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Where Falsafa Meets Analytic Philosophy of Religion: A Farabian-Hickian View of Prophecy

The Muslim philosopher, Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī, outlined a view of prophecy tied to a Neoplatonic framework that emphasised the acquisition of prophecy as a human intellectual achievement through a connection with what he termed the “active intellect” (*al-ʿaql al-faʿāl*). This Farabian account of prophecy runs contrary to the mainstream view in the Islamic tradition, which conceives of prophecy and revelation as a direct bestowal by God. However, the Farabian account—at least when stripped from its controversial Neoplatonic metaphysics—arguably provides a more intellectual satisfying one, especially to someone engaged in contemporary analytic philosophy of religion.

To examine how this might be so, I want to bring into conversation the Farabian account of prophecy in Islam with John Hick’s broader theory of religion. According to Hick, the revelations or prophecies central to the world’s great religions, develops from a “bottom-up” as opposed to “top-down” way. In other words, the major figures of these religions acquired prophecy—understood in terms of religious encounters with the ultimate reality that are shaped by the conceptual framework of the individual—due to their profound or heightened levels of spiritual awareness and moral character. Hick’s theory of religion bears similarity with al-Fārābī’s because both understand prophecy in this more “bottom-up” way. It is the implications of this understanding of prophecy that suggests it provides for a more intellectual satisfying account.

In al-Fārābī’s case, it meant that the prophecy or revelation acquired by the prophet—due to his connection with the active intellect—was something comprehensible in itself to the prophet but requires symbolic and allegorical conceptual translation if it is to be understood and function as a means of guidance for the religious community at large. This implies that the teachings of religion are not necessarily true in themselves but simply bear a metaphorical representation of what is true in itself. In many ways this resembles Hick, because in his view, the major world religions are all true paths to the divine as they are all understood as metaphorical human attempts to render in our terms ultimate reality in itself. Both al-Fārābī’s and Hick’s view, thus provides a framework for religious pluralism, as prophecy or revelation in various traditions are not literally contradictory, for the expressions are metaphorical.

In bringing these two accounts together, I argue that a Farabian-Hickian view provides a potentially more intellectual satisfying account of prophecy than the traditional view. First, the possibility of religious pluralism makes more sense of the epistemic problem of religious diversity. Second, this account does away with many of the moral objections to Islam. And third, despite initial impressions, I argue that we can still salvage much of the traditional Islamic narrative on this Farabian-Hickian account.



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Jamie B. Turner is a post-doctoral researcher in philosophy at the Birmingham Centre for Philosophy of Religion, University of Birmingham. His doctoral work and research publications have focused on topics within contemporary philosophy of religion, approached from the perspective of ideas and concepts within the Islamic tradition. Jamie’s work in Islamic philosophy of religion has primarily focused on themes within religious epistemology, such as the rationality of theistic belief and religious disagreement, often in reference to the thought of medieval Islamic theologian, Ibn Taymiyya. More recently, Jamie has been working on topics related to soteriology, theistic meta-ethics, and the problem of evil.