

## What Is Religion to A State? An Interpretive Essay from the Perspective of Ahl as-Sunnah

*Din Devletin Neyi Olur? Eblisünnet Perspektifinden Bir Yorum Denemesi*

OSMAN ZAHİD ÇİFÇİ 

*Selçuk University*

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**Abstract:** In this paper, the meanings ascribed to religion in a social union by Abū al-Ḥasan ‘Alī Ibn Muḥammad al-Māwardī (972-1058), an influential actor in establishing the perspectives of Ahl as-Sunnah on a State, were discussed. While doing so, first of all, the importance of al-Māwardī in the thought of the Ahl as-Sunnah state was mentioned. The study has two main purposes: To show that the understanding of human, which is the basis of al-Māwardī's thoughts, is effective in the formation of his ideas about the state, and to show that his understanding of human is supported by some experimental studies today and the same understanding of human is accepted today. Any events and construes made on human-related phenomena are centered around the construer's beliefs about the nature of human beings. Al-Māwardī, who was a key figure in shaping the views of Ahl as-Sunnah on the State, was also a definitive factor in his public-related views on religion and the State. He considered human beings as self-centered, prone to evil, and an entity that should be steered towards good, and structured his view of the State and religion according to this idea. Our other purpose is to determine the place where religion corresponds to al-Māwardī thought. According to him, religion benefits the State in providing social reconciliation, meta-physical deterrent, and legitimacy.

**Keywords:** Philosophy of religion, political philosophy, Ahl as-Sunnah, religion and state, al-Māwardī.



## Giriş

Before embarking on an interpretive essay of two institutions, religion and State, that have impacted and continue to influence human life throughout history, it is first necessary to expose the assumptions about human beings. Thus, it will become meaningful to start by revealing the existing acceptance from the perspective of the Ahl as-Sunnah in our study. Discussing the subject from the viewpoint of Ahl as-Sunnah and accepting al-Māwardī as the central motivation in our interpretative essay was his admittance as a core figure by many researchers who have written on the subject. Therefore, we preferred al-Māwardī since he was the most significant doctrinaire of Ahl as-Sunnah about the State. For instance, Hamilton Gibb and Ahmad Mubarak al-Baghdadi saw al-Māwardī as the founder of Ahl as-Sunnah political philosophy on State and one of the forerunners in the generation of Islamic political theory (Al-Baghdadi, 2003, p. 77; Gibb, 1991, p. 157).

While setting our thoughts in the study, we will not be content with just conveying al-Māwardī's philosophy, but we will try to present that some existing empirical/experimental studies also contain supportive results of his philosophies. Our primary purpose is to reveal that the ideas defended are current, and nothing has changed about human beings since then. The ideas al-Māwardī handed by traditional inheritance, which reached him through legacy, are now being put forward again with empirical studies. Although this will be the subject of a different study, in short, the idea that everything is progressing is invalid, as suggested by the ideology of progressivism.

In this study, in which we will discuss what religion is to a State, we primarily need to look into the essence of human being to answer the questions that will arise at this point since we will say that ideologies, philosophical systems, and even religions define their views by the basic assumptions about the nature of human beings.

### 1. Human Being Compelled to Socialize

Every existing meaning and value emerge with the human being who has the judgments for meaning and value. It is not possible to mention the meaningfulness or meaninglessness of anything when the human being



does not exist. Then, all that remains is the fact that they *exist*. Viewing from this angle, perhaps the only philosophical question that matters is: ‘what is the human being?’ Indeed, the history of philosophy is the history of seeking answers to this question. All philosophical activities are directed towards efforts of human beings to get self-acquaintance, realize their position in the universe, and add meaning to the life and actions. Other questions are derived from the central question; *what is the human being?* This is also a fundamental question for other philosophy disciplines and as well as today’s science branches. It seems that the human sciences such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, or all other social sciences are based on a certain understanding of human. Yet, moral philosophy, political philosophy, and even epistemology and ontology are performed based on the assumption that ‘what human is.’ Not only philosophy and science but also people in contact with each other in social life have an existing human understanding they have consciously or unconsciously taken from society (Özcan, 2016, pp. 9–10). In that case, it can be considered easily that there are a set human understanding in every theoretical and practical field from philosophy to science, and any results will be affected somehow by the set/determined human understandings.

