culturally benighted infidels, inferior to Muslims, and even to their own ancestors, the ancient Greeks, whose works were now being assiduously studied by the Arabs. The Greek texts also provided Muslims with the ideological tools to fight the Byzantines. (90) Gutas offers an interesting insight into the pride the Muslims took in the translated Greek works. They were seen as "a cultural good", whose acceptance by Muslims was proof they were better than the Christian Byzantines. (ibid.) Gutas notes: "The moral is thus there for everybody to draw: were Muslims to reject the Greek sciences they would be no better than the Christian Byzantines; the superiority of Islam over Christianity in this context, therefore, is solely based on the Muslim acceptance of the fruits of the translation movement." (ibid.) That is a fairly remarkable leap of logic, but it appears to have held. Meanwhile, the Greek legacy spread the idea of unassailable proof throughout the Arab world in the ninth century, requiring theologians and philosophers to work overtime to prove their case.

Nearly a century before Al Farabi, Al Kindi was doing his best to apply methodological rigour to theological discussions with all the philosophical tools he could muster. He made some headway in arguing that there is no conflict between faith and reason. Consider Al Kindi's observation:

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 us. 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. (Ivry, 1974: 58)

Interestingly, this chimed with the views of a traditional scholar Ibn Qutayba, Al Kindi's contemporary, who had no interest in the translated sciences but still wrote in the introduction to his literary compilation *Choice Narratives*:

For the way to Allah is not one nor is all that is good confined to night prayers, continuous fasting, and the knowledge of the lawful and the forbidden. On the contrary, the ways to Him are many and the doors of the good are wide...Knowledge is the stray camel of the believer; it befits him regardless from where he takes it: it shall not disparage truth should you hear it from polytheists ...Ibn Abbas [the Prophet's uncle] said: 'Take wisdom from whomever you hear it, for the non-wise may utter a wise saying and a bull's eye may be hit by a non-sharpshooter'. (Gutas, 1998: 159)

The concurrence of opinions between Al Kindi and Ibn Qutayba points to a significant development during the early phase of the Greek-to-Arabic translation movement: intellectual inquiry was hailed and debate of all sorts was becoming the order of the day. Even so, it was not until Al Farabi many decades later that an Islamic system of logic started to be properly built. For this, he made copious application to the "two sages" – Plato and Aristotle – inclining especially to the former for his recognition that a truly just city "will not lack anything that leads its citizens to happiness". (Al Farabi, 2001: loc 2213) Al Farabi writes that Plato investigates "the divine and natural beings as they are perceived by the intellect and known by means of that science". (loc 2215) Al Farabi sets out to show that political philosophy "as conceived by Plato and Aristotle – and thus as expressed in a life of ceaseless questioning of others and of oneself through 'dialectical conversation' – succeeds in laying the conceptual foundation for any authentically empirical and deductive natural science, as well as for understanding of civic and intellectual virtue experienced as 'the attainment of happiness'. (Note that it is the attainment, not merely the pursuit, of happiness!)" (Butterworth and Pangle, 1962: ix)

Al Farabi's focus on Platonic concepts mattered for reasons of social order and the maintenance of a well-ordered political system, as previously discussed. But his insistence on harmonizing the opinions of Plato and Aristotle in the eponymous work suggests another motivation as well. It was to save philosophy itself, or at least its place in the Muslim world. Butterworth argues "to admit disagreement between

Plato and Aristotle is to call the whole enterprise of philosophy into question. Because philosophy offers the sole viable correction to the exaggerations and sophistical tricks of those who oppose its explanations, it along with its two founders must be defended". (Al Farabi, 2001: loc 2281) This brings us back to the question of what Muslim philosophers such as Al Farabi saw in Greek philosophy that they laboured so fiercely to protect it.

The answer must start a century before Al Farabi. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Caliph Al Mamun's imposition of the *minha* or inquisition to try clerics for refusing to acknowledge the Quran was 'created', led the traditionists to object. In essence, their objection was to the theology that imposed it. This included Mutazilism or Rational Theology and later, they also challenged philosophical theology and its method, dialectic disputation. Though scholars such as Gutas say the opposition did not extend to the translated or 'foreign' sciences, Gutas himself cites a ninth-century poem that is profoundly hostile to philosophy. Naturally, this sows doubt about the assertion that 'foreign' knowledge-imports were not resented. Could dialectic, logic, systematic argumentation and unassailable proof not have been seen as part of the Greek legacy? After all, the celebrated debate between grammarians and logicians in Baghdad in the early tenth century focused on distortions of the Arabic language by Arab philosophers bent upon incorporating Hellenic ideas. That had to be in the context of a deeper ferment.

Part of the ferment is evident in the outrage at philosophy expressed by poet Abu Said Ibn Dust (d.1040) from Nisabur, now in northeastern Iran. Gutas cites him from the works of the critic Al Taaibibi (d. 1038), also from Nisabur. (Gutas, 1998: 160) Abu Said Ibn Dust writes:

You who seek religion, avoid the paths of error

Lest your religion be snatched from you unawares.

Shiism is destruction, Mutazilism is innovation,²⁵

Polytheism is infidelity, and philosophy is a lie.

²⁵ Echoes of Plato's Socrates' injunction against innovation in Book IV of *Republic*

But Gutas also quotes another poet from Nisabur, Abu-l Fath Al Busti (d. after 1009), who featured in Al Taalibi's work. Abu-l Fath Al Busti sees philosophy as a natural progression from religious belief for the inquiring mind. He writes:

Fear God, and seek the guidance of his religion,

Then after these two, seek *falsafa*

In order not to be taken in by people who approve

A religion of falsehood and "*falsafa*";

Ignore people who criticize it,

For a man's *falsafa* is the blunting of ignorance. (Gutas, 1998: 160)

The two poets' passionate disagreement suggests the debate on the merits of philosophy must have been lively, and occasionally loud. It was also clearly part of the conversation of the day, at least in literary, grammarian and logician circles. The deep distrust of philosophy expressed by Abu Said Ibn Dust and his warning that faith may be "snatched unawares" also suggests that philosophy and logic were seen by some as foreign to the Muslim belief system. This is surely to be expected. As Seyyed Hossein Nasr notes, "the historical reality of the importation of philosophy into Arabic from a foreign language and culture, that of ancient Greece" was one of "attendant difficulties". (Nasr and Leaman, 1996: 179-180) The difficulties were chiefly "created by the need to invent a philosophical vocabulary in Arabic" and they were complicated by "the linguistic focus of much of Aristotelian logic". (ibid.) That linguistic focus gave rise to the suspicion among Arabic grammarians that "the philosophers' interest in Greek logic was nothing but an attempt to substitute the grammar of Greek for the grammar of Arabic". (ibid.) Nasr's reference to Aristotelian logic's linguistic focus is worth noting in the context of Al Farabi's attempt to harmonize the opinions of the two sages. As previously noted, he hailed the "eminence" of both Plato and Aristotle and reiterated "They are described as the ultimate in profound wisdom, subtle knowledge, remarkable inferences, and fathoming the delicate meanings that lead to purity and truth in everything". (Al Farabi, 2001: loc 2365) And yet, it is Plato he calls "the Divine". Clearly, Plato's

relentless focus on justice and human happiness worked better than Aristotelian tools to help Al Farabi make the case for “logic as a sort of universal grammar”. (Nasr and Leaman, 1996: 180)

In any case, the stakes were high for Al Farabi’s endeavour to build an Islamic system of logic that neither diminished what he called “virtuous religion”, nor felt constrained by it. He wanted to show that philosophy simply vouches for the truth of the opinions and actions of the “first ruler” in the “virtuous city”. This was important because dialectic, systematic argumentation and unassailable proof were exactly what was needed for a revealed religion such as Islam to root itself among peoples beyond the Arab lands. It was not enough for a religion to spread by the march of armies, through commerce, or on account of individual considerations of monetary benefit (conversion meant new Muslims would no longer pay the poll-tax). New believers needed truly to believe.²⁶ That was more likely if the Islamic belief system were presented as a religious form of an ancient philosophical truth than simply as a revelation to be accepted, no questions asked. That is what Al Farabi seemed to be working towards. According to Butterworth, Al Farabi indicates “philosophy understands what is set forth in religion” and that he first mentions practical and theoretical philosophy in the *Book of Religion* simply as a “means for preserving the opinions and actions passed on by revelation to the first ruler in virtuous religion”. (Al Farabi, 2001: loc 1725, 1727) Ulrich Rudolph agrees and reflects on *Opinions of the Inhabitants of the Virtuous City* as follows:

Al Farabi goes on from here to say a virtuous religion imitates philosophy. For both include a theoretical (*nazari*) and also a practical (*amali*) part. The difference between religion and philosophy lies solely in the manner in which they articulate the issues that arise in both parts. Philosophy yields, for both theoretical and practical matters, demonstrations (*barahin*) and universals (*kulliyat*). Religion, by contrast, cannot provide demonstration, and can provide universals only in a restricted fashion. In both respects, therefore, it is subordinate to philosophy. (Rudolph, 2008: 11)

²⁶ The jurist “Ibn Hanbal said that all faith was Islam but not all Islam was faith and not every Muslim believed in God for some had turned Muslim for fear of the sword”. (Tritton, 1951: 45)

Paul L. Heck adds that in the thirty-third section of *Opinions of the Inhabitants of the Virtuous City*, Al Farabi “argues that nations and cities, even if diverse in *milla* [religion], all have the potential of qualifying as virtuous by commonly held standards of happiness”. (Heck, 2008: 197) This had to be significant considering the Muslim commonwealth was wracked by problems created by competing intellectual traditions that challenged philosophical endeavour on religious grounds.

Still more ‘genuine Islamic problems’

The Abbasid decline had not come about suddenly, but the development must still have been a shock. After the Abbasids overthrew the Umayyads in 750, they created a vast, culturally diverse but inclusive and “consciously cosmopolitan” empire, which was marked by hustle and bustle on its road network. (Silverstein, 2010: 19)²⁷ The caliphate became rich. Culturally, it attained great heights. As already mentioned, Al Mansur, the second Abbasid caliph, initiated the Greek-to-Arabic translation movement, which led to a period of sustained intellectual activity in different fields, not least philosophy, medicine, science, astronomy, and mathematics. The mass manufacture of paper in the Abbasid empire created a book trade to satisfy growing numbers of readers. Along with the Abbasids’ changing political fortunes came several different intellectual trends. These were probably also part of the genuine Islamic problems of his day Al Farabi set out to address. Clearly, Al Farabi was concerned about social order and stability and why would he not be? The void left by the ideal ruler – philosopher, prophet and king – must have been a preoccupation, some 250 years after Muhammad’s death and amid the chaos of the declining Abbasid caliphate. Just like Plato in the *Republic*, Al Farabi links social order with wise, virtuous and just rule and it is in this context that he tackles two other social forces of his time – jurists and theologians.

This was no easy task. They had built up a devoted if diverse following in Islam’s first two centuries. *Kalam* or the discussion of theology existed even before the “science of *kalam* became independent and recorded in writing” but discussion of

²⁷ The Abbasid empire’s road network “encouraged a level of internationalism, multiculturalism and inter-connectivity that most Westerners would associate with modernity”. (Silverstein, 2010: 19-20)

religious authority and political legitimacy intensified after the era of the Rashidun or the four rightly-guided caliph-successors to Prophet Muhammad. (Haleem, 1996: 71) The community of believers pondered unanswered questions after the Prophet's death in 632 and that of his son-in-law and cousin, the fourth caliph Ali in 661. Who would now have the authority to interpret the Quran when specific problems arose, the Muslim community wondered, and why and how should they be deemed to have it? Theologians settled on the Quran and approved Hadith as a guide to the right answers. (Guillaume, 1924)²⁸ From this emerged a full system of jurisprudence (*fiqh*). The Quran and the *sunna* – the example set by Muhammad as embodied in the Hadith – were joined by *qiyas* (analogical and syllogistic reasoning) and *ijma* (community consensus) to produce the body of law known as *sharia*, a guide to action for individual Muslims. (Rippin and Knappert, 1986)

The bulk of Hadith literature “is demonstrably the work of the 250 years after the Prophet's death” and more particularly in Islam's second century because “during the Umayyad period theologians were under a cloud”. (Guillaume, 1924: 15, 18) It was also in Islam's second century that the views of the Mutazilites became influential. From the early eighth century, they had served as the proto philosophers of the Muslim world, with their pitch for two basic tenets of the faith, both of which were founded on reason – the oneness of God and his justice (from which came man's free will). Belief in God's oneness led the Mutazilites to argue the Quran was ‘created’.²⁹ They drew criticism from traditionally minded theologians opposed to the use of reason altogether. Caliph Al Mamun's institution of the *minha* in support of the idea of the created Quran, intensified theological opposition but in an unexpected way. A compromise of sorts between rationalists and traditionists was supplied by a former Mutazilite, Abul Hasan Al Ashari (d.935). Making his case in as rational a way as the Mutazilites, Al Ashari said the Quran was uncreated and God had foreknowledge of human action. However, God created the power for man to ‘acquire’ actions already created by God. This theology suggested God is inaccessible

²⁸ Muslims found themselves in a similar situation to the Jews. The Quran, just like the Mosaic law, was unable to satisfy all the community's needs with respect to systematic and moral theology, ritual, and civil and military law. Just as the Talmud arose to supply the needs of the Jews, who only had the Mosaic law, the “Muhammadan community found itself at the death of Muhammad with a holy book and the living memory of a prophet; from these two sources the ecclesiastical and temporal polity of the Islamic world was for all time built up”. (Guillaume, 1924: 9)

²⁹ The argument was that if the Quran were eternal, it would be co-terminus with God and that would be polytheism or *shirk*.

to human reason and everything He does must be accepted *bila kaif* (without asking how). The Asharites raised philosophical questions and answered them in a novel way, preparing the ground for Al Ghazali (b.1058), one of Islam's most influential thinkers. Asharism held sway on Sunni Islam for centuries. The Mutazilite vs Ashari face-off showed the testiness of theological debate in Islam's first three centuries.

