

4

Tawḥīd and Its Political Exports: The Dialectics of Negative Theology and Islamic Utopianisma

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The central unifying theological concept of Islam is *Tawḥīd*: the oneness of God. It is the leitmotif of the Qur'an; its message saturates *al-sīrah al-Nabawiyya* (biography of Prophet Muhammad), and Muslim believers attest to its claims every day in their prayers with the phrase, *La ilaha ill Allah* (There is no god but God). It is the organising belief that structures the lives of religious Muslims throughout the *dār al-Islām*. Given its centrality, all other aspects of Islam flow from the concept of *Tawḥīd*, including Islamic theology, ethics, economics and politics. If statements, beliefs and positions do not comport with *Tawḥīd*, it is impossible to claim that such are Islamic. Without *Tawḥīd*, Islam loses its determinative concept, and what remains can no longer be described as Islam. By nature, the concept of *Tawḥīd* is affirmative; it affirms the reality of a singular divine being. But all affirmations carry within themselves equal negations. The negative principle of *Tawḥīd* is the claim that nothing in existence is, or can ever be, divinity. In other words, God's singularity by definition limits divinity to itself, and therefore all else is other than divine. This negativity of *Tawḥīd* is most poignantly expressed in Islam's anti-idolatry, its prohibition on *shirk*: the 'apotheosis' (ἀποθέωσις) of anything finite, conditioned, or created.¹ Islam's theological prohibition on idolatry has a political export: its foundational negativity is translated into the political realm via the concept of utopia, a socio-political concept that also by its inherent nature defies any attempt at positive articulation. In this chapter, I will explore the theological logic of *Tawḥīd*, arguing that such a concept transcends the simple affirmation of God's singularity via Kataphatic Theology (positive theology), and suggest that such a singularity is expressed in its wholeness when it is also articulated via its negative principle: what God is not, i.e. Apophatic Theology (negative theology). I will argue that such a negative principle, having migrated from the theological into the socio-political, translates into the inherently negative concept of utopia (ουτοπία), i.e. 'that which has no place'. Understanding that all of the Islamic tradition proceeds from the central concept of *Tawḥīd*, most importantly its inherent negativity, we will demonstrate that the theological ban on

1 The Latin equivalent of the Greek term 'apotheosis' is 'deificatio' (deification), often translated as 'making divine'.

idolatry ought to be reproduced not through Islamic utopianism, wherein new visions of an Islamic utopia are produced, but rather through Islamic utopianism's anti-utopia stance.

4.1 The Dialectics of Tawḥīd

The theological concept of Tawḥīd is the leitmotif of Islam. In the Qur'ān (112:1–4), the singularity of Allah is described most succinctly in the shortest of chapters, *Sūrah al-Ikhlāṣ*:

- 1) Say, 'he, God, is one,
- 2) God, the Eternally Sufficient unto Himself
- 3) He begets not; nor was He begotten.
- 4) And none is like unto him' (Nasr 2015).²

This *sūrah* (chapter) expresses the essential 'oneness' of the divine that is constitutional in Islamic theology. It positively articulates limited attributes of what God is: 'one', 'eternally sufficient', 'not begotten (fathered)', and wholly unique and what God is not, 'begotten'. Through deductive logic, we can also extract the negative qualities of the Divine from the *sūrah*'s positive articulations of the Divine: God is not multiple nor divisible; God is not dependent on anything outside of himself; God is not the offspring of anything; and God is not identical with anything else. When combining both the positive articulations and the negative articulations, along with the negative deductions, we get a fuller picture of the nature of Tawḥīd: God is (1) *Aḥad* – Indivisibly one; *Waḥid* – Singular by nature; God is unique, indivisible and independent of God's creation; nothing can be added or subtracted from God, and God is the universal creator and the God of the created universe.³ While Kataphatic Theology expresses the Islamic conception of what God *is*, at least its *formal* aspects, Islamic Apophatic Theology expresses what God *is not*: God's negativity. This negativity, or the 'ineffable' (*arrētos*) in Greek, sometimes translated as 'unsayable', is the intangible and wholly escapable quality of the Divine that we want to focus on in this chapter, for it is the 'ineffable' of God that translates into the negativity of the utopia (Steenbuch 2022).

2 *Sūrah al-Ikhlāṣ* is sometime referred to as '*Sūrah al-Tawḥīd*', as it succinctly encapsulates the theological idea of God's 'unicity' (*aḥadiyya*) and God's 'oneness' (*wāḥidiyya*).

3 In the Arabic language, the term *Waḥid* represent numerical one. However, in *Sūrah al-Ikhlāṣ*, the term used to describe God's singularity is *Aḥad*, also translated into 'one'. While these two terms are often used interchangeably, it has been suggested that *Waḥid*, which is one of God's 'divine names', is a positive articulation of God's singularity; *Waḥid* is a positively articulated affirmative number and therefore can be added to or subtracted from. *Aḥad*, one the other hand, denotes the negativity of 'absolute oneness', which is both unique and indivisible, and unlike anything else. Both terms denote oneness, but in two different ways. *Waḥid* expresses 'external oneness', which is always in relation to other existent things, whereas *Aḥad* expresses 'internal oneness', i.e. something that is one-in-and-of-itself, not in numerical relation to existent things. *Aḥad* is thus understood to express a higher degree of divine singularity because it is not in relation to anything other than itself, whereas *Waḥid* expresses God's relation to created things outside of itself (Nasr 2015).

