Medieval Islamic Philosophy for the Modern World
An Interview with Charles Butterworth

Al-Noor Staff
Before Charles Butterworth began his work, there was not much of a field of scholarly research in Islamic philosophy. That has changed in the last half-century because of Dr. Butterworth’s dedication and ingenuity in studying pre-modern Islamic philosophers, including Alfarabi, Al-Razi, and Averroes. In doing so, Dr. Butterworth has introduced the Western world to some philosophic masterpieces for the first time and has encouraged an active appreciation of an often-misunderstood school of thought. He received his B.A. from Michigan State University. In addition, he studied at the University of Ayn Shams in Egypt and received a Doctorate in Philosophy from the University of Nancy in France before obtaining his Ph.D. in political science from the University of Chicago. He served for several years as the Principal Investigator for the Project in Medieval Islamic Logic in Cairo with sponsorship from the Smithsonian Institute.
Dr. Butterworth also served for a period as president of the American Council for the Study of Islamic Societies. He taught for most of his career at the University of Maryland, College Park, where he is currently Professor Emeritus of Government and Politics.

Dr. Butterworth has traveled extensively throughout the Islamic world, and he has lived in most Arabic speaking countries. In his work, he has completed original translations of works by Rousseau in addition to the translations he has done for texts of Islamic political philosophers. He has written critical editions of most of the Middle Commentaries written by Averroes on Aristotle’s logic and has published studies of different aspects of the political teachings of all of these writers in ancient and contemporary terms.

What lead you to first become interested in Islamic political philosophy?

Butterworth: When I was at the University of Chicago, I had the pleasure of studying with Leo Strauss, and one day in class he mentioned that in order to understand the history of philosophy, one really had to understand what happened in the Medieval Period, but not only Latin/Christian philosophy, also Arabic/Islamic and Hebrew/Jewish, so one thing led to another and I decided to study Arabic and see if that was accurate. I think it was. I thought it was going to be a detour of a couple of years, and it’s turned out to be a detour, more or less, of a lifetime, but it’s a huge, rich world that we really do need to know about.

Do you feel that the study of Islamic political philosophy has become more popular since that time?

Butterworth: I think that it’s certainly become more popular since that time. It’s not simply popular. What’s happened in our time is that we’ve seen that there are a number of very interesting younger scholars who are doing Arabic/Islamic philosophy. You have somebody here at Boston College—James Morris—who specializes in Persia or Iran and studies Persian mystical philosophy or mysticism, so you have people involved in all sorts of different aspects of studying this culture—this very wide culture—and I’m fascinated every time I open up a journal to see how many new voices there are of people coming along and doing this work.

What did you study during your time at the University of Chicago?

Butterworth: I went to the University of Chicago to study political philosophy with Leo Strauss, and because of this detour towards Arabic/Islamic philosophy, I then began to work with Muhsin Mahdi, who later ended up teaching at Harvard. While at Chicago, my work was mainly with Mahdi, but there was a woman in the Oriental Institute by the name of Nahbia Abbott, who was a remarkably disciplined historian of the early Islamic period and she wrote a lot of articles on how papyrus turned into paper. Things started being written on papyrus, and later as paper became more the material to be used for writing, that was used. Then there were other people—it was a rich department, even in those days—Jaroslav Stetkevych, who did poetry and literature. A fellow by the name of Norman Golb, who was very interested in Judeo-Arabic, the Arabic language written in Hebrew letters used by many Jewish scholars throughout the years, and I worked closely with him as well. So, I had a lot of varied training at the University.

Then, after you left the University, what experiences did you have that you particularly enjoyed or found rewarding?