Al Farabi waded into the roiling waters of the debate. In *Enumeration of the Sciences*, Al Farabi is dismissive of Muslim theologians for engaging only in dialectic, seeking unquestioning, unreasoning acceptance of prophecy, or resorting to tricks to point out implausibility in other religions rather than addressing implausibility in their own faith. In arguing from agreed premises rather than offering demonstrations that can be traced back to solid first principles, Al Farabi disdains their unawareness of what Adamson calls the dialectical nature of their enterprise or the modesty of its aims compared to the demonstrative majesty of philosophy. (Adamson podcast series) Heck notes that the thirty-fourth section of *Opinions of the Inhabitants of the Virtuous City* suggests the root cause of divisiveness in ignorant cities is dialectical argumentation (*kalam*) "which is preoccupied with the representation of truth through images". (Heck, 2008: 197) Disputes are caused by "images (*mithalat*) that are meant only to imitate –without attaining – the certainty of demonstrable proof (*burhan*)". (ibid.) Clearly, Al Farabi's distaste for the techniques of dialectical theology were rooted in his anxiety they would swing Muslim opinion away from universal truths, making it harder to argue for, establish and maintain a just political system.

He also took a measured view of jurisprudence. It was the last resort, Al Farabi admitted, if there were no replacement for the ideal prophet-ruler and new problems had arisen for which there was no clear solution in existing law. In *Book of Religion*, Al Farabi notes the practical abilities of the ideal ruler are realised above all in the handing down of laws, which represent an application of the general to the particular in a way appropriate for the city and its inhabitants. (Adamson podcast series) Though the ruler's law-giving function may seem a distinctively Islamic feature of Al Farabi's theory, Plato too discussed the philosophical basis of laws.

But even as Al Farabi acknowledged a place for *fiqh*, he explained it was not like philosophy, which provided a way to understand the true basis of the prophet-ruler's laws. In *Enumeration of the Sciences*, Al Farabi writes:

The jurist takes the opinions and actions declared by the founder of the religion as given and sets them down as fundamentals from which he infers the things that necessarily follow from them, whereas the dialectical theologian defends the things the jurist uses as fundamentals without inferring other things from them. (Al Farabi, 2001: loc 1563)

In other words, neither jurisprudence nor dialectical theology can do what philosophy can. As Al Farabi says in *Book of Religion*: “And since it is the theoretical part of philosophy that gives demonstrative proofs for the theoretical part of religion, it is philosophy, then, that gives the demonstrative proofs of what virtuous religion encompasses”. (loc 1834)

Clearly, in Al Farabi's view, neither jurisprudence nor dialectical theology is able to go much further than its limited purpose. Therefore, neither should be given a task to which it is unequal. Al Farabi is even more lukewarm about grammarians, the third intellectual force of his day. In the tenth century, the grammarians were arguing that Arabic grammar rather than the philosophers' imported Greek logic offered more to the Arabic-speaking world as a measure of reasoning. But for Al Farabi, “grammar is culturally specific because it is tied to the language of a single people, whereas logic is universal and uncovers the structure of human reason itself”. (Adamson, 2016: 74) He also considered philosophy universal with every prophet ruler and every philosopher understanding the same truths though they may be symbolized in different ways by different prophetic revelations. This should be seen alongside Al Farabi's attempt to present religion as just another form of philosophy. To extrapolate, Islam is not just for the Arabs but for all humanity. This might have been politic in the context of the Muslims' expanding empire. But what might have been politic in the long term and in a broad strategic sense was looked upon askance by some Arabs. Leaman explains that when Al Farabi “dethroned” grammarians, it became highly controversial because “the grammar of the Arabic language is the grammar of the language which God used in transmitting his final revelation... The miracle of the Quran (*ijaz al-quran*) lies in the language itself”. (Leaman, 1999: 6)

The heightened sensibilities around the issue are apparent in the previously mentioned debate conducted in Baghdad in 932 between grammarians (represented by Abu Said Al Sirafi) and logicians (represented by Abu Bishr Matta, a Christian who founded the Baghdad Peripatetics). Nasr writes that one of the themes of the debate was the grammarians' claim that "in order to introduce Greek philosophy and science into the Islamic arena, the Arab philosophers had resorted to 'building a language within a language'; that is they were distorting the original and pure Arabic language as revealed in the Quran in an unnecessary and irresponsible manner". (Nasr and Leaman, 1996: 899)

The intellectual ferment in the Muslim world imparted a unique flavour to Al Farabi's philosophical quest. Much good could come of the venture of Islam, he seems to be saying, but the edifice that rises from the basic structure must be built on sound universal principles.

Epic worth

Is it too much of a stretch to say that the Greek legacy's usefulness may have extended beyond the mere structural outline for a "virtuous" state? If Al Farabi was drawing upon Plato's ideas for a well-organised society, might these have included more than just the attributes of a philosopher-king? Might they have covered the very ways in which the inhabitants of the virtuous city would safeguard their blissful political state? One of the uses Al Farabi found for the Greek legacy was to lay out a way for man to strive for perfection. In line with both Plato and Aristotle, Al Farabi believed that man cannot live in a solitary fashion but must do so as a member of society. Therefore, it was incumbent upon man to strive for "the perfect state, the *madina al-fadila*, for an ethical society of the highest order which conforms to the order of justice which is apparent in nature". (Walzer, 1985: 9) Al Farabi identifies the habits and predilections of the inhabitants of cities that are not virtuous by referring to the falsifications, cheatings and deceptions that lead to faulty judgement. In this, he seems to be fastening on the core of Plato's argument for worthy representation in the ideal state – give the citizens the right materials to work with and

they will think in the right way. They must have the right knowledge to be able to reason their way correctly. Untruths and misrepresentations will lead citizens astray.

Accordingly, Al Farabi is very clear in his discussion of what might cause a city to have faulty judgement, which leads it to miss the right path. In *Opinions of the Inhabitants of the Virtuous City*, he says such a city must have surely had for its first ruler “a man who falsely pretended to be receiving ‘revelation’; he produced this wrong impression through falsifications, cheatings and deceptions”. (253)

Falsifications and deceptions suggest deliberate misrepresentation, the cynical portrayal of something untrue as true. This might have been a general warning on the perils of having a dishonest leader but Heck suggests it indicates Al Farabi’s acute consciousness of misleading images, even if only through word pictures. Heck says Al Farabi’s view of representation addresses the shifting concepts of religious leadership in the middle Abbasid period:

The point is that images, which are represented through language – including the language of revelation (God on His throne, flowing rivers of paradise, fiery flames of hell), cannot be awarded the same level of certainty as concepts that can be demonstrably proven (i.e. intelligible and not merely rhetorical reality)... To believe that imagery can attain the rank of certain knowledge is therefore to miss the point of imagery, which exists to represent truth but which cannot be defended as truth. (Heck, 2008: 197)

Al Farabi is very aware of the tricks imagination can play upon the mind, especially when it is exposed to base sensory stimuli. In *Selected Aphorisms* he writes about the consequences “of the corruption of their sense perception and of their imagination”. It means “those who have sick bodies imagine what is sweet to be bitter and what is bitter to be sweet... Similarly, because those who are evil and who possess defects have sick souls, they imagine that evils are good things and that good things are evils”. (Al Farabi, 2001: loc 618) It is a reasonable guess that people with a corrupted sense perception, imagination, sick bodies and sick souls would all live in Al Farabi’s ignorant city. He writes of such a city’s characteristics, its “depravity and baseness; the aim of its people is the enjoyment of the pleasure connected with food and drink and sexual intercourse, and in general of the pleasures of the senses and of the imagination, and to give preference to entertainment and idle play in every form and

in every way”. (Walzer, 1985: 255) In the ignorant city, people have a sensory overload – in terms of striving for food, drink, sex – but these are transient and not the eternal truths that make for justice and happiness. Al Farabi’s depiction of the ignorant city is reminiscent of Socrates’ commentary in the *Republic* on those “who know not wisdom and virtue, and are always busy with gluttony and sensuality”. (Plato, 2012: 314)³⁰ Al Farabi also writes of bad people in bad cities: “their faculty of representation [is] spoiled by will and habit”. (Walzer, 1985: 269) This is consistent with his disapproval of people who live solely for the pleasure of the senses and the imagination. He is very conscious of the distinction between the faculty of representation and “the faculty of practical reasoning which produces thought, deliberation, careful examination (scrutiny) and discovery of the appropriate means by deduction”. (173) The faculty of representation, Al Farabi writes, works differently:

When there is an appetite towards knowing a thing which has to be apprehended by sense-perception, the action by which it is attained will be composed of an act of the body and an act of the soul; as the thing which we desire to see. For we shall succeed in this by raising our eye-lids and directing our gaze towards the thing we desire to see, and if it is far away, we shall walk towards it, and if there is a screen in front of it, we shall remove that screen with our hands – all these, then, will be acts of the body whereas sensing itself is an act of the soul. (ibid.)

There are faint echoes of the Plato’s allegory of the cave here – with the firelight casting shadows on the wall for prisoners to see and throwing up images like a movie projector on a screen. In a sense, just as Plato’s Socrates speaks of a fallen world and the hard, essential process of ascent by one prisoner (the philosopher) towards light and truth, Al Farabi writes of removing the screen, the filter that masks or misrepresents reality, conceals the truth and clouds the mind’s eye. Al Farabi appears to be suggesting representation speaks to the body – conveying what Plato’s Socrates calls “the shadows of the images” – but it is the soul that senses reality or truth, sans the “screen”. (Plato, 2012: 327; Walzer, 1985: 173) It is in line with Socrates’ elaboration in the *Republic* of the “faculties in the soul – reason answering to the

³⁰ Appendix A

highest, understanding to the second, faith (or conviction) to the third, and perception of shadows to the last". (Plato, 2012: 324) Perhaps even more than Plato, and perhaps because of the ferment over dialectical theology in the Abbasid period, Al Farabi may also be speaking of the "screen" of words. This would be thrown up by "the rhetoricians, the eloquent, the poets, the musicians, the scribes" Al Farabi has identified as one of the five parts of the virtuous city.

Al Farabi elaborates on the many ways in which the faculty of representation works:

When representation of a thing is desired, it is attained in different ways: one through the direct action of the faculty of representation, such as representing what is hoped for and expected, or representing what happened in the past, or wishing for something which the faculty of representation puts together; the second by something being transmitted to the faculty of representation from the sense-perception of something and having been changed into something else represented as a thing to be feared or trusted or through some act of the rational faculty which has reached the representative faculty. (Walzer, 1985: 173)

Al Farabi is clearly warning against overly trusting the evidence of one's eyes and ears (and perhaps taste buds too) without stopping to exercise the faculty of reason. After all, a change might occur when something is transmitted to the faculty of representation from the sense-perception. This suggests the faculty of representation can alter reality and reason must be deployed in order to arrive at the truth.

He goes on to write that for "the bilious, insane and madmen and their like", their powers of representation show "things which are neither real nor imitate reality". (227) Going by his sharp words for the inhabitants of cities that are wicked, ignorant or have lost their way, it is clear that Al Farabi believes they, like "the bilious, insane and madmen and their like" have embraced a sense of "things which are neither real nor imitate reality". This, he suggests, occurs because the faculty of representation can display "reproductive imitation... Sometimes it imitates the things sensed by the five senses by combining the sensibles preserved in it which are imitations of the things sensed. Sometimes it imitates the intelligibles; sometimes it imitates the

nutritive faculty; and sometimes it imitates the appetitive faculty”. (211) Al Farabi’s reference to “reproductive imitation” – a representation that seems true but is not – echoes the rejection by Plato’s Socrates of “wholly imitative...mimetic art”. (Plato, 2012: 175) In Book III, Socrates even asked his interlocutors to consider if all imitation should be prohibited.

Al Farabi notes that the “highest rank of perfection which the faculty of representation can reach” is visionary prophecy. (Walzer, 1985: 225)

Below this man [the visionary prophet] are those who see all this partly in waking life and partly during sleep, and those who represent all these things in their soul but do not see them with their eyes. Below those are people who see all this during sleep only, and express their experience in imitating phrases, in allegories, in enigmatic phrases, substitutes and similies. (ibid.)

The reference to the prophet who sees “partly in waking life and partly during sleep” is consistent with earlier Arab philosophical writings by Al Kindi on prophetic dreams. Al Farabi agreed that the prophet-philosopher-ruler receives a revelation in the form of symbolic images that may come to him in his dreams. Adamson says Al Farabi thought the prophet’s imagination decoded the images received from God and subsequently represented them in a way his subjects could understand. (Adamson podcast series) Revelation requires “a symbolic interpretation”. (Rahman, 1964: 167) As previously noted, Al Farabi does not explicitly mention Islam or Muhammad, but it is clear the prophet of the world’s youngest revealed religion was an example close to hand of the highest form of representative art, its reception and dissemination. For less exalted people though, Al Farabi takes a dim view of “imitating phrases” and some aspects of creative thought and activity. This becomes clear from his commentary on the different art forms.

Did Al Farabi matter?