Early within Islamic history, the theologians (*mutakallimūn*) and philosophers (*faylasūf*) posited the notion that God has 99 names that correspond to real and ontologically distinct 99 attributes (Ruffus and McGinnis 2015). Theologians divided these names into two categories: (i) *ṣifāt al-dhāt*: *Attributes of the Essence* and (ii) *ṣifāt al-fi'l*: *Attributes of Action* (Sobhani 2024). The former correspond to the inherent nature of the Divine, the fixed attributes that are meant to express God's eternal and immutable *being*, what Ibn Sina called, the 'Necessary Existent' (*wājib al-wujūd*) (Adamson 2013). The latter express attributes that correspond to *actions* of the Divine, which presuppose God choosing to act in a given way as opposed to another way (Sobhani 2024). For example, *ṣifāt al-dhāt* would include God's oneness, eternality, omniscience, omnipresence, i.e. the nature of God's being, and *ṣifāt al-fi'l* includes attributes such as compassion, mercy, justice, reflecting the nature of God's actions. Logically, the actions of God are manifestations of God's being; God acts compassionately because God is compassion (*al-Raḥmān*); God acts mercifully because God is mercy (*al-Raḥīm*); God acts justly because God is justice (*ʿādl*), etc.⁴ Yet, while humans cannot share in the *ṣifāt al-dhāt*, for they are contingent existent, they can share in the *ṣifāt al-fi'l*, for they too can exercise compassion, mercy and justice (for example). However, they cannot *be* compassion, mercy, justice, as being such requires the perfection of their attributes in both form and substance. Nevertheless, because Islamic theology is often articulated positively, as it is in the Qur'ān, and positive articulation lends itself to blurring the distinction between the Creator (God) and the created (humanity), the *mutakallimūn* have given Islamic theology two important functions: (i) it must simultaneously affirm the Qur'ānic description of the Divine, as it is expressed kataphatically in sacred texts, and (ii) it must guard against anthropomorphism of the Divine and the deification of man. In other words, theology must thread the needle between validating positive articulations regarding the nature and characteristics of the Divine via Kataphatic theology, while also invalidating those same characteristic when they anthropomorphise God or deify anything that is contingent. Humans can share in several of the *ṣifāt al-fi'l* attributes, but in their actualisation, they remain relative to humans, and thus corresponds to humanity's limitations, i.e. its conditionedness, its finitude, its imperfectness, which are all determined by the fact that humanity is created and therefore contingent. Only the Divine can *be* such attributes in their perfection, for only the Divine is *wājib al-wujūd*.

Throughout Islamic history, the *mutakallimūn* understood that the temptation to assign divine attributes to contingent existents can be seen throughout religious history. Following the Qur'ān's own condemnation of the apotheosis of Jesus of Nazareth (Sūrah al-Ma'idah 5:73–75, 116), Muslim scholars have long viewed Christians as having succumbed to this temptation, as had many peoples before them who deified their leaders: Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, etc. It has been a major goal of Islamic theology to thus describe the Divine as accurately as possible, especially in relation to such descriptions in revelation, and at the same time safeguard the Muslim community from diffusing divine qualities to contingent existent things.

4 According to Ayatollah Ja'far Sobhani (2024, p. 45), the identity of Divine Essence and attributes represents the majority position among Muslim theologians, whereas the minority argues that attributes are in addition to the Divine Essence.

4.2 Shirk and Wathaniyya

The Islamic tradition identifies the gravest of sins as *shirk*, or ‘polytheism’: the association of partners with God, or the assigning qualities that belong solely to the Divine onto contingent existent things. More accurately, shirk is the elevation of that which is by nature contingent into the realm of the absolute, or the deification of that which is not divine. Formed from the tripartite Arabic roots, ش ر ك (š-r-k), shirk means ‘to share’, as in a contingent entity falsely sharing in the absolute (an exclusive) divinity of God. Those who engage in polytheism are *mushrikūn*: *polytheists*. An important term associated with the concept of shirk is *wathaniyya*, or ‘idolatry’.⁵ While some scholars use ‘polytheism’ (shirk) and ‘idolatry’ (wathaniyya) interchangeably, they are not synonymous, neither etymologically nor conceptually. It is possible to imagine a polytheistic religion that maintains an iconoclastic ban on images of the divine, or even a ban on naming the divine (Apophasis). Such a religion would not be idolatrous, but they would be polytheistic. Likewise, it is possible to imagine a religion that worships an image of its god while maintaining a unitary concept of the divine. They would be idolaters, but not polytheists. While most *mushrikūn* are both polytheists and idolaters, they do not have to be; idolatry is not necessary for polytheism, nor is polytheism necessary for idolatry. Nevertheless, in Islamic theology, both shirk and wathaniyya are considered violations of the absolute sovereignty and unity of God, as both deduct from the *aḥadiyya* (unicity) and *wāḥidiyya* (oneness) of the singular and absolute Divine. As such, they are equally condemned in Islam.