Butterworth: It’s been a great pleasure to be able

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to travel a lot to the Middle East over the years. I spent a year doing fieldwork research in Egypt when I was writing my dissertation, and that opened me to a whole new world of contacts and possible ventures. Eventually, after leaving the University of Chicago and becoming a young assistant professor, I was able to persuade the Smithsonian Institution that paper was just as important an artifact as shards. The Smithsonian was giving very generous grants of money to people doing pieces of pottery—trying to figure out cultural traces through pottery, but they had never considered that maybe manuscripts would be another way to do this. I wrote a persuasive grant application to study medieval Arabic logic and started a whole program on that in Cairo, which lasted six or seven years. In my case, I went back and forth. I used my summer and winter break time to go to Egypt and work on manuscripts—editing them and later translating them. And then also, from that, all sorts of other projects developed. So, I have had the pleasure of traveling through almost all of the Arab world and also through Persia, back before the Khomeini revolution.

For some of the texts that you have written about, you are one of the first persons to translate them, or you translate them in unique ways. What is your process for translating these often confusing Arabic texts?

Butterworth: It’s a learning experience. Something that used to happen and was well known for scholars of Greek or scholars of Latin, but wasn’t well known for the rest of us, was that someone working on a text used to make a working translation, to help himself or herself go through the text. I guess what I have done is the same sort of thing, but then tried to come up with a finished product, something that is readable in English. As I have been doing this, the discovery that I have made for myself is how nuanced the language can be. Words do not always mean the same thing. It’s good to try to translate the same Arabic word by the same English word, and to use one English word for one Arabic word. You sometimes can’t do that, but should try to keep to that rule as much as possible. Then, to think how in Arabic—as in English and many other languages—the same word used in a different context can have a different meaning. So, you can use that word, but you have to understand that it takes on a nuance. Essentially, this exercise has become a marvelous learning tool to learn for myself—and hopefully to pass onto others—how a person thinks—how the author thinks, and then helps us to think through that author’s thought process.

What was the state of philosophy in Islam prior to Alfarabi’s writings?

Butterworth: Roughly speaking, he is the third person in the Arabic/Islamic world to write in a philosophic manner. You have al-Kindi, you have al-Razi, and then you have Alfarabi. Al-Kindi is about fifty to sixty years older than Alfarabi. Al-Razi is about five to six years older than he is. What they did, compared to what Alfarabi did, is really very little. Al-Kindi is primarily interested in talking about the books that had been discovered from the Greek tradition, especially Aristotle’s books, trying to place them in a context.
Then, he wrote a long study of part of the *Metaphysics*, especially that having to do with the unmoved mover—that having to do with God. Al-Razi wrote a number of different treatises. He was especially interested in medicine. As far as philosophy goes, his most famous contribution was a defense of his own life patterned after Socrates’s defense of his life—a kind of Apology for what he—Al-Razi—was doing, patterned after what Socrates had for the Athenian people at his own trial. Alfarabi comes along with something entirely different, and seems to be convinced from the outset that what had been known as philosophy was in disarray. It was not understood, neglected, and needed to be reinvigorated. So, he sought to approach it from a new perspective and to bring back philosophy the way it had been understood both by Plato and Aristotle, and present it to the Arabic-speaking people. What is so interesting about that is that he was a non-Arab. His mother-tongue was either Dari or Pashtu, a dialect of Persian, but he learned Arabic, taught in Arabic, and understood the need to reinvigorate philosophy for Arabic speakers.

Compared to some of these other Islamic philosophers before and after Alfarabi, he seems to speak almost purposefully in non-religious terms. How was he able to write so confidently without explicitly addressing Islam, given the time period?

**Butterworth:** I don’t think that there was a problem during his time period. There is discussion going on, there’s certainly theological and juridical investigations, but there’s also a notion that we, the jurists, or we, the theologians, will stay doing what we’re doing, and not a sense that they have to smash anybody who disagrees with them. That comes later, especially with Al-Ghazali, but during Alfarabi’s time period, there’s either elation about all the new learning that’s coming forth—and it’s probably that more than anything else—or there’s some kind of reason for having a laissez faire attitude; letting people study what they want. So he has no pressure on that square, to the best of my knowledge.

Do you think that neutral take on religion is why his teachings have been so accessible for Jewish and Christian philosophers, such as Maimonides or Aquinas?