When we look at the history of philosophy, we encounter many definitions about human beings and, accordingly, quite different theories about human and life. It appears that the traits of human beings such as thinking, speaking, generating, and acting are highlighted in these definitions, and depending on which feature is emphasized, the terms such as *theoretike*, *praktike*, or *poetike* is referenced. However, the fact that human is a social being draws attention as the common aspect of all these definitions. Therefore, a human is an entity that has to be socialized since he is a being.

Two key institutions, State and religion, emerge as a result of the necessity of socialization. The existence of these two institutions appears to be important for the creation and application of the rules that are required for people to live together in social life. We begin with the notion that religion is an institution that creates the most general social rules in our study, which focuses on the role of religion in the social dimension rather than the individual itself.



## 2. Functions of Religion

Al-Māwardī's philosophies about the essence of human beings naturally became decisive in his ideas of the State-religion relationship. The 8<sup>th</sup> verse of Surah Shams<sup>1</sup>, which we can accept as the human understanding of the Ahl as-Sunnah, shapes the understanding of human that al-Māwardī takes also as a basis. The current scientific support for his understanding of human and the role he draws for religion in social life and State within this understanding is found in the empirical studies of Karen Wynn and her team (Hamlin et al., 2007; Hamlin & Wynn, 2012; Kuhlmeier et al., 2003; Mahajan & Wynn, 2012; Sheskin et al., 2014; Wynn, 2007; Wynn et al., 2018; Wynn & Bloom, 2014) and Jared Piazza et al (Piazza et al., 2011).

In the 8<sup>th</sup> verse of Surah Shams, the human being is portrayed as a creature with the ability to be either good or bad, and those who choose the good are redemptive while those who choose the evil are in waste, according to the verse's following sentences. Religions exist to demonstrate the good to people, suppress the evil in their potential, and guide them to choose the good. The social side of religion is clear from this perspective.

In the empirical studies of Karen Wynn and her team, in which we claim that we have received up-to-date scientific support in disclosing al-Māwardī's understanding of humans, generated supportive conclusions such a human understanding. In experiments conducted with infants in a laboratory setting, the human being was proven clearly to have the ability to become good and evil at the same time (Hamlin et al., 2007; Kuhlmeier et al., 2003; Wynn, 2007; Wynn & Bloom, 2014). Another conclusion of the study was that giving direction to people influenced their decision to choose the truth. Furthermore, it was reported that a selfish person might display altruistic behaviors by giving orientation (Sheskin et al., 2014; Wynn et al., 2018). Thus, along with the willingness of educated individuals to choose the good, giving courses to people in the State-run educational institutions must be emphasized as one of the reasons for the existence of a State as a social institution. Al-Māwardī also believed that people being selfish by nature would be prevented from bringing evil to the forefront in society through religion and a mind train by belief (Al-Māwardī, 1981, p.

<sup>1</sup> ...inspired in it the knowledge of its sins and its piety...



146). If the nation is not mature enough to enable averting the evil via guidance and religion, a powerful sultan takes on the responsibility to do it. That sultan, who gathered all types of authority under his liability, should not slide into despotism while preventing the society from descending into evil. At this point, religion would limit the sultan's power to prevent him from sliding into dictatorship (Al-Māwardī, 1973, pp. 136–138). Like religion, the State should also play a vital role in maintaining social order and ensuring that people respect each other's rights while living together. However, religion redraws its frontiers, while the State performs this function.

