

## **Alfarabi's Hermeneutics of Religion: Contemporary Relevance of His Perspectives on Freedom of Religion**

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### **Abstract:**

Contemporary debates on freedom of religion are based on the following premises: a) Human beings are born free, as unique individuals with distinct personalities shaped by natural and social influences; b) human rationality, being the seat of human freedoms, is universal; c) Religion, and hence freedom thereof, might as well be relegated to the realm of individual consciousness. This explains the reference to “the freedom of consciousness and belief” in many international and legal documents. d) Therefore as an individual human right, freedom of religion, consisting of one’s right to uphold any belief, dogma, conviction or practice, must be protected against external coercion and interference of any sort.

So, the question arises as to the nature of freedom of religion; does it belong inside or outside the realm of human rights? It appears that once a religion is perceived from a majority perspective, it is positioned outside and, hence, falls under the political rights - and if it is perceived from a minority perspective or from the point of view of the latecomers to a country, it is positioned inside. It comes easier for some adherents of different religious traditions to try to devalue all the “other religions” in a spirit of competition for influencing public opinion rather than focusing on the common issues facing all religions alike. Freedom of religion is unquestionably one of these issues at stake now.

In this paper, I intend to provide a short analysis of the philosophical perspectives developed by some Muslim philosophers on the question of freedom of religion. Since freedom of religion is a social and first-order political issue, it must be dealt with in the theoretical context of social and political philosophy. But contemporary philosophy has almost severed its ties with religion. To the modern view, philosophy involves rational reflection on the nature of things and religion is concerned with practices based on revealed doctrines which are presumably impervious to rational scrutiny. However, I will attempt to argue that freedom of religion can only be resolved by a philosophical perspective on truth, which was the nature of philosophy as understood by some Muslim philosophers, like Alfarabi and Avicenna. We cannot analyze freedom of religion within a single religious perspective, nor one philosophical perspective on modernity. The perspective of these Muslim philosophers of 10th to 13th century are relevant here because for them, philosophy was not just a rational discourse, as it is for us today, but also a matter of academic exchange or statements; it was about primarily ways involving ‘practice of spiritual exercises with the aim of the transformation of the self by the acquisition of wisdom.’”

**Keywords:** al-Farabi, Avicenna, Averroes, Practical truth, Muslim philosophy, Philosophy of religion, Negative freedom, Enlightenment, Freedom of religion, Hermeneutics of religion.

### **Issues Concerning the Definition of Freedom and Religion**

Hegel draws attention to ambiguities in the definition of freedom. For Hegel, since freedom has no content and it is an empty concept, there will be no definition of freedom from its substance or its negation. Only a literal meaning can apply to it.

“No idea is so generally recognized as indefinite, ambiguous, and open to the greatest misconceptions (...) as the idea of Freedom: none in the common currency with so little appreciation of its meaning.” (*Hegel's Philosophy of Mind* 1971, 239). Little needs to be added to Hegel's remarks, except that freedom is also confused with liberty.

Common public usage, however, confounds the term ‘liberty’ with that of ‘freedom’ by defining it as the lack of restraint. It is in this common sense that freedom here only means political and social freedom. If one were to look for a clear definition of freedom or were to ask a series of questions designed to elicit a working definition of freedom in modern philosophy, the answer would most likely be in line with solid liberal individualistic terms. One of the modern philosophers who gives such a liberal individualistic definition is Isaiah Berlin. In his *Two Concepts of Liberty*, he argues that “we should not confuse freedom with every good thing, such as a decent income and life chances. Everything is what it is, and not something else. Freedom means lack of restraint.” Berlin calls it “negative liberty”. For him, this is a bad definition because the definition focuses on the limits of one's actions. “To know my freedom,” writes Berlin, “I have but to ask how many doors are open to me, and how wide they are open. The rest is extension of this sense, or else metaphor.” (Berlin 1969, lvi)

Defining freedom of religion is not simple either, rather more complex and complicated. The issue is primarily related to human beings, it is about human freedom in its relation to having certain beliefs and acts intertwined together in what we call religion. From the psychological perspective, we need to define our subject matter in terms of a) freedom of will, b) freedom of thought, c) freedom of expression c) freedom of worship d) freedom from coercion and e) moral freedom of personal development and f) freedom of reason.