Did Al Farabi’s grading of the arts and its implications matter? Just how influential was he, anyway, in his day and among the Muslim thinkers who followed him? One might reasonably start with a comment from a lay observer of events in tenth century

Baghdad. Al Masudi, an intrepid traveller who is sometimes described as the ‘Arab Herodotus’, wrote 36 books, of which only two survive. Both of these surviving works – *The Meadows of Gold and Mines of Precious Gems* and the *Book of Admonition and Revision* – are considered “notable attempts at ‘global’ history”. (Lunde and Stone, 2007: 1-2) In *Meadows of Gold*, Al Masudi makes the following comment on Al Farabi in the context of the transmission of Greek science to the Arabs:

In our day the commentary of Matta Ibn Yunis on the logic of Aristotle is considered authoritative; he died during the caliphate of Radi. The torch was then passed to Abu Nasr Muhammad ibn Muhammad al Farabi, the student of Yuhanna ibn Haylan, who died in Damascus in the month of Rajab 339/950. I know no one today as learned as he, except one man, a Christian living in Baghdad, known as Abu Zakariya Ibn Adi... (43)

Was this simply a compliment to a contemporary, or recognition of Al Farabi’s standing? Al Farabi’s impact on Muslim thought is documented. It starts with his chapter in the *Ara* on the First Cause, God, which mentions “beauty and brilliance and splendour”. (Walzer, 1985: 83, 350) The idea is foreign to Hebraic tradition altogether but appeared in Islam due to the impact of Greek thought (and of Al Farabi). (351) More than a century later, the influential Persian philosopher and theologian Al Ghazali incorporated this doctrine, which he may have known from Al Farabi, into his main religious work *Revival of the Religious Sciences*. (ibid.) Ibn Sina (d.1037), who is considered the pre-eminent philosopher and physician of the Islamic world, “laid a great emphasis on the figurizing function of imagination in the Prophetic Revelation”. (Rahman, 1964: 167) Leo Strauss writes of Al Farabi and Ibn Sina’s philosophical blurring of the lines between religion and politics as follows:

Revelation as understood by Jews and Muslims has the character of Law (torah, shari'a) rather than of Faith. Accordingly, what first came to the sight of the Islamic and Jewish philosophers in their reflections on Revelation was not a creed or set of dogmas, but a social order, if an all-comprehensive order, which regulates not merely actions but thoughts or opinions as well.

Revelation thus understood lent itself to being interpreted by loyal philosophers as the perfect law, the perfect political order. (Arioli, 2014: 552)

At least one prominent Christian cleric of Al Farabi's day appeared to agree with the essence of his views on the unreliability of representation. Euty chius or Said Ibn Bitriq (d. 940), Patriarch of Alexandria, wrote:

All that men make, however, the way of those paintings and plans and images and models are only a resemblance of the sensible material creatures which they see and know. These can be perceived by the five senses because of their [the senses'] coarseness... They make material representations of things which, like them, are material... They are not able to imitate immaterial spiritual creatures which they do not see or know, such as angels, demons and souls, and they cannot give any of these an image or representation or model. How can one give an image of what one does not see nor sense? (Cachia and Watt, 1960: 30)

Euty chius was involving himself in a long-running argument among cultures around the Mediterranean about what made an image 'true'. This is a subject we will discuss in the next chapter. But Al Farabi's views on representation were not only about images per se but images created by words. He argued they should hew to the received truth, a universal, transcendent reality resplendent in religion and in philosophy, and thus allow for the attainment of happiness.

The extent to which Al Farabi's writings reflected the preoccupations of his people, in his time and beyond, may be seen in the writings of the Ikhwan Al Safa. Their writings are said to "constitute a marvelous epitome of the mixing of Aristotelianism and Neoplatonism in the cauldron of Islamic intellectual endeavour". (Netton, 2009: 109) Some scholars discern Plato's influence in Ikhwan doctrine and it's clear from their characterization of the body as a prison for the soul that they did know something of the *Republic* as well as the *Phaedo* and *Crito Dialogues*. (ibid.) It is possible the Ikhwan both knew of – and may have even drawn upon – Al Farabi's writings that used Plato's ideas. Certainly, the *Rasail* absorb many Platonic themes and motifs, not least in the Simile of the Two Islands.

Al Farabi's ideas, it seems, were well within the zeitgeist. As we shall discuss in the next chapter Al Farabi's real legacy may be the philosophical rationale for controlling creative expression in the Muslim world. In so doing he completed a

project begun by an Umayyad caliph with coins, and calligraphic inscriptions in the Dome of Rock. Just as the absence of images – figural representation – had become an image of Islam, a representation of the faith, Al Farabi's rationalization of controlled creative writing fed a further move to fashion the religion in a way that didn't grant legitimacy to new interpretation.

CHAPTER 3

THE STRUGGLE OVER IMAGES AND IMAGE-BUILDING

Historians generally use the term ‘iconoclasm’ for the period in Byzantine history that tumultuously paralleled the rise of Islam and the entrenchment of the new faith as a force to rival the Christian empire in the east. But ‘iconomachy’ or the struggle about images may be more “appropriate”. (Brubaker and Haldon, 2011: 7) There was a decided struggle over images in Byzantium from the late seventh century to the mid-ninth. It was never a mass movement for or against images, but a polarizing struggle for power that used images – or the rejection of them – as “a major form of propaganda and polemic on both the political and ecclesiastical levels”. (Elsner, 2012: 373)

It could be argued that iconomachy proved more debilitating than iconoclasm. Rather than a decisive burst of iconoclastic activity – say, a draconian, strictly enforced ban, the wholesale destruction of images and mass executions of their makers – successive Byzantine emperors struggled, with varying levels of commitment, for 126 years¹ to fine-tune state policy on religious representation and its uses. Until imperial iconoclasm finally ended with the so-called Triumph of Orthodoxy in 843, Byzantium was faced with worsening relations with the pope in Rome, although there are different views about the precise reasons.

What is undeniable is that iconomachy had far-reaching consequences. It contributed to a rift within the Christian church, sundering the Greek-speaking east from the Latin-speaking west and pushing the pope away from the Byzantine emperor and towards the Frankish king. The effects of this massive reorientation would not become fully apparent until the middle of the eleventh century.² Iconomachy helped eastern Christianity resolve its inner tussle over appropriate religious belief and practice. After the Triumph of Orthodoxy, the eastern church legitimized a way of worship that set it firmly apart from the Muslims. The struggle over images was even used to score symbolic geopolitical points about religious faith and identity between the rulers of Christian Byzantium and the Muslim caliphate, then in its first half-century of existence. The caliph played along in the ensuing “polemic of images” on coinage, which would be the first of many struggles for superiority between the two

¹ Leo III (717-741) to Michael III, who was crowned in 842, just one year before iconoclasm finally ended.

² The Great Schism of 1054

imperial systems. (Elsner, 2012: 374) It would have an effect that lasts until today, namely “Islamic art's break from the Greco-Roman representative tradition”. (ibid.)

But the intensity of the rhetoric of, and about Byzantine iconomachy has served to obscure “the variety of positions and responses [towards images] in the eastern Mediterranean (especially the world that had been Byzantine until the mid-seventh century but was by the eighth under the political control of Muslim conquerors)”. (369) Elsner points to “a vast and variegated richness” in attitudes towards representational art and its use in religion in Egypt and Syria, in different languages such as Coptic, Syriac, Armenian and Greek, and in Jewish, pre-Islamic, and Muslim cultures. (ibid.) In other words, hostility to images by Byzantine rulers and some senior churchmen cannot be taken to represent the views even of all Christians, let alone of the whole region. In any case, the issue of images was viewed very differently by Byzantium’s Christian rulers from their counterparts in the Muslim caliphate. They started from very different points of view, moved towards very different goals on distinct timelines, and cannot be seen as two halves of a whole. In fact, by the time Al Farabi, the system-builder of Islamic philosophy was born (872), holy images had been restored in Byzantium for nearly three decades and such forms of representation were not a pressing issue for its Muslim neighbour. They had never been, and certainly not in quite the way imagery was an issue for the Byzantines. But as we shall see, by Al Farabi’s time, the caliphate was concerned about a different sort of image – its own – and in a quite different form to traditional representational art.

However, some explanation is needed for the fact that the iconoclastic³ movement is so “clearly identified with trends injected into the life of Byzantine Christianity by Jewish and Muslim models” and that Byzantine imperial hostility to images is depicted as an imitation of the anti-imagist actions of Muslim caliphs, or as a defensive reaction to them. (von Grunebaum, 1962: 3) The best place to start a critical investigation would be, where else, but in seventh century Byzantium.

³ In line with “conventional usage”, the terms ‘iconoclasm’ and ‘iconoclast’ will be used, although the first is “anachronistic” and the second “pejorative”. (Brubaker and Haldon, 2011: 2)

Belief and practice in Byzantium

The seventh century was a particularly testing time for the east Roman empire. Alain Besancon describes “the perils and terrors of the Byzantine Middle Ages” as follows: the Persian wars, Arab attacks, Slavonic, Bulgar and Avar invasions. (Besancon, 2000: 114) Indeed, the first quarter of the century was occupied with Persian attacks and those from the Avar khanate (kingdom) in central Europe, which culminated in the coordinated Avar-Persian siege of Constantinople in 626. At the time, a relic-icon of Christ was credited with saving the imperial capital. After this, the Avars’ political and military power declined but the Persian threat persisted for another year.

The Byzantines remained harried anyway. They now faced rival upstarts, the Arabs. By 634, the Arabs had taken Damascus. The decisive 636 Battle of Yarmouk ended Byzantine rule in all of Syria. The next year, the Arabs captured Jerusalem and Gaza and within the next decade, the Byzantine empire had lost Egypt, its richest province. By 650, the empire had halved in size, lost its major agricultural base, and had dwindling financial and military reserves. It is significant that after 654, the Byzantines made no further attempt to re-take Egypt. The demoralization that followed these developments “was accentuated – and rhetorically overshadowed – by the heresy (in Byzantine eyes) of the instigators of these problems, Islam”. (Brubaker and Haldon, 2011: 777) Unsurprisingly then, texts about seventh century Byzantium portray the Arab invasions – and gains – as God’s punishment for the sins of the Chosen People. How could it be otherwise when the Roman empire was regarded as “God-guarded” and as the “sole legitimate empire sanctioned by divine decree”? (13, 11)

By the end of the seventh century, the Byzantines had given up hope that God would forgive their sins enough to permanently erase the Arab threat. “It was no longer possible to expect that Islam and the Arab threat was going to be overcome by force, diplomacy or an act of God”. (778) The Arabs had overcome civil conflicts – the first *fitna* (656-61) and then a second period of great disorder, the second *fitna* (680 to roughly 692). After the caliphate had reconciled under Abd Al Malik, he of the charged polemic of images with his Byzantine counterpart, it had become “clear that Islam was not a temporary adversary”. (ibid.)

This is the context of two key developments right around that time. A Syriac-language work compiled by an anonymous writer from outside Byzantine territory shortly after 692 became enormously popular. And the Byzantine empire took the first forceful and official steps to differentiate itself from its Muslim neighbor.

The Syriac-language work was known as *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodios*. It looked forward to a recovery led by a great emperor who would destroy the power of the Arabs using the orthodox authority endowed by God. That doleful contemplation of the rise of the Arabs – or Ishmaelites as the author calls them – is considered noteworthy for its descriptions of devastation and tyranny, its belief that Arab success foreshadowed the end of the world, and the fact that this was one of the earliest written Christian responses to the Muslim Caliphate. That *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodios* enjoyed considerable influence in the mediaeval world – both in the Byzantine commonwealth and the Latin west – and set the tone for all subsequent Byzantine apocalyptic texts indicates the dark mood of the times.⁴ Of course, Christian reactions to Islam, which “are documented from an early date”, were hardly favourable to the new faith. (Daniel, 1960: 13) John of Damascus, who was born roughly fifty years after the Hijrah of 622, wrote about the “heresy of the Ishmaelites”. (Sahas, 1972) It is considered significant. John challenges Islam, casting it as a heresy, a corruption of orthodox Christianity. In the late seventh century, a formula for the abjuration of Islam for Christians returning to the fold may be related to John’s work. (Daniel, 1960) The formula “confused Islam itself with pre-Islamic paganism, and associated an idol of Aphrodite with the kabah”. (13) The formula’s nineteenth century editor, Edouard-Louis Montet, described it as “at once exact and mistaken”. (ibid.) What the formula, John’s writings and the polemic that followed was to create was “a deformed image” of Islam by “misapprehension and misrepresentation”. (12)⁵ The tradition continued in later centuries. The ninth century polemic *Anatrophe* by Nicetas of Byzantium picks “piecemeal at the Quran; it does not

⁴ Around 686, when there was an outbreak of plague in eastern Syria, John of Phenek, a monk, was writing about the Muslim conquests as a sign the “the end of the world has arrived”. (Brubaker and Haldon, 2011: 778)

⁵ “By misapprehension and misrepresentation, a notion of the ideas and beliefs of one society can pass into the accepted myths of another society in a form so distorted that its relation to the original facts is sometimes barely discernible”. (Daniel, 1960: 12)

even try to understand the Quran before refuting it”. (15)⁶ *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodios* was just one of the earliest examples of anti-Islam polemic in the east.

Right around that time, the 692 Quinisext Council called by the emperor provided the first known Byzantine canonical legislation about religious images. Quinisext said that Christ’s incarnation justified and required holy portraits because his redemption of humanity depended on his real human death. (Brubaker and Haldon, 2011) Three canons from the Quinisext Council are regarded “as key steps toward a fully theological articulation of images within church practice”. (Elsner, 2012: 377) In an attempt to purify Byzantine religious practice, the canons restricted what the council saw as excesses, objected to images that corrupt the mind and placed a “premium” on the representation of Christ as a man. (ibid.) Instead of the lamb as a symbol of Christ on icons, “Christ our Lord...shall stand in his human aspect,” Quinisext ruled. (Besancon, 2000: 122)

This theological justification of icons, which both sought to regulate and expand representational possibilities in the religious sphere unambiguously distinguished the Byzantine empire from the Muslim caliphate next door. But Quinisext “seems to have followed rather than precipitated the changing role of the sacred image”. (Brubaker and Haldon, 2011: 61) In other words, the Byzantines were clinging to icons and holy images as a spiritual force protection of sorts against “the perils and terrors” of the seventh century. Quinisext’s authority – and rulings – weren’t accepted by the pope in Rome. The dispute was about several issues, not least the marriage of priests. However, the ban on some forms of representation of Christ (as a lamb, for instance) was also looked upon askance in the west.