The pagan Arabs that Prophet Muhammad confronted in the seventh century’s ‘age of ignorance’ (*al-Jāhaliyyah*) were both polytheists and idolaters; they both maintained the existence of multiple gods, and created images, statues and other forms of physical representation of those gods. Being that such polytheism and idolatry legitimated the unjust status quo of Meccan society, such Arabs were considered the worst of *al-Kafirūn* (the disbelievers). The Qur’ān (109:1–6) addresses the community of disbelievers directly in *Sūrah al-Kafirūn*, saying:

- 1) Say, ‘O disbelievers!
- 2) I worship not what you worship;
- 3) Nor are you worshippers of what I worship;
- 4) Nor am I a worshipper of what you worship;
- 5) Nor are you worshippers of what I worship;
- 6) Unto you your religion, and unto me my religion.

Many scholars believe that the repetitiveness of the verses (‘*āyāt*) 2–4 is meant to emphasise how condemnatory such polytheism and idolatry was to God, and that there would never be any compromise between the ‘people of Tawhīd’ (*al-Muwaḥḥidun*) and the ‘people of shirk’ (*mushrikūn*) (al-Qur’ān 109:1–6). All sins can be forgiven by the Divine, but shirk alone God refuses to forgive.

5 According to Alain Besançon (2000), the term ‘idol’ derives from the Greek word, εἰδωλον (*eidōlon*), meaning ‘image’, or ‘form’ (*eidos*). It is a representation of that which doesn’t exist, and as such is ‘false’.

Muslim scholars have divided the concept of Shirk into two categories: (i) *al-Shirk al-Akbar* (Greater Shirk), which is the unconcealed worship of anything other than God, or the unconcealed apotheosis of anything created, and (ii) *al-Shirk al-Aṣghar* (Lesser Shirk), which covers those who worship with wrong intentions, i.e. those who are outwardly pious but whose motivations for worship are other than *fī sabīli llāh* (for the sake of God). Both forms of shirk are understood to ‘cross the boundaries’ (*tāḡūt*) of what is acceptable in Islam. While the first form of Shirk is the outward and/or public worship of false gods, the second is a form of psychological polytheism; it makes something in this life the ‘utmost concern’ above God, such as social recognition, prestige, power, etc., or simply having the wrong intention (*niyyah*) for worshipping in public. They are both considered ‘rebellion’ against God, although the latter is hardly punishable due to its concealment (al-Qur’ān 4:51).

Tawḥīd, as a theological concept, challenged the belief that numerous gods existed. However, to claim that only one God exists does not necessarily provide the adequate logic as to why that God ought not to be physically depicted in the form of an ‘idol’ (*al-ʿAṣnām*). To adequately address the issue of *wathaniyya* (idolatry) and to exile the temptation of *wathaniyya* from the burgeoning Muslim *ummah* (community), Prophet Muhammad instituted a ban on physical depictions of the Divine, as such imaged gods (idols) were contingent creations, powerless, and of no benefit to themselves or humanity (al-Qur’ān 25:3). This image ban, the ‘bilderverbot’ as it is called in German, was eventually extended into a ban on depicting anything that could be falsely deified, such as humans. Understanding the mistake Christians made when they deified Jesus of Nazareth and began to make images of him, early Muslim scholars added additional safeguards against not only making idols of Allah, but also against deifying Muhammad, the ‘Seal of the Prophets’ (al-Qur’ān, 5:116). No images of Muhammad were to be made, as images could lead to the worship of Muhammad, which happened in Christianity regarding Jesus of Nazareth.⁶ Were Muslims to image either God or Muhammad, it would constitute shirk *and* *wathaniyya*, as the false image of god would not be God, and the image of Muhammad would not be God, but rather an image of a falsely deified human. The absolute sovereignty and unity of the Divine was conserved via the ban on images, echoing the Qur’ān’s injunction to think of God as wholly unique: ‘and none is like unto him’ (al-Qur’ān, 112:4).

4.3 The Negativity of the Islamic Bilderverbot: Image and Language

The *sīrah* of Muhammad attests to the long struggle against the Meccan pantheon and the images that represented their deities. Like Judaism, Islam forwarded a complete ban on depictions of the Divine; no image, whether two-dimensional or three-dimensional,

6 Although Islam banned the depiction of prophets and other sacred figures, it does not mean that Muslims were intolerant of other religions’ depictions of such figures. For example, in 630 CE, when engaged in the ‘cleansing of the Ka’ba’ in Mecca, the pagan idols and frescoes were destroyed, as they represented false deities. However, the icons and/or frescoes of Jesus of Nazareth and his mother, Mary, were spared. Although the Muslims rejected the theological legitimacy of their depictions, the images were nevertheless respectfully removed from the Ka’ba out of reverence for whom they depicted. Additionally, successive caliphates preserved the figurative and statuary art of previous civilizations in the *dār al-Islām*, seeing no threat from their existence as relics of the past (Ibn Ishaq 1955).

created by the hands of a human could claim to be the Divine itself, or a true depiction of Divinity. By definition, any image claimed to be the Divine, or represent the Divine, was not the divine nor its representation, for Divinity escapes all depictions and is not a created thing. Thus, the only way to imagine the Divine is to imagine it without image, which logically is oxymoronic. This complete inability to image the Divine constitutes the negativity of Islamic theology's ban on images. The image ban is not only an injunction against all attempts to imagine the Divine (both physically and cognitively), but also a recognition that no such thing is possible, as the created lacks the capacity to accurately mirror the uncreated; the conditioned cannot mirror the unconditioned; the finite cannot mirror the infinite. God's absoluteness is not representable by way of the conditioned. Paradoxically, all attempts to imagine the Divine fail to imagine the Divine. The transcendent nature of the Divine simply cannot be encapsulated by the non-transcendent. In this sense, the negativity of the *bilderverbot* merely reflects the reality of the negativity of the Divine.