How will we define freedom of religion by emphasizing positive freedoms in the sense freedom “of, to and for” holding beliefs about God, the meaning of life, and of nature? Or should we define it negatively as freedom from, for instance, oppression by individuals, by society or by means of political order itself etc.? Can one measure freedom or lack of it against rational truth itself? These questions are all relevant to the issue of freedom of religion.

We also need an operative definition of religion that will be applicable to the freedom of diverse adherence of religions. The premises on which the contemporary debates on freedom of religion are based are the following: a) All human beings are born free. b) Societies are made up of individuals with unique and distinct personalities, by a social contract for the pursuit of common good. c) However, natural and social influences shape the individual behavior and social order. d) The reason is the inborn universal faculty that all human beings share. e) The only reliable source and the boundary of human freedoms is individual conscience and the laws of a society. c) Religion

and, hence, freedom thereof might as well be protected by laws and yet it must be relegated to the conscience of individuals -hence the references to “freedom of belief and consciousness” in most international legal documents; d) Therefore, as an individual human right, freedom of religion consisting of individual’s right to uphold any belief, dogma and conviction and practice thereof must be protected against external coercion and interference of any sort. If not all, but the fundamentals of these premises depends on the tacitly accepted logical fallacies, but this is not our concern here. However, it should be noted that these premises are sublimated as the basic tenets of modernity.

The fallacy we will remark in passing consists of the tautological assumption that as if individual consciousness is a jar of cookies received as a gift, one can eat without opening the container. While in almost all academic circles, on which the psychology’s scholarship is based, firm theories presuming it to be an unquestionable fact that from early on the human conscience is shaped to a greater extent by the individual response to all sorts of external factors such as nature, family, and social environment. Can we, then, still talk about an individual consciousness left intact and able to be protected by the law, when individuals reach the legal age? These kinds of legal statements are fallacies in the sense that atheists such as Dawkins declares a legal battle for protection of underage children’s conscience from parental religious influence and deleting all religious reference to children of all age, i.e. reference in the international and national documents as Buddhist, Muslim or Christian should be cleared. So, the parent should have no right or privilege to teach their children any religion or faith of their choice.

The second fallacy is related to a form of tacit classification of individual’s freedom into two kinds: freedom of interior and exterior actions. Freedom of conscience, thought and belief is related to an individual as a person, whereas freedom of expression is related to an individual as a member of society. This is important because depending on our definition of ‘religion’ it could be related to social and, therefore, political freedoms or to individual freedoms as an interior act of conscience.

So, the next question arises as to the nature of freedom; is freedom of religion interior or exterior to human action - that is religious action (assuming that there was a category called action)? It appears that since religion itself is subject to multiple interpretations so is the realm of its freedoms. Recent legislative acts and initiatives in several countries of Europe, for instance, have been interested in understanding the belief system, conduct and dress codes of Muslims. Ever since the controversies about the representation of the Prophet of Islam in literature, visual arts or media (particularly with the Salman Rushdie affair) several experts and observers have tried to suggest ways to regulate people’s religious actions, interior and exterior. So, freedom of religion definitely falls under the rubric of political and social rights.

### **Negative Freedom in Modernity**

If we define ‘freedom’ in negative terms as lack of restraint, we are delimiting it in its social sense. Individualist definitions mostly refer to the liberties, i.e. satisfaction of desires of body and

intellect. The end for which these desires are to be fulfilled is left squarely ambivalent. For this reason, our search for satisfactory answers to these questions in modern philosophy may be in vain; we may need to look for answers elsewhere. Half a century ago, a Muslim scholar Ismail Ragi A. Faruqi gave a lecture to the faculty of the Divinity School at the University of Chicago, on April 30, 1964. His subject was “History of Religions: Its nature and significance for Christian education and The Muslim-Christian Dialogue.”

The title makes it clear that collaboration between different faith groups in teaching each others’ religion in fairness to its own tradition was a promising educational project at the time. However, attempts of this kind did not bring the projected results. Instead, freedom of religion is getting more and more threatened in many parts of the world, even in the countries that used to be the cradle of freedoms. The unquestionable issue at stake now is not “freedom *in abstracto*” but more concretely freedom of human beings living in a society, a community and a certain country. If philosophy is primarily a way of questioning human life situations, then all the challenges threatening not only freedoms but also foundations of human societies would be the starting point of a meaningful discussion. After all, we are all responsible for engaging constructively with the problems facing the cohesion of our modern plural societies. The problems related to the freedom of religion cannot be resolved within an antiquated conceptual framework. In the face of increasing xenophobia, racial and religious hatred, intellectual responses to these kinds of social crisis across the world seems not only inadequate but obviously less than promising in terms of expectations of harmonious social life.