Meanwhile, Byzantium set out to express its official recognition of holy images and assert the force of its religious identity through radical changes in the design of coins. Emperor Justinian II⁷ replaced his image on coins with that of Christ and the words ‘rex regnantium’ or King of Kings. On the reverse, the emperor was described

⁶ In the twelfth century, Peter the Venerable, abbot of the Benedictine abbey of Cluny in France, commissioned a translation of the Quran from Robert of Ketton. It was widely distributed among the libraries of Europe, but it’s not clear if it helped close the distance between Islamic and European thought. In Ketton’s translation, the classical verses that deal with subject of divine inspiration of Muhammad were dealt with “not accurately but without misrepresenting Islamic belief.” Christians persistently failed to realise the difference between Christ and Muhammad. For Christians, “the Bible derives its significance from Christ; but Muhammad derives his from the Quran.” (Daniel, 1960: 37, 53)

⁷ Justinian II had two shots at the job of emperor – 685-695 and 705-711.

as ‘servus Christi’, slave of Christ. This was seen as a direct challenge to Caliph Abd Al Malik. His name meant ‘slave of the chief’, but the Byzantine ruler was the slave of God, King of Kings. (Elsner, 2012) The caliph responded to Justinian’s coin with one that showed a standing figure with a sword or scabbard, which may have been caliph or the Prophet Muhammad himself. But this was followed by a wholly aniconic coinage. The response to Justinian's master stroke was an equal master stroke: “the decision to coin an entirely nonfigurative, epigraphic coinage, replacing images with Quranic texts, and, in effect, to deny that the game could any more be played by the old rules. His new kind of nonfigurative image heralded Islamic art's break from the Greco-Roman representative tradition”. (374)

As Elsner further points out, this “dialogue” over coinage was prefatory to other symbolic struggles between Byzantine and Caliphate rulers even as their armies faced-off on the battlefield. (ibid.) In 691, Abd Al Malik completed the Dome of the Rock, the first monument of the new Muslim faith. It represented Islam just like on the coinage – aniconically – with script as decoration and no figures. Caliph Umar II (717-20), the defeated party when Emperor Leo III broke the Muslim siege of Constantinople in 717-18, covered up the mosaics of the Great Mosque in Damascus with white cloths. Umar’s successor Yazid II (720-24), who is greatly reviled by iconophile Christian theologians, supposedly issued an edict that ordered the destruction of images in churches, but some doubt has been cast on this. Christian Sahner argues with some justification that it is shortsighted to dismiss Yazid’s “decree as historical fiction...on the false assumption that the edict was mentioned exclusively in Christian texts, especially those of Byzantine provenance. While we can debate the original purpose and scope of the edict, it is undeniable in my view that Yazid did promulgate some kind of law...there are simply too many non-overlapping accounts of the edict from too wide an array of communities, regions, and languages to account for the information otherwise”. (Sahner, 2017: 9)

Fair enough, but the alleged scope and timing of Yazid’s edict is interesting. It could provide grounds to argue that Byzantine Emperor Leo III, notorious as the first royal iconoclast, was either being imitative of, or was intimidated by his Muslim counterpart. Leo III, who was crowned in 717, three years before Yazid II, is said to have introduced “imperial iconoclasm, in particular by the promulgation of an edict in

the year 726 or 730” on the removal of icons. (Brubaker and Haldon, 2011: 79) This is supposed to have been an attempt to purify the Christian faith of idolatry and evade “divine wrath”, which seemed manifest in events that occurred from within a few weeks of Leo III’s coronation. (ibid.) In 717, it was the approaching armies and fleet of the Arab General Maslama. Around 726, severe volcanic eruptions on two Aegean islands were seen as another sign of God’s ire.

History continues to identify Leo III as the man who set in motion a chain of events that would drive social, political, cultural and religious developments in the eastern and western churches; in Byzantium and further afield, around the Mediterranean. Starting either in 726 or 730 (sources don’t agree on the exact year) Leo III’s policies caused the Byzantine empire to adhere to an imperial iconoclasm for at least 85 and at most, 89 years. This was in two periods now known as the first and second iconoclasm: 726/30-787 and 815-843. Although the broad outlines of the historical depiction of Leo III’s role in iconoclasm are accurate, the inner shading raises questions. Doubt is cast on the veracity of many accounts, events, and even textual material such as letters and edicts. As we shall see, parts of the narrative about Byzantine iconoclasm, especially with respect to the Muslims as a trigger, just don’t stand up to scrutiny.

True or false

After iconoclasm ended in 843, it was explained as the baleful result of Muslim and Jewish influences on Christian rulers. But even when iconoclasm was in effect, with varying degrees of state acceptance or rejection of the worship, placement, value and function of icons and images, abuse was heaped on the Arabs as the role models for Byzantium’s first imperial iconoclast Leo III. Saint Theophanes the Confessor, a chronicler of the church born roughly two decades after Leo III’s death in 741, claimed the emperor was in error about the worship of holy icons and that he abominated saints’ relics too “like his mentors, the Arabs”. (39) This was wrong, just on the facts. Even the iconophile Council of Nicaea of 787 didn’t accuse the anti-image faction of relic destruction. And even Leo V, who reinstated iconoclasm in 815, is known to have sent relics to Venice. There is, in fact, “no contemporary evidence that the iconoclast emperors were opposed to intercession, or that they destroyed relics”. (ibid.)

Furthermore, doubt is cast on whether Leo III really did issue an official edict on the removal of icons and if he really ordered the pope to do the same. Might he simply have written to seek papal support for removing images from positions where they might receive devotion rightly due to God? (Brubaker and Haldon, 2011) There is no certainty either if Leo's alleged actions were a misguided attempt to claim higher moral ground than the Muslim rulers next door. According to the sequence of events gleaned from the available narrative, which is of course, iconophile, Caliph Yazid II had images in sanctuaries and homes in the occupied provinces destroyed. This led the "energetic" Leo III to take a parallel initiative and have the "venerated image" of Christ above the Chalke Gate of the imperial palace destroyed in 730. (Besancon, 2000: 114, 115) "The results were a civil war...until 843; vast ruins; countless martyrs; the destruction of nearly all of the icons (those saved, like the icons of Saint Catherine of Sinai, were for the most part in Muslim territory and escaped the less destructive rage of Islam)". (ibid.) That sequence is narrated by the distinguished French historian Alain Besancon. It is interesting for two reasons. First, it accepts the iconophile narrative as factual. Second, it enshrines a paradox but does not recognize it as such. How was it that icons were saved because Islam's was a "less destructive rage" and yet Islam had the capacity and the will to malevolently affect Christian practice? The paradox is worth exploring, and we will get to it. For now, it is enough to point out that the chronology – and even some of the main occurrences – are disputed. The incident involving the Chalke Christ, which "became the key icon whose destruction would be forever associated with the inception of iconoclasm" has been seen from 1990 as "a fabrication of the late eighth or early ninth century". (Elsner, 2012: 377) There are, in any case, no contemporary accounts of the Chalke Gate event, only later ones, which some scholars describe as "romantic and propagandistic elaborations". (Brubaker and Haldon, 2011: 128) As has been pointed out, even the iconophile 787 Nicaea Council, which ended iconoclasm, doesn't mention the Chalke incident. (ibid.)

It's also worth noting that accounts of the rioting and rampant image destruction after iconoclasm began, don't mention any other specific incident, executions or persecutions during the rest of Leo III's reign. Even his *Ecloga*⁸ or legal code makes

⁸ Considered the most important Byzantine legal work after the sixth century Code of Justinian.

no mention of images or any penalties for making or venerating them. “What is important is how little iconoclasm we can in fact establish for the first decades of the period we call Iconoclastic”. (Elsner, 2012: 377)

This raises a basic question: Why? Why are the accounts so skewed and why are they skewed in the way they are? One answer is obvious. History is written by the victors, in this case, the iconophiles. If interpolations are a problem in the seventh, eighth and ninth century Byzantine texts now available to scholars, it could be that the iconophiles re-interpreted events as they saw fit. (Brubaker and Haldon, 2011: 58) This may have been mendacious – to present the policies of iconoclast emperors as a deviation from fundamental modes of Christian behaviour and practice – but sometimes it may have been a more innocent attempt to edit an old text in a way that situated it in the post-843 world.⁹

What appears to be a great deal less innocent is the way the narrative takes Jewish and Islamic influences as primary reasons for Byzantine iconoclasm. “Spirit and chronology – both seem to justify the explanation of iconoclasm as an effect of Muslim and Jewish influences”. (von Grunebaum, 1962: 3) It is undeniably true that a “visual discourse” pervaded the “competition for imperial authority and religious doctrine (both within Christian factionalism and between Christianity and Islam)”. (Elsner, 2012: 376) And it is right to say that it is within this context that the specific developments of Byzantine iconoclasm must be placed. But how big an impact did Judaism and Islam really have on Byzantine iconoclasm?

It’s safe to say there was synchronicity of a sort. As pointed out in Chapter 1, the hardening of Muslim antagonism against images, especially in the religious sphere, can be traced. There was a different attitude in the late eighth century compared to that in the mid-seventh. Von Grunebaum recounts the trajectory over roughly 150 years: In the mid-seventh century, Umar, a companion of the Prophet, gave a Syrian censer adorned with figures “to perfume the mosque of the Prophet [but]... in a

⁹ Deviant iconoclastic emperors were made responsible for the schism in the church, the disappearance of classic education in Byzantium and many other evils. For instance, the breach in relations between Rome and Constantinople over religious issues is suggested by the texts but “there is absolutely no evidence [of it] until 754 at the very earliest, even if relations were strained”. (Brubaker and Haldon, 2011: 85) Any rift between Rome and Constantinople from the early 730s to 739/40 could have been on account of Byzantine attempts to strengthen the control and management of resources.

significant incident, in 785 a governor of Medina had the human figures erased...” (von Grunebaum , 1962: 3) But Byzantine iconoclasm seems to have started much after the Muslim lands were done with the basics of the issue of religious images, as we shall see. In churches under Islamic rule, figural decoration apparently died out before Byzantine iconoclasm began.¹⁰ This may have had some effect on Christians in neighbouring Byzantium. There is evidence from the second half of the seventh century and the first half of the eighth, that “inter-communal relations in the conquered lands involved an awareness on all sides, at least among the theologically educated and literate – Muslims, the various Christian confessions, and Judaism – of one another’s textual traditions and major theological themes”. (Brubaker and Haldon, 2011: 106) The exchange of ideas and motifs were “part of a continuum which did not respect political boundaries”. (ibid.)

That continuum assumed ominous form in the writings of some prominent iconophile Christian priests in Dar Al Islam. One such was Theodore Abu Qurrah, who served as bishop of Harran, now Turkey, from 795 to 812 and was a student of John of Damascus.¹¹ John, it should be noted, is considered “the real founder” of the eastern Christian tradition of anti-Islamic polemic. (Daniel, 1960: 13-14) In his treatise on images, Abu Qurrah, who wrote in Arabic, mentions the “unacceptable state of affairs” of which he had learned. This was as follows: "that many Christians are abandoning prostration to the image of Christ...and to the images of his saints...because non-Christians, and especially those who claim to be in possession of a scripture sent down from God, rebuke them for their prostration to these images, and because of it impute to them the worship of the idols, and the infringement of what God commanded in the Torah and the prophets, and they sneer at them". (Griffith, 1985: 58)

The reference to a sneering, harrying group of people “who claim to be in possession of a scripture sent down from God” is telling. Abu Qurrah had to be talking about Muslims, so recently formed into a faith group on the basis of the revelations Prophet Muhammad claimed he received from God. While diatribes

¹⁰ The Church of St George at Deir Al Adas in southern Syria, 722, has the last dated floor with figural mosaics in Muslim lands. (Brubaker and Haldon, 2011)

¹¹ John of Damascus is regarded as one of the central figures in the thought of the eastern church and his major theological offering, *The Source of Knowledge* probably served as the model for St Thomas Aquinas’s *Summa theologiae*, the most important work of western scholasticism.

against Jews had been on the rise too, the Muslim conquerors were increasingly blamed for the Christian re-think of image-veneration. Abu Qurrah's treatise appears to sum up the angry defensiveness of iconophile Christian clergy and theologians with respect to Islam in comparison to Christian practice. However, in this context, it is interesting to note that eastern Asia Minor – which was Christian and part of the Byzantine empire – shared with Muslims a predisposition to hostility to figural religious representation. It was in the eastern part of Byzantium that important sections of Leo III's army were based. Therefore, it must have been heartening for the emperor to have his measures to restrict the worship of images “as loyally indorsed (sic) in eastern Anatolia as they were bitterly opposed in the Hellenic centers of the western part of the Empire”. (von Grunebaum, 1962: 6)

Even those who argue that Judaism and Islam “cannot be ruled out as sources of his [Leo III's] iconoclastic views” concede that “the full theoretical articulation of Iconoclasm is a specific development of Christianity in the East and is probably unthinkable without the survival of classical trends in the Byzantine world”. (Barasch, 2000: 54) The antagonism to images within the Greek church can be traced way back, to long before Islam's emergence.

The church and iconomachy

Early Christianity had a conflicted attitude to images, which meant a prolonged iconomachy in slow motion. There was the biblical prohibition of graven images, which prompted “a certain low-level iconophobic unease”. (Elsner, 2012: 371) And there was the modest development of a specifically Christian art in the early centuries of Christianity. This included graffiti and signs for initiates on the walls of catacombs and the meaning given by believers to the representation of say, a garden or a palm tree. From the late second century, there were specifically Christian symbols such as the miracle of bread and fishes as well as more arcane ones such as ichthus (fish) an acronym for Christ.