The iconoclastic negativity of the *bilderverbot* is also apparent within language as a means of expressing divine reality. Just as images by their nature cannot capture the reality of divinity, nor can language, for it too is finite, conditioned and bound to a created species. The claim that the Divine escapes articulation through positive lingual utterances has given birth to Apophatic theology, or what is called 'negative theology'. Unlike Kataphatic theology, which speaks of God via positive/affirmative language, in negative theology, only what God is *not* can be expressed, for negative language does not construct a lingual image of what God supposedly is but rather seeks to define that which God is not and cannot be. Through negative utterances, an approximation of what God is can be deduced, but it will only remain an approximation, a semblance. Just as the *Bilderverbot* recognises the impossibility of imagining the Divine in physical form, and therefore bans any attempt to do so, so too does negative theology recognise the impossibility of constructing a linguistic image of the Divine. While negative theology traditions, from the ancient Greeks through Judaism, from Christianity to Islam, and from the Abrahamic faiths to modern philosophy, do not ban positive articulations of the Divine, there is always a tacit understanding that the linguistic means to express divinity are inherently lacking, incapable, and bound to fail, as the wholly transcendent cannot be reduced to less than wholly transcendent and still be true (Steenbuch 2022). Additionally, mankind's languages are bound to the species, and species language is bound to historical development, rational capacity, the physicality of the human being's ability to speak, all of which are determined by the limitations of the species. Therefore, what humanity can say about that which escapes human limitations, i.e. the Divine, is always going to be constrained. As such, Muslim philosophers (and some rationalist *mutakallimūn*) have generally recognised that what is articulated about God within human language, even the sacred language of Arabic, is approximate, an imperfect form and thus always bound to fail in the task of accurately representing that which cannot be adequately represented. Nevertheless, it is better to have a limited, incomplete, or even imperfect understanding of the Divine than none at all.

Understanding the inability of both man-made images and species language to represent the wholly transcendent, apophatic theology abandons the pursuit of positive articulations regarding that which cannot be adequately represented. The Mu'tazilī school of Islamic

theology is especially keen on apophatic theology. For centuries, the Mu'tazilī engaged in long standing debates on *'aqidah* (creed) with other schools of thought that continued to develop Kataphatic theology. In contradistinction to those schools of Islamic theology, especially *al-ḥanābila* and its traditionalists heir, *al-wahhābiyya*, the Mu'tazilī theologian, Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī (874–936 CE), set aside those positively articulated aspects of traditional Islamic theology for a theology more closely rooted in the inherent negativity of Tawḥīd. For example, in his heresiographical book, *Maqālāt al-Islāmīyīn wa Ikhtilāf al-Muṣalīn* (*The Teachings of the Muslims and the Differences of the Prayerful*), al-Ash'arī describes the Mu'tazilī understanding of the Divine as such:

God is unique, nothing is like him; he is neither body, nor individual, nor substance, nor accident. He is beyond time. He cannot dwell in a place or within a being; he is not the object of any creatural attribute or qualification. He is neither conditioned nor determined, neither engendered nor engendering. He is beyond the perception of the senses. The eyes cannot see him, observation cannot attain him, the imagination cannot comprehend him. He is a thing, but is not like other things; he is omniscient, all-powerful, but his omniscience and his almightiness cannot be compared to anything created. He created the world without any pre-established archetype and without an auxiliary.

(*al-Ash'arī, quoted in Corbin 2014, pp. 109–110*)

Henry Corbin, in his *History of Islamic Philosophy*, remarks that this type of negative theology has a ontological export: it is 'limited to the plan of unconditioned being, and does not extend to the plane of non-unconditioned being', and as such, it results in the 'negation of the divine attributes, the affirmation of the created Qur'ān, and the denial of all possibility of the vision of God in the world beyond' (al-Ash'arī, quoted in Corbin 2014, p. 110). In other words, al-Ash'arī's negative theology is an attempt to express in apophatic terms that which fundamentally cannot be expressed in the kataphatic terms, thus making positive claims about God, such as the divine attributes (*ṣifāt*), the idea that the Qur'ān is uncreated and thus eternal (or co-existent with God), and visions of that which is beyond the world, wholly untenable, as they are all attempts to express the 'inexpressible' (Gk: *arrētos*) via positive image-creating language. This apophatic approach to the Islamic *'ilm al-kalām* (science of theology) attempts to preserve and protect the Tawḥīdic conception of the Divine and its most fundamental and uncompromisable attributes, God's oneness (*aḥadiyya*) and uniqueness (*wāḥidiyya*), both of which can be articulated in negative form: God is not more than one nor is he divisible, nor is there anything like unto him. All attempts to express that which God is either *borderlines* on anthropomorphism and/or idolatry, or is anthropomorphism and/or idolatry, as the construction of a linguistic and/or physical image of the divine is to create that which the Divine is not. For the negative theologian, blurring the dualistic distinction between the created with the uncreated, the conditioned with the conditioned, the non-absolute with the absolute, is to engage in *shirk* (idolatry/polytheism): the unforgiveable sin of associating not-God with God. For theologians like al-Ash'arī, the absoluteness of God's unity and uniqueness must be safeguarded against all forms of anthropomorphic and polytheistic thought, even by those who attempt to understand the Divine with good intentions.