Therefore, as a starting point for a fruitful discussion, I will look at the critical response to Faruqi’s lecture by Charles H. Long, who was a professor of History of Religions at that time. Long writes this in his note:

Faruqi’s portrayal of the history of the discipline of religions presupposes that such discipline was carried out along rational lines of scholarship. However, such judgment may not be totally accurate. The history of religion is a child of the European enlightenment. This is to recognize that the history of religion had its beginnings in a period in which the Western World was seeking some rational as over against a religious understanding of the history of man’s religious life. The history of religion during the enlightenment was for the most part rationalistically and moralistically oriented. Prior to this time, the understanding of religion from a religious point of view yielded even less on the level of scientific understanding, for while the medieval theologians were able to see Islam, for example, as a religion and not as an instance of a truncation of reason, it was nevertheless relegated to the level of paganism since it did not meet the standards of the one true revelation. The rationalistic interpretation of history had the value of establishing a criterion other than revelation as the basis of religion. This meant that to a greater degree the data of the non-Christian religions could be taken a bit more seriously. This was further validated by the idea of universalism of the enlightenment and the reports from colonizers and missionaries which established a broader if inadequate basis for the understanding of other religions and cultures. (Faruqi 1965, 50, n. 16)

The reason I mention these remarks is that the question of religious freedoms cannot be resolved within the parameters of post-Enlightenment philosophy. It may appear to be a compliment to modernity or even to Christianity if one makes a mystical interpretation of these kinds of remarks which were in the spirit of the time no more than a lip service not only to the “so-called enlightened sections of modern society” but also to the religiously sensitive ears. Enlightenment is neither really the culmination and manifestation of Christian rationality, nor can it serve as a good ground for understanding what is the true nature of freedom of religion but only feeds the self-gratification of modernity.

It is true that history of religions did not tread a clear-cut rational course.

It is also true that medieval attempts to understand any other religion from the perspective of one's own religious tradition have proven their own fallacies, too. But it would be hardly a fair judgment if one were to claim that only post-Enlightenment reason has given rise to an appreciation of inter-religious tolerance. By giving due credit to its contribution to the development of the science of comparative religion, one should not forget that the Enlightenment has also exhibited uncompromising hostility towards and skepticism about religion.

The idea of freedom has changed as it became to signify a formal sense, as freedom from tradition and authority. In the Enlightenment, freedom is understood as a rational choice which one cannot obey tradition without using judgment. As Descartes and Kant have shown, nothing could be acceptable if one knows and freely assents to it. Kant described moral decisions other than derived from autonomy reason as heteronomous. Romanticism, in opposition to the Enlightenment trust in the absolute power of reason, has changed the conception of freedom under the influence of natural and empirical sciences.

For different reasons treatment of religion underwent a substantial change. According to Morris Jastrow, at the turn of the 20th century, these changes affected the methods of study of religions in Western tradition in seven categories: indifference, superiority, intolerance under the form of suppression and persecution, then comes the era of skepticism which followed a period of hostility towards all religions. Then comes the period of historical treatment of religion ending in the comparative study of religions. (Jastrow 1902, 1-22)

This skepticism of the Enlightenment affected Christianity more than other religious traditions by severing philosophy from practical wisdom of religions and metaphysical wisdom on truth leaving and subjective hopes of individual mind. The question which now arises is this: In retrospect, by making the object of human will its own self-regulating reason, did philosophical enlightenment give man his own freedom or make it an object determined by the forces of nature? In other words, have individual human beings discovered the inner source of their freedom in “self-regulating reason” at the expense of losing spiritual and moral freedom of self-realization ever since?

### **Some Muslim Philosophers' Approaches to Freedom**

For some of the major Muslim thinkers, like Alfarabi, freedom is a human faculty or potency

not only to the satisfaction of desires of the body, but also of spirit and mind, and human dignity in his social milieu. The end for which human beings are born free is towards completion or attainment of happiness and excellence of individual self, as well as social. To will something means that the subject is devoid of the object of his will. For an agent, having a purpose signifies that he is in need of fulfillment through the object aimed at.