**Butterworth:** I’ve never thought of it that way. There’s probably something there. Especially Maimonides; what he’s interested in is trying to understand Aristotle better, and Alfarabi helps him to do that. Maimonides is very aware of the different schools of theology in Islam. The juridical schools are not anything he has to be concerned with, as a non-Muslim, he has to worry only about the religious school, the place that he’s living, and make sure he doesn’t go against it, juridically speaking. So he doesn’t get into these questions of the dialogues, the debates that are going on among the different juridical schools. And as far as the theologians go, in *The Guide*, Maimonides has no patience at all for the arguments that they’re engaged in. But he is intrigued by what he learns from Alfarabi, because Alfarabi helps him see much clearer what’s going on. The same thing’s true for Averroes. I don’t know Thomas well enough to know what he says about Alfarabi, but that might well be what’s going on for Thomas. He doesn’t have to worry about defending the faith against Alfarabi; he can learn from Alfarabi.

Do you think that borrowing between faiths and cultures is lacking today? Do you think that an interchange similar to that between these early philosophers would be possible today?

**Butterworth:** As far as the dialogue among faiths, yes. There was this disastrous speech that Pope Benedict gave at Regensburg that angered the Muslims very, very much. It angered people who understand Islam a great deal. It was needlessly offensive. But it gave rise to a very interesting dialogue. And that dialogue is still going on. It also, in one way or another, prompted a lot of reaching out from Christians to Muslims and from Muslims to Christians. Sadly enough, there is not that much going on with respect to Muslim-Jewish or Jewish-Muslim understanding. A lot of that has to do with Israel and the Palestinian question. So the short answer: there is a lot going on and especially here in the United States, there is a great deal going on, but elsewhere as well. In the UK, to a certain extent, until these tragedies of January in
France and in Germany, and now you’re beginning to see people backing away from that and starting to become biased towards Islam.

**Butterworth:** I don’t see that happening on a large scale, but I am intrigued to see how many Westerners of Christian background are trying to use the philosophers of Islam to understand philosophic questions better. On one level it’s just a simple matter of becoming culturally aware of something different, but then it goes deeper. And there really are important questions about the way we live with one another that grow out of that beginning discourse, the whole anti-colonialist impetus that you see or read about today. We in the United States who don’t have to worry about people from our colonies coming back can try to understand the UK, France, Germany, Holland and their problems much better. A few people there who have this awareness of the Middle East are also trying to help their fellow citizens do that. So there’s a very lively debate going on. Right now it looks like the biased folks are getting the upper hand. Hopefully that’s just going to be for the immediate future and pass away.

There have been a lot of Christian and Jewish philosophers and theologians who appreciate Alfarabi and his philosophy, but many in the Islamic tradition see it as conflicting with important religious beliefs. Could you talk about what ways that is so and how those differences might become palatable to the Islamic tradition?

**Butterworth:** It’s something you find in every religious tradition, the true believer who wants to stick to the text, the revealed text and nothing but the text of the sacred scriptures and the writings that derive from them. Alas, in the Islamic world, there is a great deal of that kind of closed mindedness that prevails, but because of education and because of the widespread emphasis on learning more about the other, that is being nibbled away. Chunks are being broken off of that, and there’s an openness coming. What I’ve grown up with and have seen among people living in the Arab/Muslim world, is either a kind of mindless secularism among people, and therefore, a willingness to devote themselves to the here and now. That’s not very interesting. Or a very blinkered religious faith that doesn’t want to consider other possibilities. That latter is being challenged because we’re now learning so much more by interaction. I realize there’s one problem for what I’m saying, and that is this Islamic State and all the nonsense and all the horrible acts that are coming from it and the notion that young people, who have grown up in the West, feel an attraction to go and join it. That’s a problem. We’re going to have to overcome that. Today I don’t see a solution, but I find it hard to think that infatuation with what they stand for and what they’re doing, can prevail. It’s abhorred action, and I think people will come to their senses.

What do you think that contemporary Muslims can learn from the teachings of Alfarabi or from the tradition of Islamic political philosophy?