The church imposed no programme for or against religious symbols but theologians and Christian writers tried to plug the gap. Origen, one of the most influential figures in early Christian theology, distinguished between the ‘image’ (*eikon* in Greek), the truthful representation of an existing thing, and the ‘idol’

(*eidolon*), a false representation of what does not exist. (Besancon, 2000) Clement of Alexandria, a Father of the early Greek church, said statues were “unclean and loathsome spirits” who haunt graves, and that men can even fall in love with them because images in general have a morally corrupting influence. (Barasch, 2000: 52) As Elsner notes, “from the fourth century and certainly the fifth – the moment of Christian hegemonic ascendancy – there is plenty of evidence, both literary and in the archaeological record, for Christian destruction of pagan idols and sanctuaries”. (Elsner, 2012: 372)

This emerged from the notion of what was seemly for God. It was an idea passed down from pre-Socratic philosophers such as Xenophanes and addressed by Euripides, Plato and Cicero, among others. The Church Fathers made seemliness for the divine “a pillar of Christian theology”. (Besancon, 2000: 20) Iconoclasm is founded on the belief that “every figure and in particular, every human figure or every figure made by human hands, is unseemly and blasphemous”. (ibid.) Worshipping an idol, or the representation of a false god is, according to Gregory of Nazianzus, the fourth century archbishop of Constantinople, a “transferral to the creature of the honor due the creator”. (66) In other words, entirely unseemly. There is unmistakable resonance with Leo III’s concerns 400 years later in Byzantium about images receiving devotion rightly due to God alone.

The educated classes of Hellenistic and Roman society had anyway long thought the belief in idols “primitive superstition, characteristic of the uncouth and illiterate” and this affected early Christian thought. (Barasch, 2000: 49)¹² But unrestrained devotion by the “uncouth and illiterate” was not limited to pre-Christian times or to the cult of icons and sacred images in Byzantium between the sixth to eighth centuries. The aniconic Muslims too pored over “different facets of the image of the Prophet”, as portrayed by preachers in stories about his behaviour, personal life, personality, looks and words. (Schimmel, 1985: 7) “In the oldest days, no official

¹² Confession coaxed by Roman poet Horace from a wooden statue of a god: “Once upon a time I was the trunk of a wild fig-tree, a useless log, when a carpenter, after some doubt as to whether to make me a privy or a Priapus, decided to make me into a god. So I am the greatest deterrent of thieves and birds.” (Barasch, 2000: 49) Of course, the masses venerate religious figures quite differently from the learned, with greater frequency and enthusiasm. This was the case with the Prophet of Islam too. Muhammad Maher Hamadeh’s 1965 unpublished PhD dissertation *Muhammad the Prophet; a Selected Bibliography* “lists 1,548 different titles dealing explicitly with Muhammad. . . By broadening the base and including materials of a more popular nature, the number could be extended ad infinitum.” (Royster, 1972: 49)

doctrine concerning the sinlessness of the Prophet was known” but the thirst to know about the Prophet and venerate his moral purity grew more intense with the greater distance in time. (58) A tradition gradually developed in which “the popular preachers enjoyed depicting the Prophet in wonderful colours, adding even the most insignificant details (thus, that he had only seventeen white hairs in his beard)”. (32) Just like the educated classes in Hellenistic and Roman society, more sober Muslim theologians looked askance upon these “pious, well-meant exaggerations”. (ibid.) Not only is the Prophet venerated, so is his family, something that “is important not only from the religious viewpoint...it also developed into a decisive factor in the political history of Islam”. (19)¹³ The celebration of the Prophet’s birthday is an example of the growing veneration of Muhammad during the Middle Ages. In the late eighth century, Abbasid Caliph Harun Al Rashid’s mother transformed the Meccan house in which the Prophet was born into an oratory and pilgrims performing the *hajj* “visited it in pious awe”. (145) From Fatimid Egypt (969-1171), emerged the trend of marking *maulid*, the Prophet’s birthday, with large-scale festivities. (ibid.) There is a decided sense of carnival, an attempt almost to celebrate a Muslim version of Christmas. (ibid.) Schimmel detects in the Muslim veneration “influences from or similarities to Christian or Hellenistic-Gnostic ideas”, which again signals the traffic in ideas and practices between the religious and cultural traditions of the region. (7)

Christian ideas about images underwent a significant change in 312 when Constantine became the first Roman emperor to convert to Christianity. An imperial pagan art already existed and “only a slight shift was needed to make it a Christian art”. (Besancon, 2000: 110) Even before he became a Christian, the Roman emperor’s image was considered on a par with the emperor himself.¹⁴ It had his authority and was invested with his presence. In the pre-Christian Roman empire, the one icon that indisputably and officially incarnated a god was the emperor’s statue. (Besancon, 2000) The imperial theology had the emperor as “delegate of the supreme God”, “earthly replica of the sun”, the “living law” and everything he touched or used was deemed sacred. (59, 60)¹⁵ When he became a Christian, Constantine simply adapted

¹³ The political implications are, of course, the Shia-Sunni split.

¹⁴ Barasch notes that a fugitive reaching an imperial effigy was granted ten days’ asylum.

¹⁵ There was a monotheistic logic of a sort in this imperial cult. It could be considered “consonant with the theology of Plotinus: the One, the transcendent God, Thought, the mediating God, the Soul, which diffused the divine to every level of reality”. And it is also consonant with the Christian theology of Origen and Eusebius in that there is a transcendent God the Father and the Logos that governed the world. (Besancon, 2000: 60)

the imperial cult to become “a double for the triumphant Messiah...incarnation of the Logos”. (61) In fact, the Roman ruler became a mediator “between gods and men. The emperor was the second god, whom the transcendent God used to govern the world...(and) paganism became systematised under the influence of imperial ideology”. (59) The dangers of this for the church were obvious. There was the biblical prohibition on images and the warnings against idolatry by the Church Fathers, but the church still had to accept that the “colossal statue of the emperor [would be] the only image persisting from pagan antiquity”. (61) Images of all the other pagan gods were demolished after Constantine’s conversion but not of the emperor, the entity that Besancon calls the “political god”. (70)

Some refused to imbibe the new prescribed cocktail of Christian and imperial theology. Eusebius, a fourth century historian of Christianity and bishop of Caesarea where the Church Father Origen had taught, denied even the possibility of a portrait of Christ. His ‘Letter to Constantia’, the emperor’s sister, said as much. “What image of Christ are you seeking?” the letter asked. “Could it be the true and immutable, the one that possesses by nature its own characteristics, or could it be the one that [Christ] assumed for us, when he assumed the shape (skhema) of the servant?” Eusebius goes on to point out that Christ “possesses two forms, but I myself cannot think that you are asking for an image of the divine form; in fact, Christ himself taught you that no one knows the Father except the Son, and that no one was worthy to know the Son except the Father who begat him: I must therefore think you are asking for [the image] of the servant form and of the flesh he assumed for us. Yet, of it we have learned that it was mixed with the glory of divinity and that what is mortal was swallowed up by life”. (117-118) The ‘Letter to Constantia’ would serve as “a valuable patristic witness for the iconoclasts and was constantly evoked”. (118) It’s not hard to see why. Not only does Eusebius reject an image of Christ, he denies it is even possible to paint a portrait of the divine essence. As Besancon notes, “For Eusebius, God never truly becomes man: he appears”. (ibid.)

Even so, Roman imperial theology tacked on to the Christian faith meant the cult of religious relics and icons became a sunshine sector. Everything physically associated with the emperor had already been considered sacred. Now, the cult of relics was cast in the mould of the cult of the emperor. Any material object that had

been in physical contact with a Christian saint or was supposed to be part of his body became a relic with something of the saints' supernatural powers. (Barasch, 2000: 53) In the fifth century, when reliquary boxes decorated with religious images became available, emperors also started to appear on icons. Besancon describes an image in a convent in the Constantinople suburb of Blachern that shows an enthroned Virgin with Emperor Leo I, his wife, daughter and son and heir around her. The next century saw emperors actually encouraging the veneration of religious images, allowing them "to occupy the place of their [the emperors'] own images and hence to be the objects of the overtly pagan worship these images had always received". (Besancon, 2000: 114) From 527, the reign of Justinian, theologians began to offer nuanced reasons to worship sacred images – they are 'reminders' of him whom they portray even though the learned men admitted there was a "distance between the symbol and what it symbolised". (Barasch, 2000: 53) At the height of the iconomachy of the eighth century, John of Damascus stressed this function of the image, writing that a picture of Christ "reminds" Christians of their saviour.

Unsurprisingly then, icons became widespread and were to be found everywhere – at the head of armies marching into battle, in homes, outside shops, among travellers' treasured possessions. People believed that icons spoke and that they bled. There were reports of an icon of Christ that bled when attacked by Jews or Saracens. (ibid.) Legends grew about the miracles performed by statues and images of Christ, the Virgin and the saints. Christian priests even scraped bits off icons into the Eucharist wine "as if to add to the real Presence [of God] the miraculous presence of the icon". (Besancon, 2000: 114)

This was the state of play when the Muslim state and its armies appeared on the horizon and started to encroach on Byzantine territory and the empire's sense of physical and psychological security. "The state, the church, and the individual orthodox believer – all in a state of spiritual crisis – needed help, in the form of new channels of access to divinity. Relics worked, but they were not infinitely reproducible, and images-not-made by human hand [acheropoieta such as Veronica's Veil and the Icon of Edessa] were even rarer". (Brubaker and Haldon, 2011: 782) Images made by humans became acceptable stand-ins, which meant improved status for artists, who had thus far been relegated to artisans' guilds with painters grouped

with the druggists who prepared their paints and sculptors with the stonemasons. (Barasch, 2000: 372) An industry of sorts sprang up around religious imagery, with monasteries becoming major producers and heavily invested in the veneration of images.

Some historians question if there really was “more of a cult of images” from the sixth to the eighth centuries or just more “textual noise” about images. (Elsner, 2012) All that’s certain is there was iconomachy, a discernible struggle about images, one that had existed in some form or other from early Christian times. But between the sixth and eighth centuries, the rationale advanced for images is illustrative of, at the very least, a perceived need to respond to the debate. Around 600, much before imperial iconoclasm began, Pope Gregory the Great remonstrated with Serenus, Bishop of Marseilles, who had all the images in his episcopal city destroyed. “It is one thing to worship a painting”, the pope wrote, “and quite another to learn from a scene represented in a painting what ought to be worshipped. For what writing provides for people who read, paintings provide for the illiterate (*idiotis*) who look at them, since these unlearned people see what they must imitate; paintings are books for those who do not know their letters...” (Besancon, 2000: 149) The pedagogical and rhetorical function of the image discerned by Gregory chimed with Horace’s analogy *ut pictura poesis* (as is painting so is poetry).

From outside Byzantium, Abu Qurrah, the Christian iconophile priest, wrote that images are the writing of the illiterate and the bodiliness that images imply is no more attributable to God than is the bodiliness, which the language of the scriptures implies. It’s thought that Abu Qurrah wrote his tract on images after 787 when the first iconoclasm ended. (Griffith, 1985)¹⁶ This suggests he was arguing a case already won but the iconomachy continued and so did the debate. In the following century, the German monk Walafriid Strabo reiterated that “the picture is a kind of literature for the uneducated man”. (Barasch, 2000: 64)

¹⁶ “For a long time after the discovery of Abu Qurrah’s tract on images, scholars were of the opinion that he must have composed it before the year 787, since he nowhere in it mentioned the Second Council of Nicaea, which took place in that year... In 1963, Ignace Dick was able to show that Abu Qurrah could not have written his tract until after the year 799. What makes this conclusion certain is the fact that in chapter sixteen of the tract on images Abu Qurrah alludes to the story of the Muslim convert to Christianity, St. Anthony Ruwah, who was killed at Raqqah, not far from Harran, by the order of the caliph, Harun al-Rashid (786-809), on December 25, 799.” (Griffith, 1985: 57)

The seventh, eighth and ninth century defense of images as just another medium for what is conveyed through words is worth noting. It will come up later, in a different context when we consider the Muslim response to images during and after Byzantine iconomachy. But with respect to the church, the rhetorical use of images had been argued much before Byzantine iconoclasm. In the fourth century, Basil, bishop of Caesarea Mazaca in Cappadocia, wrote: “What telling offers the ears, painting reveals silently by imitation”. (Besancon, 2000: 150) Somewhere round the same time, Gregory, Bishop of Nyssa, stressed: “the image is a book of language”. (ibid.) Barasch suggests that this was in line with adoption by iconodules¹⁷ of the Neoplatonist idea of ‘participation’ (*methexis*). In *Phaedo*, Plato describes the relationship between a universal idea and the sensible particulars by explaining the particular isn’t identical to the universal but also not divorced from it – it takes part in the universal. As Barasch puts it, for the defenders of images, “participation is not a category specific of the painted icon only: rather it is a universal principle...Even Scripture is a simile, or an image of the Divine”. (Barasch, 2000: 56-57)

The debate continued to rage and Elsner mentions a late sixth or early seventh century outbreak of iconoclasm against Christian images on the part of priests in Armenia as well as “a series of defenses of images against either iconophobic doubters or outright iconoclasts” in the same period. (Elsner, 2012: 377) He cautions that it’s not possible to be sure these events occurred because the reporting sources “are often later and always partisan, if not polemical”. (ibid.) That is hardly unexpected considering the interpolations previously discussed with respect to seventh, eighth and ninth century Byzantine texts. But if the Armenian outbreak is true (or even partially true) it would suggest that iconomachy at least, if not iconoclasm, was stirring in Byzantium even before the coming of Islam and the threat from the Muslim caliphate. If true, the Armenian iconomachy would have reprised Christian debates about images underway for hundreds of years. As Origen asked, so must have the Armenian clergy, how valid is an image of God and how true is any representation of the divine? Or as Dionysius Areopagita, the first Bishop of Athens in the first century asked, how can God appear to humanity, and how can God, who is beyond matter, be revealed in a world of material things? And finally, the Armenian

¹⁷ “The general conviction of the iconodules – as expressed first by the patriarch Germanus at the beginning of the crisis, in 725 – was that to reject icons was also to reject the Incarnation”. (Besancon, 2000: 126)

priests may have wondered, can the inaccessible divinity of Christ be circumscribed or confined? Is it sinful to honour anything but God in the way one would God? Christians had been discussing these issues for centuries with Theodore the Studite¹⁸ addressing the tricky question of whether Christ is seen on the icon or just his human nature. Theodore's answer: in Christ, "the invisible shows itself". (Besancon, 2000: 130) In some ways, it may be fair to say the Christian debate on images "evolved in a ready-made context". (Brubaker and Haldon, 2011: 40) Arguments were made within the "rhetorical structure" set up by philosophical deliberations over hundreds of years. (ibid.) In the late second century, Clement of Alexandria said images could neither be divine nor sacred because they are material and the only true image is that of the pious Christian in whose soul God and the Holy Spirit reside. Origen took a similar position, as did fourth and fifth century theologians. The Council of Elvira (306) canonised the prohibition on images of the divine in churches. And then there was Eusebius's 'Letter to Constantia'.