It is entirely fair to say that Muslim philosophers emphasize freedom of will more strongly than, say, Enlightenment philosophers, like Kant. For Kant, freedom should be defined on its own term and could only be understood in terms of its contrary, i.e. the lack of freedom. Therefore, for Kant, freedom is its own negativity. What we call a deficiency in being human or being in need of fulfillment is the evidence of something beyond human substance, as Averroes would have said. According to Ghazali, the discovery of freedom in human beings begins with the recognition of what is already known. These words sound contradictory at first. But in a close analysis, it is clear that the deficiency or the perfection of which a human being finds himself lacking leads him to the desire of what is already known. Ghazali declares that “agent is an expression referring to one from whom the act proceeds, together with the will to act by way of choice and the knowledge of what is willed.” (Al-Ghazali 1997, 57) The existence of freedom requires the performance of an action which is motivated by the will of something lacking or by its benefit which is already known. Therefore, it is understood as “the will seeking after something known” by the willing subject. “If then, a quest is supposed without knowledge, there would be no will” (Al-Ghazali 1997, 179)

There are three Islamic terms to be treated in relation to the concept of freedom: liberty, choice, and will. In modern usage, probably the Arabic term *hurriyya* means both liberty and freedom interchangeably. But it was not commonly in use in philosophical treatises, except in Abu'l-Barakāt al-Baghdādī's later usage of the term in referring to Aristotle's definition of freedom: “[Aristotle] said that freedom (*al-hurriyya*) is a faculty of soul protecting itself substantively not artificially. Again he says that freedom belongs primarily to substance and secondly it does not belong to habits” (al-Baghdādī, 1998, 279-280) That means freedom is not acquired through actions and habits but is the inborn quality of human substance. In other words, freedom is understood through actions of human agents aimed at self-protection, but it cannot be reduced to these habits.

The concept of freedom has a moral and even an aesthetic sense. Some Muslim writers, for instance, Thanawi gives a literal definition of freedom as “antiquated and released” and adds that it also means “unsurpassable beauty and fairness.” But he also gives a better meaning to the term as “pure or sincere. The term freedom means sincerity of wisdom as it appears in man to separate the truth from other than itself.” (al-Tahanawi, 1996, 121) This is also the philosophical definition of freedom. He, then, continues to give a mystical definition of freedom, as “relieving the memory from being occupied with things other than the word of God.” It should also be mentioned that “freedom is the ultimate end of servitude, in which there is salvation just like at the beginning of his creation.” In another definition, freedom means in general sense release from desire, and in a special

sense, it means release oneself from desire and put his will to the truth. (al-Jurjānī, *Kitāb al-Ta'rifāt*, 1983, 86)

Human will is a potency which will be free only through knowledge and deliberation. By reason and by free choice, human will becomes free. The agent is the one who causes some other thing “to pass from potency to actuality (...); this actualization occurs sometimes from deliberation and choice (ihtiyar.)” (*Averroes' Tabafut Al-Tabafut* 1987, 89) A similar definition of freedom in relation to human act is also made by Ala al-din al-Tusi, who is referring to free will as “an attribute of human being in a state of relatedness to act or not to act whose exact fulfillment is freedom that is not compulsory, yet a requisite of it.” (al-Tusi, *Tabafut al-Falasifa*, 2003, 169)

How are these philosophical and theological definitions related to freedom of religion? These are also definitions of human nature. But whilst the human body, being subject to natural causes is not free, the human soul, and hence its highest faculty of intellect, is free. The power that makes human being human -that is to say a combination of the two components is the free will. But the question about free will is something different in theological or philosophical perspective.

Let's take another example of definition by al-Ghazali; when he defines freedom from a theological perspective, he is more cautious in his choice of words. The will is attributable to the discernment of something from its like; so, without having such a faculty we would have left only with potency. At first sight, it appears as if al-Ghazali is making a concession to the philosophical doctrine of freedom of will. But he carefully avoids crossing the theological line and instead tries to give a literal definition of the term free will.