The study conducted by Jared Piazza et al. indicated that while people display expected good behaviors in social life, they assumed that a metaphysical entity was watching them and exhibited anticipated/moral actions with this feeling even when no one is around (Piazza et al., 2011). This research also demonstrated that religion is as effectual as the State at maintaining social order and that religion's metaphysical deterrence was significant in addition to the deterrent force of the State. According to al-Māwardī, who regarded religion as a prerequisite for the social order, the religions that people believe and obey are necessary for the survival of humanity and the continuation of civilization. Religion ensures that people who are evil by nature do not follow the bad feelings in their personalities and do not stray from the path of righteousness. The enraged soul of the human being can dare to be punished by the State or attempt to commit wicked crimes in places where the State is not present. However, the torment of the hereafter (afterlife) proposed by religion and the concept of a judgment day when all will be revealed restrains the depravedness of the soul. Therefore, it is an absolute necessity that any society shall have a religion in terms of the world order and the welfare of the people (Al-Māwardī, 1973, p. 136). al-Māwardī had already defined religion as a belief that people followed, without distinguishing between true and false beliefs, and considered it as a metaphysical deterrent so that religion attributed to social reconciliation and coexistence (Al-Māwardī, 1981, p. 184).

The study of Karen Wynn and her team revealed another finding on the role of religion that is worth emphasizing here. Yet, determining that infants have feelings of marginalization, which were not acquired through



socialization but brought by them from birth, is critical in making the existence of religions meaningful (Hamlin et al., 2011; Hamlin & Wynn, 2012; Mahajan & Wynn, 2012). It seems that othering is a natural phenomenon for people who were born to marginalize one other. Also, it has been witnessed that people marginalize each other for a variety of reasons in everyday life. For example, people marginalize and even attempt to kill each other because of the teams in football games whose purpose of existence is to provide entertainment. Nowadays, although it is almost a prevalent notion that religions are the reason for separation of humanity, religions create the most vital framework in human reality, which makes anything a pretext to separate one another and prevent people from marginalizing as much as possible. People of the same religion may readily embrace each other regardless of language, color, or nation, and such aspects, all of which is a reason for othering, surprisingly lose their power beneath the umbrella of religion. When we consider religions with this perceptive, their vitality for social life emerges once again. Socialization of people is facilitated by the fact that religions provide a philosophy to them, and people's vision of life is directed by the same philosophy. The fact that religions present philosophy to people and people living their life through the same philosophy facilitates their socialization process. Al-Māwardī also emphasized this function of religion. According to him, religion inspires people to have a heart and be merciful to others, and it invites people to establish sincere friendships with each other based on love rather than self-interest. Only religion, he claims, may eliminate wicked thoughts in the heads of people and prevent them from committing crimes. According to al-Māwardī, a State can be improved through religious principles, and people can take a stable and correct path by adhering to these principles. Abandonment of religious values leads to differences of opinion, unrest, and internal disputes. As a result, right and wrong get entangled, and right and wrong become inseparable. Nothing but religion can bring together the strong and the weak, the noble and the non-noble, around a common idea. Therefore, the State always needs a superior religion to unite people, resolve conflicts, and limit unjust desires and demands (Al-Māwardī, 1981, p. 146).

According to al-Māwardī, another purpose of religion is to bring legitimacy to social organizations. This religious function draws attention as a