Accordingly the fact iconoclasm manifested itself in Leo III's reign and was pursued with greater vigour by his successor Constantine V¹⁹ was not much of a surprise. Some see an undercurrent of "potential iconoclasm" running through the entire history of the church, which served as a "battleground of a continuing conflict of pro-iconic and anti-iconic tendencies". (von Grunebaum, 1962: 5) However, one significant change from those early debates did occur in the latter period of imperial iconoclasm, that is from the second half of the eighth century and in the ninth. There was a shift "from an emphasis on ontology (that is, the being of God) to a greater accent on epistemology (that is, how God is to be known)". (Elsner, 2012: 376)

The arguments advanced by John of Damascus in his three orations illustrate how this was achieved and the icon became acceptable, with a valid purpose and function. Elsner states, "Christology – that is, the precise definition of what the Incarnation means in terms of Jesus being both man and God – is the crucial mechanism for John's argument". (378) He takes on the issue of idolatry at the outset, in the first oration, then addresses "the Incarnation as the special case that justifies images". (ibid.) He quotes the Old Testament prohibitions on images and concludes

¹⁸ Theodore's Stoudion monastery was one of only two monastic communities that offered organised opposition to imperial iconoclasm, according to Brubaker and Haldon.

¹⁹ Constantine V (741-75) is considered the most iconoclastic of eighth and ninth century Byzantine emperors.

“that He forbids the making of images because of idolatry and that it is impossible to make an image of the immeasurable, uncircumscribed, invisible God”. (ibid.) But of Christ Incarnate, John writes: “When He who is bodiless and without form . . . is found in a body of flesh, then you may draw his image and show it to anyone willing to gaze upon it”. (ibid.) He suggests fearless discernment “between the different kinds of worship...For adoration is one thing, and that which is offered in order to honor something of great excellence is another”. (ibid.) He summarises his position as follows: “I do not worship matter; I worship the Creator of matter who became matter for my sake, who accepted to dwell in matter, who worked out my salvation through matter”. (ibid.) In the second half of his third oration, John develops the argument. Elsner writes: “the shift to the use of images in the process of approaching and honoring the Godhead is key”. (ibid.) John presents the image as “a likeness, a paradigm, an expression of something, showing in itself what is depicted in the image”. (ibid.) Rather than being idolatrous, images “reveal and make perceptible those things which are hidden”. (ibid.) Once images become a conduit or a means of knowing God, they assume an epistemological position. Overall though, the history of the image “under the Christian system... consists of an alternation between glory and extinction”. (Besancon, 2000: 379) Perhaps Byzantine iconoclasm then, should be seen as the penultimate plot twist in a story that had started to be written long before.

Muslim iconomachy?

Did Muslims struggle over images? Not in the way the Christian Byzantines did and not for the same reasons. After Caliph Abd Al Malik issued his riposte in coinage to Emperor Justinian II, Islam was demonstrably pursuing an aniconic agenda within seventy years of its founding. But it appears to have been afflicted with iconophobia rather than iconomachy and that too within a very specific context. As detailed in Chapter 1, in Muslim lands, art for the secular space was different from that for the religious. Imagery per se was not a problem, just the representation of living creatures, including human beings. The Great Mosque of Damascus, for instance, which dates to 715, has images, but they are unpeopled courtyard mosaics of rural houses and river landscapes. The prohibition on depicting living beings was strictly applied “only in the most holy areas of mosques”. (Brubaker, 2009: 39) There is little evidence of a struggle over images and their role in Muslim religious practice.

However, imagery may have come more generally into focus in the last quarter of Islam's first century. We can deduce this from "Rudi Paret's historical analysis of the chains of authorities who transmitted the several forms of the Islamic traditions about images". (Griffith, 1985: 68) He has shown they first entered public discourse...roughly in the period of the reign of the Caliph Abd Al Malik (685-705). (ibid.) This would explain why Abu Qurrah, the iconophile Christian priest, would take notice in his tract on images of a Muslim prophetic Hadith that rejects religious images. Abu Qurrah's reference "is one of the earliest documentary evidences of its currency". (65) As also of its popularity. That some of these early Hadith condemned images and their makers is significant because it offers "the first view of the development of an official Islamic antipathy to images of living things". (69)

But that still does not indicate a Muslim iconomachy of the kind that played out in Byzantium. Susanna Ognibene says of Islamic Palestine – part of the east Roman empire until the Arabs definitively claimed it in 638 – that Muslims displayed "iconophobia". (Brubaker and Haldon, 2011: 233) Sahner, however, describes the "predominant aesthetic posture in medieval Islam" as aniconism rather than iconoclasm. Muslims had a tendency to eschew representation in art rather than the proactive destruction of images. (Sahner, 2017: 9) Claims that policies such as Yazid's infamous if disputed edict spurred or even inspired Byzantine iconoclasm are seen to sit oddly with the behaviour of both Muslim leaders and followers during Islam's first century.

Islamic Palestine, and its many churches are a case in point. One of the wealthier provinces of Byzantium, predominantly Christian Palestine's churches were large and "lavishly decorated". (Brubaker, 2009: 52) Not only did the churches remain in use after the Arab conquest, they crucially appear not to have suffered any "hostile destruction" within or without. (54) What happened instead was the modification of the figural decoration by Christians themselves who lived under Muslim rule. (ibid.) "The disfigurement, when it appears, is so carefully done we must assume that the people who used and respected the buildings affected were responsible". (ibid.) The last dated floors with defaced figural mosaics in Muslim lands are: St Stephen's Church, Umm Al Rasas, 718, and Church on the Acropolis in Ma'in, 719/20, both in present-day Jordan, and the Church of St George at Deir Al

Adas in southern Syria, 722. (Brubaker and Haldon, 2011) “All subsequent eighth century churches in the region reveal only floral and geometric ornament” even though “Palestinian ‘iconoclasm’ was not consistently applied, ...and [may] have been a localized response rather than the realization of some anti-image edict by the ruling caliph”. (Brubaker, 2009: 52; Brubaker and Haldon, 2011: 107) In the second quarter of the eighth century, non-representational motifs replaced or partially replaced the people and animals originally depicted in church floor mosaics. (Brubaker, 2009)

The Palestinian Christians may have been attempting to negotiate social practice and sometimes, they did it so cleverly there was just enough left of a figure to make out what had been removed. (Brubaker, 2009)²⁰ This suggests the Christians were trying to go along to get along rather than because they agreed wholeheartedly with Islamic beliefs about representation. (ibid.) The pragmatism clearly indicated here seems to make a nonsense of Abu Qurrah’s complaint that Christians in the caliphate were increasingly iconophobic because they were genuinely convinced of the Muslim and Jewish case against images. (Griffith, 1985)

A further point emerges from Abu Qurrah’s fulminations on the alleged Muslim iconoclastic campaign against Christian religious practice in the caliphate. That he could write so openly – and in Arabic, no less – suggests the Muslim rulers were relaxed about dissonant Christian voices and permitted them to be heard. This, despite the caliphate, according to Griffith, progressively getting to the point of insisting that public monuments should proclaim only what the rulers considered to be the true religion. (ibid.) And yet, Abu Qurrah was allowed to be outspoken as we know from his writings. This is worth noting because Abu Qurrah did not fly below the radar. He was known to the Islamic scholarly establishment of his day. 'Isa ibn SabTh al-Murdar (d. 840) wrote a treatise "against Abu Qurrah, the Christian". (55) He also features in later accounts – his name appears in at least two places in the *Fihrist* of the Muslim bibliographer Ibn an-Nadim (d. 995). (ibid.) And Abu Qurrah travelled widely – “from Egypt to Armenia, and in the territories in between, preaching the Chalcedonian message and arguing with Jews, Muslims, and Jacobites

²⁰ The Palestinian Christians’ attempts to accommodate the Muslim attitude to images may have been like the Roman *damnatio memoriae*. When the Romans cut out the names of disgraced people on statuary, “they usually left the viewer with just enough information to identify the figure being damned”. (Brubaker, 2009: 55)

alike. (54) There is some speculation he may even have got to the caliph's court in Baghdad.

Suffice it to say, Abu Qurrah had his head above the parapet, but was still able to speak his mind. His writings, and those of his more famous mentor and predecessor at the Mar Saba monastery in Palestine, John of Damascus, are seen as key to the resistance to imperial iconoclasm in Byzantium. The issue must have been hotly debated in Mar Saba. Yet another priest from that monastery, Saint Stephen of Saba, judged influential in Palestine in the 780s, took a purist position on images. The purists stressed the role of the Eucharist, the cross and the use of prayer. (Brubaker and Haldon, 2011) They were dissatisfied with the monastic leadership's perceived tolerance of the flourishing of "beliefs and practices associated with the cult of saints – relics, miraculous cures, and so forth". (244)

That both Abu Qurrah and John of Damascus wrote in favour of image-veneration from Dar al Islam suggests they felt reasonably safe to speak out. They were admittedly beyond the reach of Byzantine prosecutions. (Besancon, 2000) But perhaps also the caliphate's treatment of Christians and their religious beliefs may not have been quite so oppressive or iconoclastic after all?

The Muslim way

Muslims had a distinctive way with respect to images. Unlike the Torah's multiple and clear prohibitions against figuration, the Quran is "almost mute" on the subject. (77) It is the Hadith, which obviously don't have the status and authority of the Quran, that offer "verbal condemnation of imagery and image-makers". (Brubaker, 2009: 38)²¹ The Hadith indicate early Muslim iconomachy of a sort. How then to explain the assured manner in which Muslims grasped the notion of representing the divine metaphorically much before the end of Islam's first century? (Besancon, 2000) It does not appear to have been a disputed path. Might this have been because of an unsaid truth recognized by Muslims, that "the notion of God, as the Muslim imagines it from the Quran, is sufficiently transcendent to discourage image-making at its

²¹ "Our main early text for this period, the Koran, maybe dating as a collection from the mid-seventh century and certainly in existence in some form by 690, barely mentions representation and certainly does not make any categorical statement about the right-ness or wrong-ness of literary or visual imagery". (Brubaker, 2009: 38)

root”? (81)²² As mentioned in Chapter 1, scholars have pointed out that even the Quranic *surah* condemning “intoxicants and gambling, sacrificing to stones, and (divination by) arrows” is not about figuration but idolatry, which is deemed as just one of several abominations. The stones referred to in the *surah* are “the upright stones of pre-Islamic Arabia, idols no doubt, but which do not seem to have been figurative”. (77)

Indeed, Muslims from the earliest times seem not to have even considered using mimetic art to represent Allah. “There was not so much a Jewish art as there were Jewish artists. Conversely, there were not so much Muslim artists as there was a Muslim art”. (ibid.) Besancon writes, “Even a simple carpet seems to have been oriented toward an inaccessible transcendence and designed to direct attention to it”. (79) As a Sufi master said, “I have never seen anything without seeing God in it”. (ibid.) And another Sufi’s confession: “I have never seen anything but God”. (ibid.) Projecting the written word [Quranic *surah*] onto a mosque’s cupola turned architectural space into “an icon without a figure”. (ibid.)

Therefore, while Caliph Abd Al Malik’s aniconic coinage and calligraphic decoration in the Dome of the Rock may have been the first grand metaphors of the Muslim way, “the iconography of the metaphor” probably had less to do with any one individual, however powerful. It may have come from something deep within the Muslim faith. “Every graphic sign, every work of art, refers to God, looks in his direction, yet never hopes to attain him”. (ibid.) Although it has been argued that Abd Al Malik’s abandonment of figural images on coins “is analogous to the image denial of iconoclasm” (Elsner, 2012: 385) it took a Christian iconophile priest to recognize that figures do not an icon make. Abu Qurrah declared that words are like icons and even though he was simply making the case for Christian holy images, his larger point is valid: the written word too is a form of representation; a word picture can evoke a response just as much as a painted one.

This is exactly what Al Farabi would be dealing with roughly a century later: the power of representation through the written word. He would consider the need to

²² “Jewish iconoclasm is a result of the Covenant. Conversely, Muslim iconoclasm is a result of the absence of a Covenant...It is because...no image of human fabrication can ‘stand’ before the Jewish God because he is too near, or before the Muslim God, because he is too far away”. (Besancon, 2000: 81)

regulate it, how best it could be done, and explain the philosophical rationale using Platonic arguments. By the time Al Farabi was pondering some of his key philosophical theories, figural representation was pretty much settled as an issue for Muslims. There *was* a Muslim way with respect to images and it wasn't in dispute. As detailed in Chapter 1, within 30 years of the Prophet's death in 632, Muslim art and creative expression had marked out two parallel paths depending on the context for which it was intended. There was art for the secular space, such as the palaces and bathhouses of the Umayyads (661-750). And there was the art considered appropriate for religious spaces. With Caliph Abd al-Malik's coinage bearing lines from the Quran and Quranic verse featuring in calligraphic decoration in the Dome of the Rock, the lack of image had become an image of Islam. The word was now the image. The importance of the written word – its meaning and its absorption – was also exemplified by the investment made by the Abbasids, the second Muslim dynasty, in the Greek-to-Arabic translation movement from the eighth to the tenth centuries. It's clear that by Al Farabi's time, if not well before, the Muslims knew the power of the word, whether attributed to God or from Hellenic thinkers and experts in diverse fields such as astronomy, medicine, geometry and science.²³

But in Al Farabi's time, as in all periods of political flux, the word may have had an especially baleful power. In Al Farabi's day, the Abbasid empire was markedly in decline, the caliphs increasingly facing a crisis of authority, both moral and political, and Islam's biggest project – the multi-ethnic commonwealth – seeming to be in trouble. As in most such fraught moments in history, what was written and said – whispered in the bazaar, cranked out in poorly-inked pamphlets, argued by learned men in treatises – would have been key. It is not too much of a stretch to see this as one reason Al Farabi took such keen interest in Plato's imaginary ideal state and the conditions he set for it to be viable. Byzantine iconoclasm wasn't mirrored in the Muslim caliphate next door and Muslims may not have been especially concerned about issues of figural representation in the spiritual sphere – for these were pretty much settled – but in tenth century Baghdad, representation through the word must have been important.