Al-Ghazali, who represents some form of theological orthodoxy and mystical outlook, is critical on philosophical and other theological doctrines of freedom. Early on, some Muslim theologians, especially the rationalist Mutazilate School, emphasized the human reason's capacity to distinguish what is morally right and wrong. They also uphold the existence of free will, a human capacity to make a moral choice between what is right and what is wrong. Inspired by the Quranic advice that “among themselves, mankind should strive to compete in the good deeds”, Mutazilate School was convinced that reason and freedom were secure bases to establish moral and political order, leading to common good and justice in a plural society. However, they did not follow their own conviction when members of Mutazilate school held some political power for a short period of time; soon, not only they turned into very harsh critics of other religions but also they began to resort to oppressive ways to compelling other Muslim scholars to accept their doctrines. They left a historically bad legacy on the issue of freedom of religion, since they maintained that it cannot be dealt with theological reason alone.

Therefore, the question of the freedom of religion, in general, cannot be resolved in theological discourse because it inevitably evokes doctrinal debates. Questions regarding the veracity or truth of one religion against another cannot be resolved by theological reasoning alone. Within the dogmas of a specific religion, we cannot solve the problem of religious freedoms and it must be carried into the realm of philosophical reason.

### **Freedom of Religion as a Political Issue in Alfarabi**

So far, I have argued that questions concerning the nature of freedom of religion or religious freedoms cannot be evaluated within the limits of modern philosophical discourse nor in theological discourse. We have to return to a so-called pre-modern understanding of philosophy or a way of doing philosophy in order to deal with the question in its own true features. Alfarabi's political philosophy is the right place to start.

In his influential work on the division of science, Alfarabi deals with the subject of the role of reason in religion. He describes three distinct approaches prevalent in his days. This same discussion is still relevant today. 1. One group claims that religion reveals truth above and beyond the reach of reason. Hence religion is a phenomenon to be reckoned with in its own terms, since reason cannot judge the content of religion. 2. The other group argues that religion not only comprises itself but also it is complementary to reason, that is to say, religion brings us certain ideas, some of which conform to reason and others are beyond the reach of reason. In other words, religion concurs with human rationality to a certain extent and opens a new horizon that elevates the human capacity. 3. This group argues that religion and reason lead to the truth from different paths. If there appears to be a contradiction, there remain two possible ways to resolve this conflict. Alfarabi suggests the philosophical method. The religious text should be revised in order to be understood correctly and/or rational knowledge is to be reviewed. Despite of this, the contradiction is still not resolved and the final solution would be to interpret the religious expression by means of rational knowledge. The other way to resolve the conflict is by denying the existence of a contradiction between religion and reason; if it is claimed to be a fact, philosophers should attribute it to either ignorance or bad intention of the claimant. Since reason is taken as the vehicle of truth, reason will judge the truth of the matter in case of conflict between two competing claims.

We may call this Muslim perspective as a philosophical moralist and rationalist approach to religion. Let's not forget that Averroes defines philosophy as the "rational inquiry into the existing things and their contemplation in so far as they are proofs of the Creator." (Ibn Rushd 2001, 3) It is a philosophical perspective that allows one to be open to the truth for moral and intellectual development within one's own religious tradition. Alfarabi is aware of the diversity of religious opinions and narratives, both in ancient literature and also in his own social circles. He was aware of what Carlos Fraenkel calls "cultural religious forms" (Fraenkel, 2012, xii), seen as reading practices:

[T]he myths, stories, histories of peoples and histories of nations, that man narrates and to which he listens solely for the pleasure they give. For to take pleasure in something means nothing other than the achievement of comfort and delight. Likewise, looking at imitators and listening to imitative statements, listening to poems, and going over what one comprehends of the poems and the myths he recites or reads, are used by the man who delights in them and is comforted by them only for his pleasure in what he comprehends. The more certain his apprehension, the more perfect his pleasure.

The more excellent and perfect in himself the man who comprehends the more perfect and completes his pleasure in his apprehension. (Alfarabi 1961, 73)

All people share this religious freedom that belongs to individual morality and that is part of his spiritual development. However, there is also a freedom of religion that relates to the political sphere, where the forms of good social life and social order are to be determined through philosophical analyses of human purposes in regard to the conception of ontological truth. In other words, the final question concerning the common good could only be established by an appeal to rational truth, not by the particularities of any religion. This may sound as if Alfarabi had projected secular social order where no single living religion dominated the public sphere. This was not the case, for Alfarabi, just as he believed the unity of philosophy depended on the universal human intellect, so, he equally believed in the universality of Islam as a complementary final form of all.