As stated before, Muslim philosophers and theologians have for centuries debated the finer points of Islamic '*aqidah*', especially as it relates to the proper way to conceptualise the Godhead; is God knowable or fundamentally unknowable; is his distance unbridgeable or is he 'nearer to man than his jugular vein'; and in the face of suffering, does he intervene in history or is he *Deus otiosus* (inactive God). The inability to articulate the reality of the Divine in coherent, rational and/or positive language has also been recognised by Sufi scholars throughout Islamic history, thus leading to some of the greatest mystic poetry ever written, wherein linguistic images of the Divine are supplanted by humanly relatable symbols and metaphors (Sells 1994).

No matter the answer to the vexing questions of theology, what is important to us here, is that the inherent negativity of Tawḥīd, which is not denied by any school of Islamic theology, and the apophatic expression of that divine negativity, has a socio-political export. In other words, the inherent negativity of the Divine migrates from the depth of Islamic kalām into the social and political realms, wherein it determines, or should determine, how Islamic society – the family, civil society and state – are constructed, and how they govern the *Lebenswelt* (Lifeworld) of the Muslims.

4.4 From the Theological to the Socio-political: The Migration of Negativity

Since the time of Muhammad, Muslims have attempted to develop societies and states that would embody the highest ideal of Islam, with *Medīna al-Nabī* (Medina) being the foremost archetype of an Islamically embodied city-state. Since the concept of Tawḥīd is the core of Islam, and Islam was the core organising principle of Medīna, we are safe to deduce that the city of Muhammad was organised around the concept of Tawḥīd. Being so, we can deduce that Tawḥīd is not merely an essential theological concept, but rather one that has constitutional socio-political exports, as any socio-political entity that wishes to identify itself as 'Islamic' ought to comport with the strictures of that unifying concept. In other words, essential social and political elements that emanated from the logic and essence of Tawḥīd ought to be that which structures Islamic society. It does not logically conclude that a society that fails to abide by Tawḥīd and its socio-political export can rightly call itself 'Islamic', as the law of identity demands that if two entities are distinguishable, regardless of their overlapping similarities, they are recognised as two distinct entities. Indeed, Muslim societies have long attempted to realise the essential characteristics of the Prophet's Medīna al-Nabī, as that is the model for an Islamic society. Nevertheless, the numerous societies that have been established by Muslims that can truly be described as 'Islamic' are few and far between, if ever that descriptor was deserving. While some Muslim communities and eras were more 'Islamic' than others, there has always been a gap between what an Islamic society *ought* to be and what Muslim society *is*. Nevertheless, the Islamic city-state of Medīna al-Nabī is seen within Muslim societies since its establishment by the Prophet Muhammad and the *ṣaḥāba* (companions of the Prophet) as being the apex of what a Muslim society ought to be. The way in which Muhammad practiced justice, mercy, and compassion in Medīna are constitutional for Islam, and as serve a model of 'Islamicity', and just as the personal Sunnah of Muhammad is emulated by Muslims in their daily life

throughout the *dār al-Islām*, Medīna is the object of emulation in the socio-political sphere.⁷ The Prophet's Medīna, in this sense, is the closest Muslims have to a 'utopia' outside of the description of Jannah in the Qur'ān and Ḥadīth. Yet, as Medīna can serve as a model of emulation for Muslim governance, it cannot serve as an Islamic utopia, for the very nature of utopia is defined by its inherent negativity. Paradoxically, all what mankind has identified as being the realisation of utopia has been false; even Muhammad's Islamic utopia of Medīna was no utopia, despite it being the culmination of what an Islamic society ought to be. To understand this seemingly paradoxical situation, we must understand etymologically what is meant by 'utopia', and consequently understand why the socio-political exports of that concept defy a positive articulation, just as the penultimate realities of the Divine resist positive articulation.

The concept of utopia was first systematically defined by the Christian philosopher, Saint Thomas More, in his 1516 CE book, *De optimo rei publicae statu deque nova insula Utopia* (On the Best State of a Republic and on the New Island of Utopia), known simply as *Utopia* (More 2010). In this work, More depicts a fictional island and its capital Amaurotum as embodying the socio-political norms that constitute the 'optimal' republic.⁸ Rooted in Plato's *Republic*, especially the ninth book wherein Socrates describes the ideal society as 'paradeigma' (model), and reflecting Aristotle's notion of the 'communitas perfecta', found in his book *Politiká*, More's *Utopia* constructs a society that embodies the *sum-of-all-oughts* – a positive image of what the ideal society would entail (Ackroyd 1998). Such a society is unified, self-sufficient and capable of actualising the teleological ends of all societies: Eudaimonia (happiness/flourishment). Social institutions covered in *Utopia* not only include issues of the state, but also issues of religion, the arts, economy, property, labour, welfare, marriage, pleasure and actualisation, just to name a few. Visions of a utopian existence can be found in a variety of times and societies, with some being this-worldly and others other-worldly. For example, there is the Garden of Eden in Judeo-Christian tradition; the pastoral perfection of Aradia in ancient Greece; Homer's Elysium Fields; Hesiod's Golden Age; The Garden of the Gods in ancient Samaria; The Celt's Mag Mell; Japan's Mahoroba; the 'New Jerusalem' as described in the book of Ezekiel; the age of Satya Yuga in Hinduism, Valhalla in Norse mythology; and the forementioned Plato's *Republic*, etc. Some of these utopias are descriptions of the afterlife, some are mystical places supposedly within human history, and some are political projects. All express what that particular

7 Although politically Muhammad was the head-of-state in Medīna, and no individual can succeed him as 'prophet-statesman', the office of the Caliph has ideally sought to emulate the rule of the prophet as much as possible while maintaining the impossibility of prophetic rule, as Muhammad is recognized as the last of the prophets, i.e. the 'Seal of the Prophets'.