²³ “One of the interesting side effects of the Protestant attack on the real presence of Christian images was the triumph of text over image in the German (Protestant) tradition of writing about art, which ultimately became the discipline of art history.” (Elsner, 2012: 386)

Accordingly, like Plato, Al Farabi made the case for creative expression in service of the ideal ruler and thence, of the “virtuous city” and of the status quo. Just as Plato demanded poets in the ideal state tell stories of unvarying good, especially about the gods, Al Farabi singled out “praiseworthy” poems, melodies and songs for the virtuous city. Like Plato, Al Farabi believed writing had great power – for good or ill – and that writers had a responsibility to support social order. He was sensitive to the power of imagery and representation through language anyway, as well as the effects of rhetoric on the overheated imagination. (Heck, 2008) So it is not particularly surprising Al Farabi would offer justification for controlling the word by restricting representation to “praiseworthy” themes. That he did so using solidly Platonic concepts is also to be expected given his admiration for Plato. In the process, Al Farabi provided a rationale for something Muslims had been fine-tuning for a couple of hundred years – controlled representation. It would be important to the next phase of Islamic image-building and can justifiably be said to have helped concretise the way Islam understands and responds to creative expression.

CONCLUSIONS

This investigation began with early Muslims' attitude towards art and creative expression, went on to examine Plato's influence on Muslim philosophers such as Al Farabi and finished with a synoptic view of the struggle over images and image-building in the eastern Mediterranean region before and after the coming of Islam.

Three main points have emerged from this study. First, there really was nothing in Islam when it was founded in 622 to suggest it would develop in the way it has. But the death sentence passed on a twentieth century writer for his fictionalised account of the Prophet's life, the destruction of the monumental sixth century Buddha statues in Afghanistan, and the recent smashing of ancient artefacts in Palmyra and other historic sites in Iraq and Libya, shows the extent to which control of representation has become a generally accepted article of faith. This is not just in terms of figural art but word pictures as well. This change occurred in mediaeval times and it's clear that Al Farabi, the Muslim world's most original thinker, provided the philosophical rationale for control of creative writing. It is ironic he did so using arguments advanced by Plato, the western world's pre-eminent philosopher. And there is a further irony in the role played by Hellenic ideas in the development of Muslim thought. The wisdom of Greek philosophers contributed to Muslim intellectual emancipation. While the Greek-to-Arabic translation movement led to a period of sustained Arab intellectual activity in different fields, it also gave Al Farabi the philosophical tools to argue for a social order that sought to control creative expression and frowned upon innovation in thought and writing.

Second, the early Muslims didn't struggle over the use and validity of images in the way of their neighbours, the Christian Byzantines. Nonetheless, the Muslims do seem to have been conscious of the power of imagery. In Islam's very first century, the word became the image of the new faith. An Umayyad caliph used calligraphic inscriptions from the Quran – on coins and in architectural décor – as an austere textual representation of Islam. In the words of Hans Belting, as quoted in Chapter 1, the absence of representational images really had “become a program”. (Belting, 2011: 61)

Third, the early Muslims made a clear distinction between art for secular and sacred spaces. There was considerable latitude in the use of representational art in the secular space – personal objects, homes, palaces, bathhouses, the centre of Baghdad;

not so within mosques. This challenges the notion held by both Islamist fundamentalists and Islamophobes that the Muslim faith has never distinguished between the secular and sacred realms.

It's worth examining the three points in greater detail.

Representation – the changing view

The proscription of mimesis is now seen as a core tenet of the monotheistic Muslim faith but that's just not true when one considers the evidence. It's clear from the Quran, the actions of the Prophet Muhammad, the lifestyle of some of his closest companions and the habits and proclivities of ordinary people ruled by the first and second Muslim dynasties. What's striking in all of these is either the lack of a fixed view on figuration or a relatively relaxed attitude to it. Muslims seem to have been keen to ensure the use or placement of figural art didn't constitute *shirk*, which is to say idolatry or the worship of anyone or anything other than God. But other than that, there was no fixed authoritative opinion on the representation of sentient beings. This would explain the contradictions in the Prophet's behaviour when he destroyed the images of gods in the pre-Islamic pagan shrine of Kaaba except for a painting of the Virgin Mary and infant Jesus. This would also put in context ninth century Baghdad's frank appreciation of a brass statue of a Hindu goddess from India. The Prophet's actions in Kaaba could be seen as respectful pragmatism. As for ninth-century Baghdad, governed by the Abbasids, the gawking Muslims' response to the Hindu statue could be seen as similar to that of modern visitors to museum exhibitions in London, Paris, New York or Dubai. The Baghdadis seem to have been curious about the exotic offering. Much like today's museum visitors, they don't seem to have been judgemental about the display, in this case of pagan religious adulation.

All of this suggests an openness to figural representation – within specific contexts – in Islam's early centuries, even though in terms of religious practice, aniconism was favoured. Christian Sahner's comment, quoted in Chapter 3, is apt. The "predominant aesthetic posture in medieval Islam" was assuredly aniconism rather than iconoclasm and Muslims had a tendency to eschew representation in art rather than the proactive destruction of images. (Sahner, 2017: 9)

But that has clearly changed and rather violently so. In 1989, Ayatollah Khomeini issued a *fatwa* calling for the death of Salman Rushdie for writing *The Satanic Verses*. In 2001, the Taliban blew up the giant Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan. In 2015, armed Muslim gunmen attacked the Paris offices of *Charlie Hebdo*, a satirical magazine that habitually offended Muslim sensibilities. The magazine had just recently featured Michel Houellebecq's newest novel *Submission*, a futuristic and rather bleak vision of France under *sharia* law. And in the past few years, the extremist group ISIS repeatedly destroyed antiquities in countries across the Middle East and North Africa.

All of these were acts of iconoclasm and all are linked by a desire, in the name of Islam, to control representation, be it through imagery or the written word. That extreme interpretations of Islam have swung so far in 1,400 years – from aniconism in the religious space to a restrictive view of all representation, both figural and written – is startling. The role of influential Muslim philosophers such as Al Farabi and his use of Plato's ideas has not received the attention it should. Instead, the focus has been on the cacophony set up by various Hadith about art, creativity and representation. But as quoted in Chapter 2 from Alfred Guillaume's authoritative *The Traditions of Islam*, the bulk of Hadith literature was produced in the two-and-a-half centuries after the Prophet's death and not all the Hadith are considered sound anyway. Thus, they cannot be said to have been decisive in Muslims' changing attitude to representation, and certainly not with respect to images evoked by the written word. The cacophony reflects a basic truth: the field of ideas with respect to representation in the Muslim world was shifting and contested. In itself, this indicates how unsettled – provisional even – was Islam's initial attitude towards representation, especially in the secular space. What this means, of course, is that proscription of figural representation cannot be said to be a core tenet of the Islamic faith. It may be the modern assumption but it isn't accurate.

When attention is paid to the mediaeval Arab world's interest in philosophy, especially Hellenic thought, much of the scholarship focuses on Aristotle's exalted place. But Al Farabi's interest in Platonic thought and his attempt to naturalise it for the Muslim world was arguably more significant by far with respect to control of the written word. Richard Walzer notes that "In the use of Plato's *Republic* as a textbook

of political theory Al Farabi was followed by Ibn Rushd (as also in other important aspects of his thought)". (Walzer, 1962: 19) So when Ibn Rushd writes that allegorical interpretations [of scripture] "ought not to be expressed to the masses nor set down in rhetorical or dialectical books", some of the inspiration has to be obvious. (Ibn Rushd, 1961: 66)

In this context, it's worth noting Al Farabi's classification of the hierarchies of occupations and of different forms of knowledge and modes of cognition. His "virtuous city" had five parts: "the virtuous, the linguists, the assessors, the warriors, and the moneymakers". (Al Farabi, 2001: loc 701) He describes the virtuous as wise, prudent, and those who have opinions about major matters and goes on to say: "Then there are the transmitters of the creed and the linguists: they are the rhetoricians, the eloquent, the poets, the musicians, the scribes, and those who act in the same way as they do..." (ibid.) Not only did Al Farabi rank dialectic, poetics and rhetoric relative to the ideal of demonstration, he rather pointedly placed the virtuous and the linguists in different categories. It's all too apparent then that Al Farabi, like Plato in the *Republic*, was profoundly distrustful of artists/ writers and the intrinsic falsehood of the images they produced.

It appears obvious that Muslim philosophers played a role in Islam's changing view of creative expression through the written word. However, what cannot be established is whether they led the charge or simply provided their "generation with an adequate comprehension of itself as the product of its past". (Ware, 2000: 289) It is possible Al Farabi's philosophical endeavours exemplify Hegel's oft-quoted line that the owl of Minerva spreads its wings only at dusk, which is to say philosophy contextualises contemporary events but does not drive them. Perhaps for Al Farabi too, just as with Plato "against the backdrop of an ageing Aegean culture", philosophy was made to fit what Hegel called the "maturity of reality". (287) But in Al Farabi's time, the attitude to creative expression by means of the word does not seem to have been especially rigid. Intellectual debate was vigorous; Muslim thinkers were writing commentaries on all manner of subjects and assuming diverse, often controversial positions. In the circumstances, it's not clear if Al Farabi's prescription for control over creative writing in the "virtuous city" was a call to action or an attempt to offer intellectual heft to a process already underway.

The word as the image

It is reasonable to assume the process was at least partly underway and that Al Farabi's philosophical endeavours had a somewhat descriptive role. The Muslims, from the very beginning, knew the power of the word – after all, their most cherished, shared possession was a book. Geoffrey Roper says that after paper production was introduced from China, it “soon became widely adopted both for fine Qurans and for more mundane and secular texts. Many centres of paper production were established throughout the Muslim world”. (Roper, 2013: xix) As has been noted by scholars, within 150 years of the Greek-to-Arabic translation movement, i.e. by the year 1000, the number of Arabic translations of Greek was immense and surpassed “in a very impressive way” the number available at that time in Latin. (Walzer, 1962: 236) Clearly, the written word was in a commanding position in Muslim lands.

Then, within Islam's first century came Caliph Abd Al Malik's aniconic coinage – a riposte to the Byzantine Emperor Justinian II – and his calligraphic decoration in the Dome of the Rock, the first monument of the Muslim faith. Both actions enshrined the word as the image of Islam. The development of calligraphy followed, creating a distinctive nonfigurative image of the faith. As a community, the Muslims more than the Christians, seem to have recognised the truth of a concept that would be advanced by a Catholic pope, some senior Christian clergymen and the Christian iconophile priest Theodore Abu Qurrah in Palestine. Abu Qurrah said words are like icons too, or that the written word is a form of representation just as much as a painting or a statue. The Muslims seem to have been wholeheartedly in agreement.

This was the context within which Al Farabi provided his philosophical rationale for control over creative writing. It completed a project begun by an Umayyad caliph with coins and calligraphic inscriptions. And it could be said to have fed a further move to fashion the Islamic faith in a way that didn't grant legitimacy to new interpretation. Walzer has remarked on the seriousness with which Al Farabi applied Plato's ideas to his world: “...reading Plato's *Republic* was not a merely academic exercise in political theory for Al Farabi. It was meant as a very serious attempt at proposing a radical reform of the Islamic caliphate”. (243-244) This was, in the first instance, about the role of the ideal ruler of Al Farabi's “virtuous city”. However, social and political order in the Muslim world was also, in Al Farabi's

theory, inextricably linked to Platonic ideas about the intrinsic falsity of the visual arts, of which the written word was one.

Secular and sacred spaces

Originally, there was a measurable distance between the Muslim secular and sacred space but it gradually narrowed. The frescoes and paintings discovered at Qusayr Amra, Khirbat Al Mafjar and Qasr Al Hayr West are proof of the relaxed attitude to representation in the secular space. These palaces were, as Oleg Grabar has stressed, “private monuments for restricted usage and enjoyment; they are not official or formal art”. (Grabar, 1973: 91) But for a religious building, or any part of a building that might have a religious function, figural representation was consciously and clearly avoided. As described in Chapter 1, again drawing upon Grabar’s scholarship, the Umayyads’ Mshatta palace illustrated the distinction between treatment of sacred space as opposed to the secular. At Mshatta, there are carved animals on three walls but not on the fourth, which corresponds to the *qibla* wall that faced Mecca. By the end of the eighth century, however, Muslims’ search for visual symbols to express their worldview no longer followed the strict distinction between private art and that for official/religious purposes. And the non-figural iconographic content of mosque art and coinage became commonly accepted. Grabar has explained it as neither the result of “a doctrine nor of a precise intellectual or religious influence. It was rather the result of the impact on the Arabs of the prevalent arts”. (97-98)

All of this is clear enough, as well as the impact on Islam of the melding of sacred and secular spheres. But what’s also true is that Islam did initially maintain a separation between secular and sacred. When there was an attempt to fuse the two, as part of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the separation had to be renewed, as Sami Zubaida has described:

The task of the Islamic state was to implement the law of God, as interpreted by the leading *faqih*, the just jurist, in this case [Ayatollah] Khomeini himself. The constitution of the Republic enshrines the *sharia* as the law of the state. Yet...by 1988 Ayatollah Khomeini found it necessary to release the government from the commands of the *sharia* with the following formula: ‘[The Islamic state] is a branch of the absolute trusteeship of the Prophet...and

constitutes one of the primary ordinances of Islam, which has precedence over all other derived ordinances, such as prayer, fasting and pilgrimage' (quoted in Schirazi 1997:213). That is to say, the government is free to abrogate the most basic provisions of the law if it judges it necessary to the public interest. (Zubaida, 2003: 2)

Conservative clerics had obstructed legislation on the grounds it didn't conform to *sharia*, but Khomeini knew that effective governance required a response to changing circumstances and that these could never be anticipated by "God's rules [which are held to] govern social relationships and transactions". (1-2) He consequently used the concept of *maslaha*, 'utility' or 'public interest'. (3) Zubaida notes that "public authorities over the centuries of Muslim history, while declaring allegiance to the holy law, largely bypassed it in matters of state". (2) In a way then, Ayatollah Khomeini and other Muslim public authorities could be seen as enormously creative in running the affairs of the state.¹ Creativity, innovation even, was allowed to the philosopher-king or, as Al Farabi called him, the "virtuous ruler" but not to creative writers and artists. It is yet another sign that the secular-sacred distinction cannot be erased within modern Islam and that arguments about the limits of creative expression are not only about creativity itself but who is entitled to exercise it. This was as true for Plato and Al Farabi and their interlocutors as it is today. Taken together, the three points that emerge from this study tell a story of change, especially with respect to representation and creative expression in the Muslim world. And there is a further implication: Islam didn't start out the way it is now, which also suggests there is no reason to believe it can't, or won't change again.

