# Illuminative Ontology and the Construction of the Ideal Society in Ayatollah Khomeini's Political Thought

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**Abstract:** This study examines the influence of Illuminative Philosophy (*Hikmah al-Ishrāq*) on the construction of the concept of the ideal society in Ayatollah Khomeini's political thought. The research is important because most previous studies on Khomeini have emphasized revolutionary politics, constitutional structure, or ideological formulation, while giving less attention to the metaphysical foundations of political legitimacy in his thought. This study employs a qualitative library research approach using historical-intellectual inquiry and hermeneutic-conceptual analysis. Data were collected through systematic document analysis of Khomeini's major political and mystical works, read alongside key texts from Suhrawardi, Mullā Ṣadrā, Plato, and al-Fārābī, as well as relevant secondary scholarship. The study finds that Khomeini's concept of the ideal society constitutes a political articulation of an illuminative-ontological structure that emphasizes a hierarchy of existence and spiritual authority. Khomeini interprets *Wilāyat al-Faqīh* as a mediation between transcendent reality and social order, thereby grounding political legitimacy in ontological and epistemological foundations rather than merely normative-legal reasoning. The findings expand the understanding of the metaphysical foundations of modern Islamic political theory and demonstrate that metaphysics can function as a source of state legitimacy within modernity. The originality of this study lies in its integrative reading of Illuminative Philosophy, *'irfan*, and Khomeini's theory of the state as a coherent epistemic paradigm.

**Keywords:** Ideal Society; illuminative ontology; Khomeini; Shiʿi political thought; *Wilāyat al-Faqīh*.

**Abstrak:** Penelitian ini mengkaji pengaruh Filsafat Iluminasi (*Hikmah al-Ishrāq*) terhadap konstruksi konsep masyarakat ideal dalam pemikiran politik Ayatollah Khomeini. Penelitian ini penting dilakukan karena sebagian besar studi sebelumnya tentang Khomeini lebih menekankan aspek politik revolusioner, struktur konstitusional, atau formulasi ideologis, sementara fondasi metafisis legitimasi politik dalam pemikirannya belum banyak dianalisis secara sistematis. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif berbasis studi kepustakaan dengan desain historis-intelektual dan analisis hermeneutik-konseptual. Data dikumpulkan melalui analisis dokumen secara sistematis terhadap karya-karya politik dan mistik utama Khomeini, yang dibaca bersama teks-teks penting Suhrawardi, Mullā Ṣadrā, Plato, dan al-Fārābī, serta didukung oleh literatur sekunder yang relevan.. Penelitian ini menemukan bahwa konsep masyarakat ideal Khomeini merupakan artikulasi politik dari struktur ontologis-iluminatif yang menekankan hierarki eksistensi dan otoritas spiritual. Khomeini memaknai *Wilāyat al-Faqīh* sebagai mediasi antara realitas transenden dan tatanan sosial, sehingga legitimasi kekuasaan bersifat ontologis-epistemologis dan tidak semata-mata normatif-legal. Implikasi penelitian ini memperluas pemahaman tentang fondasi metafisis teori politik Islam modern serta menunjukkan bahwa metafisika dapat berfungsi sebagai sumber konstruksi legitimasi negara dalam modernitas. Keaslian penelitian ini terletak pada pembacaan integratif antara Filsafat Iluminasi, 'irfan, dan teori negara Khomeini sebagai satu paradigma epistemik yang koheren.

**Kata kunci**: Masyarakat Ideal; ontologi iluminatif; Khomeini; pemikiran politik Syiah; *Wilāyat al-Faqīh*.

## 1.    Introduction

The resurgence of religious movements in the mid-1970s reshaped the global political landscape and stimulated academic interest in non-Western traditions as sources of political legitimacy. One of the most significant events in this context was the 1979 Iranian Revolution, which established religion as the ideological foundation of the state. Data from the World Values Survey indicate that more than 90% of Iranians continue to identify religion as an important element in public and political life (GAMAAN, 2020). This fact confirms that religion in Iran did not undergo structural secularization as classical modernization theory predicted; instead, it became institutionalized in the form of a theocratic state.

The dominance of Shi'i Islam as the state ideology has historical roots in the development of the *ulama* institutions in the nineteenth century, which strengthened legal and moral authority within Iranian society (V. Nasr, 2006). Twentieth-century Muslim intellectuals such as Jalal Al-e Ahmad and Ali Shari'ati later reproduced and transformed this structure of authority by articulating Islam as an ideology of social resistance. However, Ayatollah Khomeini advanced further by formulating the political theory of *Wilāyat al-Faqīh*, which granted full legitimacy to the *faqih* (Islamic jurist) to lead the state during the occultation of the Imam Mahdi (R. Khomeini, 1983). To understand the strategy and orientation of the Iranian state, scholars must examine the philosophical foundations of its leaders as a fundamental methodological requirement (Ali, 2008).

Khomeini did not position himself merely as a jurist; he also developed his thought under the influence of Shi'i mysticism (*'irfan*). Within this tradition, the concept of *wilāyah* represents the continuation of divine light and spiritual guidance after the end of prophecy (Bazzi, 2022). This concept closely relates to the idea of the *Qutb* in Sufism, which places a spiritual figure at the cosmic center. Therefore, Khomeini's construction of the ideal society cannot be separated from the ontological and gnoseological dimensions rooted in the Islamic illuminative tradition.