8 Historians have pointed out that More's island nation is unmistakably similar to the geography of England, and the capitol of Utopia, Amaurotum, has the same geographical features as London. In essence, what More did in *Utopia* was posit an imaginary vision of a 'perfected' London and England, wherein 'vices have been altogether banished' and the highest of virtues reign supreme. This includes the demand to live communally, reminiscent of the biblical Acts of the Apostles description of the early church, where 'they had all things common', i.e. Christian communism. Since all the socio-political oughts were achieved in Utopia, More's biographer, Peter Ackroyd, refers to it as the 'fabulous island of equality and happiness' (Ackroyd 1998).

society, culture and or individual believes would be the sum-of-all-oughts, and all are articulated in positive form: what such a society *is*.

Muslims have also contributed to world literature on utopia. Arguably the most important book on what can be called ‘Islamic utopia’ was written in the tenth century, *Mabādī’ Ārā’ ahl al-madīna al-fāḍila* (Principles of the Views of the Citizens of the Best State), by the neo-Platonic philosopher, Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī (c.870–950 CE), who often referred to as the ‘founder of Islamic political philosophy’ (al-Fārābī 1985). Al-Fārābī’s *Summa Philosophiae* explores what he believes are the necessary elements of an ideal Islamic state. Rooted in Greek philosophy, especially Plato’s *The Republic*, and equally reflecting the contours of his Islamic faith, al-Fārābī argues that in order to achieve the ‘ideal state’, the citizenry of such a state must cultivate the virtues of knowledge and justice, and much like the Philosopher-King in Plato’s *Republic*, the citizens of the virtuous state must be led by a Prophet-Imam, who can guide the Muslims in the reproduction of such an ideal state (al-Fārābī 1985). Like St. Thomas More, al-Fārābī lays out in detail the necessary requirements to achieve the ideal state, i.e. and Islamic utopia.

Despite the enchanting picture of the ‘optimal republic’ that Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī and St. Thomas More and paint, there is a shared fundamental contradiction within their works, a contradiction that More (writing much later than al-Fārābī) clearly understood as being definitive for all dreams of an ideal state and perfected society. While More and many others articulate a positive image of what the ideal society *is*, as a concept, ‘utopia’ is inherently as negative about what the ideal society is as negative theology is about what the Divine is. Utopia is to the socio-political what *tawhīdic* negative theology is to the Divine: *all that is articulated in positive language or in images is precisely what utopia is not*. Despite the nuanced depiction of what al-Fārābī and More’s ideal societies and states consist of, More would name such an ideal republic with a term whose etymology testifies to its impossibility: ‘Utopia’ is a Greek word meaning ‘that which does not exist’, or simply ‘nowhere’. In Greek, ‘topos’ (τόπος) means ‘place’, and the prefix ‘ou’ (οὐ) is the negation, i.e. ‘no’. Brought together and applied to any vision of the perfected society, the concept of utopia serves as the ‘reality principle’ that renders such idealised visions moot, as all proclaimed utopias are by definition *not* utopias; utopias are ‘nowhere’.⁹ In other words, positively articulated utopia can only exist as an idealised postulant, never an existing thing; it is simultaneously something that can be imagined but cannot be brought into existence in any positive form, for to establish it is to create something that is by definition *not* the sum-of-all-oughts.

As stated before, the dialectical logic of utopia is parallel to the dialectical logic of negative theology: both recognise the conceived possibility of the perfected, the optimal, the superlative and both realise that all attempted objectifications of those conceived possibilities are impossible to attain, and thus all attempts to establish the sum-of-all-oughts are bound to

9 St. Thomas More stealthily emphasizes such negativity in the names associated with his island of Utopia. As Ackroyd states, ‘Utopia itself means literally “no-place”; the principal river, Anydros, is again literally “river without water”; the name of the city of Amaurotum is derived from the Greek for dark or dimly seen; the governor of the island is called Ademus, or ‘one who has no people’. Additionally, the leaders of Utopia are called ‘Utopus’, i.e. or ‘a person of no place’. Indeed, More utilizes ‘litotes’ throughout *Utopia*, wherein he affirms the positive by deploying its negation through contrarian language (Ackroyd 1998).

fail. In other words, both apophatic theology and the concept of utopia attest to the *possibility* (or desirability) of the penultimate, i.e. God or perfected society, while realising the impossibility of translating that vision into a thing in history. However, unlike utopia, the visions of which are often articulated into positive language, the image ban, especially in Judaism and Islam, forbid the creation of images of the Divine. There are no such prohibitions on imagining a utopian society or even attempting to construct one. As mentioned before, many have formulated their vision of a utopian society and state. However, such political projects have been fraught with difficulty and end in disaster, as we'll soon see.