frequently encountered situation in the historical process. not just being unique to the political field, legitimacy can be described, in the eyes of society, as a system or institution expressing the validity and justification of an existing reality that can be associated to all areas of life emerging in objective and subjective spheres (Okumuş, 2005, p. 32). However, In terms of politics, legitimacy refers to the capacity to establish and maintain such a belief that the social order, existing political authority, or institutions are the most acceptable authorities and bodies for the society (Lipset, 1986, p. 59). This capacity enables the political authority to achieve sovereignty in social organizations without causing any social unrest. Thus, the government becoming valid through gaining legitimacy is called the legal power. The ability of the legal authority to maintain its authority also depends on how much it can justify itself in the eyes of the people it governs. Understandably, the authority in social organizations needs legality/legitimacy and legitimization support to survive and maintain its existence. It appears that the State, which is the most prevalent form of social structure, acquires its legitimacy and support through legitimators such as institutions, organizations, and groups, and as well as mediators such as religion, belief, law, ideology, and charisma (Weber, 1995, p. 56). The State enables to provide its legitimacy by using one, some, or all of these legitimators and mediators. The fate and lifetime of a State are also determined by how noticeable these factors are in the eyes of society. However, religious legitimacy is a concept derived from religion and religious sources, as well as the transcendent and traditions that originate from religion. Besides many, one of the functions of religion is to provide legitimacy, and this power has been used throughout history commonly, profoundly, and effectively. Beliefs justify the humanly defined reality by connecting it to an ultimate, universal, and divine truth. This situation makes religion indispensable for the social order; hence, it seems impossible to imagine a political order or a State that does not use religion to legitimize itself, willingly or unwillingly (Berger, 1993, pp. 65–79). Therefore, even the governments most distant from beliefs have had to seek the legitimacy of religion.

Al-Māwardī was well aware of this function of the State. He would reference this function of religion while advising State administrators, re-



minding them that their existence as administrators would depend on accomplishing this role of religion. According to al-Māwardī, governing the State just by relying on power and a vast number of soldiers while ignoring religion would result at the end of a State. Because the public and soldiers are the government powers, and they are bound by their beliefs to obey the governors. Without this belief, the soldiers' damage to the State would be worse than that of the enemies' (Al-Māwardī, 1981, p. 147). According to al-Māwardī, who cited Ardashir and Aristotle that religion is the cornerstone of the State, his supporters will turn against him and join forces with those who oppose them if a ruler disregards religion (Al-Māwardī, 1981, pp. 149–150). Again, according to al-Māwardī, there are three reasons why religion fails to fulfill its role as a source of legitimacy, resulting in coups and revolutions in a State. Firstly, the ruler (sovereign) moves away from religious ideals and appoints incompetent officials to the State administration. A leader who does so loses his legitimacy. Such a leader has no sanctity so that he becomes an open target of the nation. He quoted the following lines of a Greek philosopher in this sense: 'The public continues to give time to the oppressor. Whenever oppression begins to touch their beliefs and the houses they live in, that leader's reign comes to an end (Al-Māwardī, 1981, p. 154). Secondly, the leader begins to underestimate spiritual principles and humiliate religious individuals. Turning his back on spiritual values and putting pressure on the public who attempt to live religiously gives rise to the opinion that spiritual principles are correct, so their demands must be met. Finally, the leader begins to expose fabricated things, which have no basis in religion, and uses bad words to express them. People have no tolerance for those who try to destroy and take their beliefs lightly. A leader acting in this manner loses legitimacy, and his governance becomes invalidated and destroyed (Al-Māwardī, 1981, p. 154).

Al-Māwardī, who asserted religion to allow socialization and social union by building a solid ground with its functions, said that a State is established for three objectives. These are religious, military, and monetary objectives, and he emphasized that the primary and solid reason for the foundation of a State is the religion itself. The religious objective is the significant goal that will ensure the long-term continuity of the State and rein-



force the loyalty to the State (Al-Māwardī, 1981, p. 153). Accordingly, principles, provisions, and terms of a society shall be built on religion (Al-Māwardī, 1983, p. 67). Al-Māwardī attributed the progress of the State and the peaceful life of the public during the periods of Hulefa-i Rashids, Ömer b. Abdelaziz and Yazid b. Valid, and Abbasid Khalifas emphasized that religion was the basis of the State, and he quoted the following statement from Ardashir Babakan and Aristotle to support his views;

Ardashir said that, you shall know that religion and State are twin brothers, they only stand with each other. Religion is the foundation of a State. Then the leader shall become the guardian of the religion. There shall be a foundation for each State, and there shall be a guardian for the religion. Religion without a guardian perishes. A State without a foundation collapse.