¹ This point is well made by Anshuman Mondal in his January 2003 *Prospect* magazine essay *Liberal Islam?*: "Throughout Islamic history, then, the secular has played a significant role since there has always been a de facto separation of powers. This offers considerable scope for pragmatism, of which there is a venerable tradition in the Islamic world. Indeed, the conflict between the idealism of faith and the practical needs of a political movement has marked Islam from its inception. The Prophet himself is known to have compromised in order to further the political interests of the nascent community. In the modern world, most Islamic countries have continued this tradition".

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APPENDIX A

PLATONIC IDEAS IN PLATO'S WORDS

“A state”, I said, “arises, as I conceive out of the needs of mankind; no one is self-sufficing, but all of us have many wants...Can any other origin of a State be imagined”?

“There can be no other”.

“Then, as we have many wants, and many persons are needed to supply them, one takes a helper for one purpose and another for another; and when these partners and helpers are gathered together in one habitation the body of inhabitants is termed a State”.

“True”, he said.

“And they exchange with one another, and one gives, and another receives, under the idea that the exchange will be for their good”.

(Plato, 2012, Book II: 140)

“And therefore when any one of these pantomimic gentlemen, who are so clever that they can imitate anything, comes to us, and makes a proposal to exhibit himself and his poetry, we will fall down and worship him as a sweet and holy and wonderful being; but we must also inform him that in our State such as he are not permitted to exist; the law will not allow them. And so when we have anointed him with myrrh, and set a garland of wool upon his head, we shall send him away to another city. For we mean to employ for our souls' health the rougher and severer poet or story-teller, who will imitate the style of the virtuous only, and will follow those models which we prescribed at first when we began the education of our soldiers”.

(Plato, 2012, Book III: 179-180)

“Because, if I am not mistaken, we shall have to say that about men poets and story-tellers are guilty of making the gravest misstatements when they tell us that wicked

men are often happy, and the good miserable; and that injustice is profitable when undetected, but that justice is a man's own loss and another's gain – these things we shall forbid them to utter, and command them to sing and say the opposite”.

(Plato, 2012, Book III: 172)

“And the higher the duties of the guardian, I said, the more time, and skill, and art, and application will be needed by him”?

(Plato, 2012, Book II: 148)

“...we begin by telling children stories which, though not wholly destitute of truth, are in the main fictitious; and these stories are told them when they are not of an age to learn gymnastics”.

(Plato, 2012, Book II: 152)

“Whenever an erroneous representation is made of the nature of gods and heroes (poets and storytellers bear) the fault of telling a lie”.

(Plato, 2012, Book II: 153)

“Then the lying poet has no place in our idea of God”.

(Plato, 2012, Book II: 160)

“And further they are likely to have a bad effect on those who hear them; for everybody will begin to excuse his own vices when he is convinced that similar wickednesses are always being perpetrated by – ‘The kindred of the gods, the relatives of Zeus, whose ancestral altar, the altar of Zeus, is aloft in air on the peak of Ida,’ and who have ‘the blood of deities yet flowing in their veins.’ And therefore let us put an end to such tales, lest they engender laxity of morals among the young”.

(Plato, 2012, Book III: 170-171)

“Or is the same control [as on the poets] to be extended to other artists, and are they also to be prohibited from exhibiting the opposite forms of vice and intemperance and meanness and indecency in sculpture and building and the other creative arts; and is he who cannot conform to this rule of ours to be prevented from practising his art in

our State, lest the taste of our citizens be corrupted by him? We would not have our guardians grow up amid images of moral deformity, as in some noxious pasture, and there browse and feed upon many a baneful herb and flower day by day, little by little, until they silently gather a festering mass of corruption in their own soul. Let our artists rather be those who are gifted to discern the true nature of the beautiful and graceful; then will our youth dwell in a land of health, amid fair sights and sounds, and receive the good in everything; and beauty, the effluence of fair works, shall flow into the eye and ear, like a health-giving breeze from a purer region, and insensibly draw the soul from earliest years into likeness and sympathy with the beauty of reason”.

(Plato, 2012, Book III: 184)

“God is always to be represented as he truly is, whatever be the sort of poetry, epic, lyric or tragic, in which the representation is given”.

(Plato, 2012, Book II: 155)

“I do not say that these horrible stories may not have a use of some kind; but there is a danger that the nerves of our guardians may be rendered too excitable and effeminate by them”.

(Plato, 2012, Book III: 164)

“And if a poet writes of the sufferings of Niobe – the subject of the tragedy in which these iambic verses occur – or of the house of Pelops, or of the Trojan war or on any similar theme, either we must not permit him to say that these are the works of God, or if they are of God, he must devise some explanation of them such as we are seeking; he must say that God did what was just and right, and they were the better for being punished; but that those who are punished are miserable, and that God is the author of their misery – the poet is not to be permitted to say; though he may say that the wicked are miserable because they require to be punished, and are benefited by receiving punishment from God; but that God being good is the author of evil to any one is to be strenuously denied, and not to be said or sung or heard in verse or prose by any one whether old or young in any well-ordered commonwealth. Such a fiction is suicidal, ruinous, impious”.

(Plato, 2012, Book II: 156-157)

“Then the first thing will be to establish a censorship of the writers of fiction, and let the censors receive any tale of fiction which is good, and reject the bad; and we will desire mothers and nurses to tell their children the authorised ones only. Let them fashion the mind with such tales, even more fondly than they mould the body with their hands; but most of those which are now in use must be discarded”.

(Plato, 2012, Book II: 153)

“Then we must assume a control over the narrators of this class of tales as well as over the others, and beg them not simply to revile but rather to commend the world below, intimating to them that their descriptions are untrue, and will do harm to our future warriors. That will be our duty, he said. Then, I said, we shall have to obliterate many obnoxious passages, beginning with the verses...”

(Plato, 2012, Book III: 163)

“...our guardians, setting aside every other business, are to dedicate themselves wholly to the maintenance of freedom in the State, making this their craft, and engaging in no work which does not bear on this end, they ought not to practise or imitate anything else; if they imitate at all, they should imitate from youth upward only those characters which are suitable to their profession – the courageous, temperate, holy, free, and the like; but they should not depict or be skilful at imitating any kind of illiberality or baseness, lest from imitation they should come to be what they imitate. Did you never observe how imitations, beginning in early youth and continuing far into life, at length grow into habits and become a second nature, affecting body, voice, and mind?”

(Plato, 2012, Book III: 176)

“Those then who know not wisdom and virtue, and are always busy with gluttony and sensuality, go down and up again as far as the mean; and in this region they move at random throughout life, but they never pass into the true upper world; thither they neither look, nor do they ever find their way, neither are they truly filled with true being, nor do they taste of pure and abiding pleasure. Like cattle, with their eyes

always looking down and their heads stooping to the earth, that is, to the dining-table, they fatten and feed and breed, and, in their excessive love of these delights, they kick and butt at one another with horns and hoofs which are made of iron; and they kill one another by reason of their insatiable lust. For they fill themselves with that which is not substantial, and the part of themselves which they fill is also unsubstantial and incontinent”.

(Plato, 2012, Book IX: 314)

“This is the point to which, above all, the attention of our rulers should be directed, – that music and gymnastic be preserved in their original form, and no innovation made. They must do their utmost to maintain them intact. And when any one says that mankind must regard ‘The newest song which the singers have,’ they will be afraid that he may be praising, not new songs, but a new kind of song; and this ought not to be praised, or conceived to be the meaning of the poet; for any musical innovation is full of danger to the whole State, and ought to be prohibited”.

(Plato, 2012, Book IV: 211)

“And we must beg Homer and the other poets not to be angry if we strike out these and similar passages, not because they are unpoetical, or unattractive to the popular ear, but because the greater the poetical charm of them, the less are they meet for the ears of boys and men who are meant to be free, and who should fear slavery more than death”.

(Plato, 2012, Book III: 164)

“I believe, that in the human soul there is a better and also a worse principle; and when the better has the worse under control, then a man is said to be master of himself; and this is a term of praise: but when, owing to evil education or association, the better principle, which is also the smaller, is overwhelmed by the greater mass of the worse – in this case he is blamed and is called the slave of self and unprincipled”.

(Plato, 2012, Book IV: 221)

“At last...I was driven to affirm, in praise of true philosophy, that only from the standpoint of such philosophy was it possible to take a correct view of public and

private right and that, accordingly, the human race would never see the end of trouble until true lovers of wisdom should come to hold political power, or the holders of political power should, by some divine appointment, become true lovers of wisdom”.

(Plato's seventh Letter, quoted by Walzer, 1962: 23)

“All poems are brought forth only to make excellent the imaginative evocation of something, and they are of six sorts. Three are praiseworthy and three blameworthy. Of the three that are praiseworthy, one is intent upon improving the rational faculty, directing its actions and calculation toward happiness, making an imaginative evocation of divine matters and good things, making an excellent imaginative evocation of the virtues while presenting them favorably and treating them with respect, and presenting evil things and defects as base and vile. The second is intent upon improving and equilibrating those accidents of the soul related to power and breaking them down until they come to equilibrium and are brought back from the extreme. These are the accidents like anger, self-conceit, harshness, arrogance, impertinence, love of honor, tyranny, avidity, and similar things. And it directs its practitioners to use them for good things to the exclusion of evil ones. The third is intent upon improving and equilibrating those accidents of the soul related to weakness and softness, namely, the base yearnings and pleasures, delicateness and slackness of soul, compassion, fear, fright, distress, bashfulness, indulgence, softness, and similar things. [It is intent] upon breaking [them down] and bringing them back from the extreme until they come to equilibrium. And it directs to their being used for good things to the exclusion of evil ones. The three blameworthy ones are the contraries of the three praiseworthy ones. For the former corrupt everything the latter improve and draw it away from being equilibrated to the extreme. The sorts of melodies and songs following from these sorts of poems and their divisions are equivalent to their divisions”.

(Al Farabi, 2001: loc 687)

“Now the prudent person uses the experiential faculty during his youth, in his conduct in the presence of the supreme ruler, and while he is being schooled in virtuous rulership. From it a very venerable faculty useful in the virtuous regime is generated. Eventually, it succeeds in bringing the rulership of the one in whom virtuous rulership is potential to become actual rulership. And the most venerable of the sorts of writing is that used in the service of the supreme ruler and the virtuous king”.

(Al Farabi, 2001: loc 1082)

“The moral virtues and vices are attained and established in the soul only by repeating the actions coming about from that moral habit many times over a certain time [period] and accustoming ourselves to them. If those actions are good things, what we attain is virtue, and if they are evil things, what we attain is vice”.

(Al Farabi, 2001: loc 341)

“Evils are made to cease in cities either by virtues that are established in the souls of the people or by their becoming self-restrained. Any human being whose evil cannot be made to cease by a virtue being established in his soul or by self-restraint is to be put outside of cities”.

(Al Farabi, 2001: loc 396)

[The soul] “becomes separated from the body regardless of whether that body is living in that it is nourished and is sense perceptive, or whether the faculty by which it is nourished and is sense perceptive has already been abolished”.

(Al Farabi, 2001: loc 969)

“There are five parts of the virtuous city: the virtuous, the linguists, the assessors, the warriors, and the moneymakers. The virtuous are the wise, the prudent, and those who have opinions about major matters. Then there are the transmitters of the creed and the linguists: they are the rhetoricians, the eloquent, the poets, the musicians, the scribes, and those who act in the same way as they do and are among their number. The assessors are the accountants, the engineers, the doctors, the astronomers, and those who act in the same way as they do. The warriors are the combatants, the guardians, and those who act in the same way as they do and are counted among them. The moneymakers are those who earn money in the city, like the farmers, herders, merchants, and those who act in the same way as they do”.

(Al Farabi, 2001: loc 701)

“Just as what is used of writing in the service of the virtuous king and the virtuous rulership is more venerable than the rest of the remaining sorts of writing used in the city, so is what is

used of writing in the service of tyranny, its harmfulness, and the increase of its evil and tribulation more vile than the rest of the sorts of writing”.

(Al Farabi, 2001: loc 1090)

“If at a given time it happens that philosophy has no share in the government, though every other qualification for rule may be present, the perfect state will remain rulerless, the actual head of the state will be no true king and the state will head for destruction; and if no wise man is to be found and associated with the acting head of the state, then after a certain interval the state will undoubtedly perish”.

(Al Farabi quoted by Walzer, 1962: 22)