In this book, *Negative Dialectics*, the German philosopher Theodor W. Adorno (1999) points to a very important connection between the negativity of the imageless God and the negativity of utopia. He writes,

The materialist longing to grasp the thing aims at the opposite: it is only in the absence of images that the full object could be conceived. Such absence concurs with the theological ban on images. Materialism brought that ban into secular form by not permitting Utopia to be positively pictured; this is the substance of its negativity.¹⁰

What Adorno has written here is important, and has an export for Islamic thought: First, that materialism – here meaning those movements and individuals who wish to bring about a utopia-like existence in the material world – attempts to positively conceive of what a utopian existence would look like. However, there is a paradox in utopian thinking: While most visions of a utopian society are articulated in positive language, the realisation of such a utopia schema would inevitably create its opposite, dystopia. Latent within every vision of utopia is the temptation towards authoritarianism, as every positive blueprint for utopia becomes a means of domination among the ‘non-identical’, i.e. those who cannot be reconciled with the closed system that utopian thought and praxis brings into existence. For example, National Socialists (Nazis) envisioned a pan-Germanic empire called the ‘Greater Germanic Reich’ (*Großgermanisches Reich der Deutschen Nation*), i.e. a palingenetic ultra-nationalist utopia for the benefit of a ‘purified’ Aryan people. The Soviet Union sought to create a communist workers’ paradise – the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ – which, according to Marx, would eventually dissolve the need for the state entirely. Both regimes quickly became iron cages for those who would dissent from such encompassing political project. They were even worse for those whom that utopian society was not established to serve: the ‘non-identical’ others. In addition, we can imagine that an Islamic utopia would be experienced as a horrendous dystopia for religious minorities (and dissenting Muslims) residing within such a proclaimed Islamically ‘perfected state’. In fact, such an all-encompassing sum-of-all-oughts may prove to be wholly repressive for those with competing visions of society – for if a society is already ‘perfected’, then that which opposes it is by definition other-than-perfection, i.e. it is distorted, corrupt and/or degenerate. For oppositional voices,

¹⁰ For Adorno, ‘materialists’ generally refers to Marxist and/or those influenced by Marx’s form of materialism. Here, however, I extend that meaning to all those who wish to see a utopian state rendered into the material world. While this is broader than what Adorno meant by it, I find it to be defensible, as modern revolutionaries attempt to bring about substantive change the material world, even religious ones.

the relativity of who is defining utopia remains an abiding factor, for an Islamic utopia is no utopia for those who do not recognise an Islamic state/society constructed upon Islamic values as being the desired sum-of-all-oughts. Likewise, a religiously adherent Muslim living in what could be identified as a secular utopia may find the lack of faith in the state and society to be wanting, oppressive and diametrically opposed to their vision of what a perfected society ought to be (al-Azmeh 1990). In both these cases, that which is ‘optimal’ cannot secure universal consensus, and therefore cannot be realised as utopia without some form of internal repression.¹¹ As such, the positive articulation of utopia is problematic; it has historically led to the creation of authoritarian regimes accompanied by human rights abuses. The dār al-Islām has proven itself prone to this very utopian authoritarianism in recent history, especially with the ‘Islamic State’ brought about by ISIS (*ad-Dawla al-Islāmiyya fīl-‘Irāq wa Shām*), the Salafi movement that briefly established a quasi-state in parts of Syria and Iraq under the leadership of ‘Abū Bakr al-Baghdādī. Their vision of a state and society that would reflect the values of primordial Islam were translated into a totalitarian, oppressive and wholly violent project, one wherein human rights, individual autonomy and modern freedoms were not respected or upheld. Although they looked to the memory of Muhammad’s Medīna al-Nabī as the socio-political model of emulation, in the end that utopian model came to justify a dystopian society that not only lacked respect for human dignity and compassion, but one that made a mockery of Medīna. As history has shown, this is the fate of most political projects that seek to create a totalising ‘perfected’ society and state, thus the dangerous side of utopian thought (Fuchs and Pierret 2025).

If utopian thought is so prone to abuse, why should we continue to think in a utopian manner? Likewise, if utopia’s inherent negativity fundamentally undermines the emancipatory claims of any self-professed utopia, then what is the purpose of utopian thought? For Muslims, what is the purpose of returning to the example of the Medīna al-Nabī when envisioning Islamic perfection when it appears fraught with difficulty or even impossibility? From a philosophical and theological perspective, I argue that the most pertinent reason for maintaining the notion of utopia and thus cultivating utopian thought despite its difficulties is not in the potential for materialising utopia’s positive construction in history; rather, it is precisely the *negativity* of the concept of utopia that must be preserved and actualised in Islamic socio-political thought as a means of critiquing all that elevates itself to utopia.

4.5 ‘Utopia’ as Critique of Utopia: Against Socio-political Shirk and Wathaniyya

As stated before, the anti-idolatry element of Tawhīd forbids any deification of the created. Translated into socio-political terms, Tawhīd’s anti-idolatry element likewise animates the concept of utopia, which forbids any society from claiming the status of utopia – for utopias

11 The domination of the utopian schema is one of the reasons why the Frankfurt School never advanced any pre-conceived blueprint for a better society unlike many of their more traditional Marxist colleagues did. For Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Walter Benjamin, Erich Fromm, Herbert Marcuse, etc., all attempts to impose an all-encompassing socio-political schema on a population resulted in some form of oppression, suppression, and domination, and thus their form of critical theory remained wholly negative; it itself being rooted in the 2nd Commandment of the Jewish Decalogue, i.e. the ban on images (Byrd 2020).

by definition cannot exist. In the socio-political, utopia's negativity takes the place of Tawḥīd and denies all claims that a given society or state can be perfected and thus absolutised. In this sense, Tawḥīd combats theological Shirk (polytheism) and Wathaniyya (idolatry), and utopia combats socio-political Shirk and Wathaniyya, for just as false gods are created and worshipped as the Absolute, so too are false utopias created and given the authority of the 'perfected'. Tawḥīd, by its affirmation of one Divine being, is anti-idolatrous, as it confronts all deification claims with the charge of their falsity. Likewise, in the socio-political realm, the notion of utopia is anti-utopian; it confronts all claims of utopia with the charge of falsity, for 'that which has no place' cannot be realised in history.