In his letter to Alexander, Aristotle says that, make religion the foundation of the State, whoever opposes you shall be the enemy of your State. Whichever leader makes his State a servant of religion, he shall be a more worthy leader to the State. However, whichever leader makes his religion a servant to his State, the State shall be a disaster for him (Al-Māwardī, 1981, p. 150).

The emphasis made in these quotations, which he used to support his principles, is that the State should be a servant of religion. These quotations also centralize that al-Māwardī is of the opinion that the State is a means of religion.

## Conclusion

To sum up, what we have said so far, both religion and the State are two institutions that ease the coexistence of people who have to socialize necessarily. Any events and construes made on human-related phenomena are centered around the construer's beliefs about the nature of human beings. Al-Māwardī, who was a key figure in shaping the views of Ahl as-Sunnah on the State, was also a definitive factor in his public-related views on religion and the State. He considered human beings as self-centered, prone to evil, and an entity that should be steered towards good, and structured his view of the State and religion according to this idea. His human understanding continues to be supported by empirical studies performed even today. From this point of view, he identified some functions of religion within the State, which is the largest social structure. According to al-



Māwardī, the question of ‘what is a religion to a State?’ can be answered as follows: Religion acts as a mediator in the State in ensuring social unity and preventing people from living in the same society without marginalizing each other. Religion is a means by which all those who have the potential to marginalize each other and who can use anything as an excuse to do so are brought together. It is effective in enforcing expected/moral behaviors in society due to its dimension of offering metaphysical deterrence. It provides the control mechanism that the State is unable to establish. Religion is also a fundamental impediment to the State's control mechanism from devolving into despotism and oppression. It sets boundaries so that the rulers of the State can not cross the limits. It gives legitimacy to the State, and this legitimacy entails the State's respect for religion and what religion has declared while protecting the State's authority. Therefore, religion becomes the most important factor in ensuring a united and powerful State and Society.

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**Öz:** Bu çalışmada ehlisünnetin devletle ilgili görüşlerinin şekillenmesinde etkili bir aktör olan Maverdi'nin dine toplumsal örgütlenmede yüklediği görevler ele alınmaya çalışılmıştır. Bu yapılırken öncelikle Maverdi'nin ehlisünnet devlet düşüncesindeki öneminden bahsedilmiştir. Çalışmanın iki ana amacı bulunmaktadır: Maverdi'nin düşüncelerinin temelinde var olan insan anlayışının devletle ilgili fikirlerinin oluşumunda etkili olduğunu göstererek onun sahip olduğu insan anlayışının günümüzde deneysel bazı çalışmalarla desteklendiğini ve aynı insan anlayışının günümüzde de kabul gördüğünü ortaya koymak. İnsanla ilişkili olgu ve olaylara getirilen her yorum, yorumlayanın insanın mahiyetine dair fikirleri etrafında şekillenmektedir. Ehlişünnet düşüncesinin devletle ilgili görüşlerinin şekillenmesinde önemli bir aktör olan Maverdi'nin de insanı ilgilendiren din ve devletle ilgili düşüncelerinde belirleyici unsur, onun insan anlayışı olmuştur. O, insanı bencil, kötülüğe meyyal, iyiliğe yönlendirilmesi gereken bir varlık olarak görmüş, devlet ve dine bakışını da bu anlayışa göre şekillendirmiştir. Diğer amacımız ise dinin Maverdi düşüncesinde tekabül ettiği yeri tespit etmektir. Ona göre din toplumsal uzlaşmayı sağlama, metafizik caydırıcılık ve meşruiyet sağlama işlevlerini yerine getirerek devlete yardımcı olmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Din felsefesi, siyaset Felsefesi, Ehlişünnet, din ve devlet, Maverdi.