However, this idea of Islam as final closure of all truth never led to intolerance or hostility towards other religions. Although there was awareness of other belief systems openly in opposition to Muslim doctrine, this may not have been an excuse for violating the individual rights to life, property, honor, and reason of non-Muslims whose protection was determined by the divine purpose in Islamic revelation. Therefore, just like his own Muslim contemporaries, Alfarabi may have believed in the primordial status of Islam as well as in the finality of revelation contained in the Qur'an and revealed to the last Abrahamic Prophet, Muhammad. Therefore, religion is not understood in generic terms; rather it is perceived within the framework of both natural reason and philosophical perspective.

Philosophy for them was supplementary to religion. Moral order, providing the means for peace in society and for the individuals, needs to be tested rationally in order for the moral and political regimes to achieve the objectives in the very formation of societies. The reason Muslim philosophers have treated religious freedom as a political issue has to do with the fact that human freedom is limited only by common laws and reason. Al-Kindi has also made a distinction between the eternal truth and the truth of cognition; between "ultimate truth and practical truth." (Khadduri, 1998, 104). For al-Kindi "the truth requires that we do not reproach anyone who is even one of the causes of even small and meagre benefits to us." (al-Kindi, 1974, 57) Some political issues may not be resolved according to the assertion about the eternal truth, but according to rational statements. As Avicenna points out, every individual and social human order is limited by two bonds: "Divine law and law of reason". This statement applies to religious freedoms as well. Commenting on the purpose of divine commands Avicenna writes:

There may also be a gain to the one who is subject to penalty, in preventing him from further wickedness, because men must be bound by one of two bonds, either the bond of the divine Law or the bond of reason, that the order of the world may be completed. Do you not see that if anyone were let loose from both bonds the load of wickedness he would commit would be unbearable, and the order of the world's affairs would be upset by the dominance of him who is released from both

bonds? (Hourani 1966, 25-48)

If we try to set the doctrinal limits to religious freedoms, this would violate both God's purpose in creation as well as divine justice that must be reflected in any social order. People could be brothers in many senses: brothers in blood, brothers in religion and brothers in humanity. This is the content of a well-rehearsed prophetic tradition that most Muslims may be familiar with.

As in Ibn Tufail's *Hayy Bin Yaqzan*, the philosophical truth to which reason can attain is the same as the one symbolized by the religion itself. Ibn Tufail's elder Spanish contemporary, Ibn Bajjah, known to Europe as Avempace, was the author of a work called *Tadbir al-Mutawabbid*, i.e. *The Hermit's Regime*. Ibn Bajjah's theme was to demonstrate how man, by the unaided improvement of his faculties, may attain to union with the Active Intellect. So, freedom of religion in their public manifestations is an issue to be ordained by the laws, but the question of truth of opposite religious claims can be settled only in the light of truth, as it is reflected in the human intellect. Until the ultimate truth is attained, the door to self realization of each person of will is always open.

I would like to end this reflection with the following questions. What "is the wisdom born out of religion? Is religion complementary to wisdom? Isn't philosophy the exterior form of the human soul, while religion is the interior form thereof?" (al-Tawhīdī, 1929, 200). In order to open ourselves to these questions, we must recognize the new role to be played by a rational and philosophical debate. There are four prisons that modern human beings are capable of emancipating themselves from Nature, society, history and from themselves. Probably the road to freedom from nature has been prepared by the evolution of natural knowledge. Critical reason and democracy may help us free ourselves from the burdens of history and society. Yet, who may free us from the prisons of self, or in Freud's term, the ego? "It is the eye so long as it can see what is behind the mountains/ It is reason as long as it knows what will the future hold for it."<sup>1</sup> What happens if the eyes can't see, and reason cannot foresee what will the future hold? A man-made crisis of an unprecedented sort will be created by our own hands. This will be the crisis of freedom. Although it is the most abstract of all freedoms, as recognized in legal documents, freedom of religion gives rise to a concrete crisis of human identity, if it is violated.

### **Endnotes**

1. From Tonyukuk, an ancient Turkic Bilge or sage (born c. 646, died c. 726).

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