Islamic Utopianism is not a socio-political project wherein one seeks a palingenetic 'return' to the 'utopian' Medīna al-Nabī, nor is it a future-oriented creation of a new modernist Islamic society. Rather, the notion of utopia in the cause of Islam is not a positive vision for society at all; Islamic utopianism is a means to critique that which proclaims itself to be the embodiment of Islam in all its perfection. In this sense, Islamic utopianism is the grand inquisitor of all claims to have achieved an Islamic utopia, such as a false caliphate, an Islamic state, etc. As such, the negativity of the notion of utopia serves as the means by which dystopias (claiming to be utopias) are judged. It is a means of critique, not a means of building anew. Just as the attributes of the Divine (*ṣifāt*) are meant to give a semblance of expression as to what the Absolute is, while recognising the limitations of that expression, so to do historical visions of utopia give expression to what some believe a 'perfected society' consists of. However, such attempts to imagine the Divine and envision a perfected society in such positive language have always led to the creation of false gods and false utopias. Distorting the negative principle of Tawḥīd and utopia into positive articulations inevitably leads to socio-political disaster; history is replete with such failed projects. For such reasons, it is the ideological critique embedded within the *negativity* of God and utopia that must be deployed when thinking in political terms, not their false or distorted positivity. As such, both Tawḥīd and utopia serve as means to critique ideologies, states and leaders, which would elevate themselves to the apex of good, the sum-of-all-oughts, the absolute. For example, modern socio-political idolatry consists of leaders that cannot be challenged and demand to be treated as absolute sovereigns; ideologies that cannot be questioned; states that demand absolute obedience/submission; states that claim the right over life of all within their domain; leaders that engage in authoritarian antinomianism, wherein they set themselves above all law while demanding obedience to their laws from others, etc. Against these states, leaders and the societies that willingly submit to them, the concepts of Tawḥīd and utopia serve as conceptual resistance against anything that would augment itself to perfection, the sum-of-all-oughts, the absolute, i.e. the work of the *Zālimūn* (unjust oppressors). The emancipatory politics of Islam challenges such authoritarianism, as it is born of the negative understanding that nothing shares in the absolute qualities of the Divine or the perfectness of utopia, and thus all is subject to critique.

From this kind of utopian perspective, to oppose authoritarian leadership and states in the dār al-Islām would not be an exercise in juxtaposing a comprehensive blueprint for an Islamic utopia against the already existing society but rather would deploy the negativity of Islamic utopianism to critique that which is (the already existing society) against that which ought *not* to be. In other words, Islamic utopianism does not offer up a perfect

alternative to the authoritarian state and society, as such a utopia cannot exist, but would rather limits itself to articulating how the existing society is not the utopian sum-of-all-oughts, the ‘perfected society’. By exercising utopian thought in this way, the Muslim critic remains faithful to the anti-idolatry element of Tawḥīd, for denying the divinity of the created does not entail positively articulating the realities of the Uncreated, *and* they remain faithful to the logic of utopia, as one can critique the already established society while simultaneously avoiding the creation of a new false utopia. Thus, Tawḥīd’s apophaticism and utopia’s anti-utopianism are equally deployed against false-deities and false utopias as a means to emancipate believers – or humanity at large – from the vicissitudes of false absolutes.

4.6 Conclusion

To avoid the catastrophe of utopian political projects in Muslims societies, such as the ISIS ‘caliphate’, it is important to reengage with Islamic utopian thought, which is born from Islamic apophatic theology. The essential idea of Islamic utopianism cannot be located in attempts to recreate Prophet Muhammad’s Medīna al-Nabī or construct any other blueprint for an ideal Islamic state, as was done in al-Fārābī’s *Mabādi’ Ārā’ ahl al-madīna al-fāḍila*. Such attempts to reimagine the past and recreate it in the present have led to catastrophe after catastrophe in the Muslim world. Such visions, once implemented, ultimately descend into dystopian nightmares for Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Rather, I argue that the essential element of Islamic utopianism that must be preserved, elevated and actualised is utopia’s inherent negativity: its own anti-utopianism. Such anti-utopianism is rooted in the apophatic negativity of Tawḥīd, Islam’s ban on polytheism and images, and the very negative meaning of the term ‘utopia’, i.e. ‘that which has no place’. Paradoxically, to stay true to the utopian vision of society exercised by Muhammad and the *ṣaḥāba* during the period of the Medīna al-Nabī, one must reject all attempts to anachronistically resurrect it in the present, and all attempts to construct a new blueprint for an Islamic state for the future. Emancipatory politics should not ask Muslims to become pathological deconstructionists, but it must reject all attempts to create new false absolutes, both in theology and in polity.

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