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Butterworth: To understand their world better, and above all, I would love to see Egyptians devoting themselves to reading Alfarabi and understanding the different kinds of regimes that he sketches out in the Political Regime and learning that the infatuation they now seem to have with Field Marshal Al-Sisi is probably misplaced. Al-Sisi is a tyrant. People need to see that. I do not that think that the judgment about Morsi, the former president, is a correct judgment. I think that he was an incompetent president that made many mistakes, but I do not think for a moment that he was corrupt or that he was planning to bring about an end of the state and install a caliphate. I think that's a falsehood. So, they could learn something like that. We can't really talk about Syria. It's in shambles. It would be delightful to have a discussion with some of the mullahs in Iran, could they read Alfarabi and talk about his writings. There was a president of Iran, Mohammed Khatami, who was—who is—very conversant with Alfarabi and who seems to have profited from that. He's no longer in power, no longer has any influence, but there are others like him, and that's really a thriving society with lots of interesting, intelligent, educated people, whom hopefully we'll be able to get to know as relationships get better. And I think you could go around and look at different Arab [countries]. Jordan, which has been sleeping for a long time, seems to be waking up to a new place in the world, and, of course, Lebanon represents something very special. All of North Africa, especially Morocco and Tunisia, is very promising places. So, there is something, and what's fascinating in Tunisia and in Morocco, there's an indigenous interest in philosophy among university students and teachers that is unlike anything else elsewhere in the Arab world, so that's very promising.

Would you say, other than Tunisia and Morocco, that these texts aren't being as widely discussed and grappled with as they could be?

Butterworth: Tunisia, Morocco, Lebanon, and Iran to a great extent seem to be the places of intellectual effervescence. Egypt, of course, even today, seems to be of an important place. It's just that the tyranny that Egyptians are living under is making itself felt. When you watch television, Egyptian television, you see that people are not speaking [their minds]—well, who knows whether they're speaking their minds, but too many people are saying the same things. It looks like a party line. It looks like they're trying to please the ruler.

What are the roots of Alfarabi's philosophy? He adopts many of his teachings from ancient Greek texts, but what methods and lessons does he adopt, in particular, and why does he find them valuable?

Butterworth: If I understand Alfarabi correctly, philosophy came to fruition in Greece at the time of Plato and Aristotle. It reached a very high point with Plato, and it reached an even higher point with Aristotle. I mean there is a very definite gradation there. That was philosophy at its best, since then there has been a degradation, and he's trying to reverse that—stop it, reverse the trend, and get a restoration of philosophy back in place. A lot of it has to do with understanding what the logical arts—what we can

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learn from the different parts of logic—and how to express our thoughts in correct Arabic. We don’t need to be parrots who imitate sounds, we can work our way through things, and he’s very willing to show us how to do that. He shows us by doing it himself, rather than saying look here, look here, look here. He does it, and, what it seems to me, his procedure is a dialectical procedure—you take the opinions that are dominant today, in the day you’re living, and you try to look at what they rest on and you see whether those premises are sound or not sound and then point to other alternatives.

He differs in one remarkable way that ought to open our minds to all sorts of other possibilities. For both Plato and for Aristotle the best regime could be no big than a city—that was the size. Alfarabi thinks there are three kinds of regimes: a city, a nation, and an association of nations; in other words something that looks like the Islamic empire that he knows. He seems to suggest that this new possibility is viable, if we can only figure out how to make it work. That’s a major difference.

For the rest of it, it’s a matter of human beings haven’t changed so what makes a human being virtuous, or what makes a human being fully human, hasn’t really changed. So we just have to adapt those virtues to the different society that we are working with or the demands of the day. But it seems that there is nothing to be changed there, there is no reason for innovation.

This is a fascinating suggestion, because after all, like Christianity, Islam is a proselytizing religion. There is a promise of the whole world becoming Muslim, just as there is a promise of the whole world becoming Christian, and one has to think through with Alfarabi what the conditions for that are. It might be, that that is not such a good idea after all that variety is better than homogeneity. But he puts that out there and makes the reader think with him about the problems of the text about the way to do it and the problems that are along the path.