Scholars have developed several major strands in the study of Ayatollah Khomeini's political thought, reflecting the complexity and evolution of his ideas. First, some studies emphasize the political-revolutionary and institutional dimensions of *Wilāyat al-Faqīh*. These works interpret Khomeini's theory as a response to the legitimacy crisis of the Pahlavi monarchy and as a strategy for mobilizing religious masses prior to the 1979 Revolution (Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi, 2014; P. Mahdavi, 2012; Sergio I. Moya Mena, 2024). Other scholars argue that *Wilāyat al-Faqīh* constituted a radical transformation of Shi'i political quietism into a constitutional theocracy institutionalized in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran (V. Nasr, 2006; Sachedina, 1998). More recently, Koláček (2025) and Brännström (2022) have analyzed Khomeini's theory of sovereignty within the framework of political theology and compared it to Carl Schmitt's concept of sovereignty, particularly regarding the state of exception. Nachman (2020) has shown that Khomeini reinterpreted the concept of *maslaha* pragmatically to preserve the state's continuity. Although these studies provide valuable insights into constitutional law, sovereignty, and political practice, they rarely address the metaphysical foundations of political legitimacy in Khomeini's thought.

Second, other studies examine the ideological dimension and the concept of the ideal society in Khomeini's thought. Hossainzadeh (2016) identifies democratic and constitutional elements in Khomeini's early work, particularly in *Kashf al-Asrar*, which demonstrates his concern for public participation. Hasanpour and Rabbani (2024) explicitly map the model of a "good society" in Khomeini's religio-political thought and highlight the challenges of its implementation in modern contexts. Adib-Moghaddam (2012) views Khomeini as a thinker who sought to reconcile Islam with political modernity while remaining within a normative Shi'i framework. However, these studies focus primarily on normative and ideological aspects and do not systematically connect them to the ontological and epistemological structures of Islamic philosophy.

Third, scholars have explored the relationship between Shi'ism, Sufism, and gnosis (*'irfan*). Nasr (1970) and Corbin (1971) emphasize the epistemological continuity between Shi'i theology and Islamic mysticism. This synthesis reached systematic expression in *Hikmah Muta'āliyah*, where Mullā Ṣadrā integrated Greek philosophy, Shi'i theology, and gnosis into a unified metaphysical framework.

Ridgeon (2014) highlights the "hidden" mystical dimension in Khomeini's personality that reflects this intellectual heritage. Bazzi (Bazzi, 2022) and other scholars analyze the role of mystical leadership as an agent of modern political mobilization. Nevertheless, these studies often remain at the biographical or symbolic level and do not examine how illuminative ontology systematically shaped Khomeini's political theory.

Fourth, other scholars analyze the historical and geopolitical impact of Khomeini's thought. Coville (2019) and Darius (2019) examine Khomeini's political legacy in contemporary Iran. Kazemi and Hart (2019) and Kamrava (2012) analyze changes in Iran's foreign policy orientation after the Revolution. Vakil (2011) discusses internal political fragmentation and factionalism within the Islamic Republic. Bohdan (2020) explores ideological interactions between Shi'i Islamists and the Muslim Brotherhood during the Cold War. Although these studies provide important insights into political practice, they do not sufficiently investigate the philosophical foundations underlying the ideological structure of the state.

Based on this review, scholarship on Khomeini has developed across institutional, ideological, mystical, and geopolitical dimensions. However, a significant conceptual gap remains. Existing literature has not systematically connected Illuminative Philosophy (*Hikmah al-Ishrāq*) with Khomeini's construction of the ideal society. Scholars have not yet analyzed the metaphysics of light, the hierarchy of existence, and the epistemology of gnosis as foundational elements of the theory of *Wilāyat al-Faqīh*. Consequently, many interpretations reduce political legitimacy in Khomeini's thought to juristic derivation or revolutionary strategy rather than understanding it as a political articulation of an ontological-illuminative paradigm.

This study aims to analyze the influence of Illuminative Philosophy on the construction of the concept of the ideal society in Ayatollah Khomeini's thought. The study explains how the ontology of light and the epistemology of gnosis within the illuminative tradition shaped the legitimacy of political authority in the theory of *Wilāyat al-Faqīh*.

This study argues that Khomeini's concept of the ideal society does not derive solely from normative juristic reasoning but rather rests on the metaphysical framework of Illuminative Philosophy (*Hikmah al-Ishrāq*), as formulated by Suhrawardi and developed ontologically in Mullā Ṣadrā's synthesis. Illuminative Philosophy conceives reality as a hierarchy of light, while Mullā Ṣadrā later reformulated this metaphysical vision ontologically through the doctrine of *tashkīk al-wujūd*, or the gradation of existence. This ontological structure forms a conception of leadership as mediation between transcendent reality and social order, a model that also appears in Plato's and al-Fārābī's concepts of the ideal society, where the philosopher or imam serves as the center of cosmic and social harmony. Accordingly, one can understand *Wilāyat al-Faqīh* as a political articulation of an illuminative gnoseological structure in which the *faqih* functions as a subject who possesses both epistemic and moral authority to organize society according to a hierarchy of truth.

This argument also tests the assumptions of secularization theory, which predicts the differentiation and separation of religion from politics in modernity. This study argues that metaphysics within the illuminative tradition does not merely serve as a theological background but functions as a source of meaning construction and semantic power in shaping socio-political order. The study contributes to the enrichment of Islamic political theory by demonstrating that political legitimacy in Khomeini's framework rests on ontological-epistemological foundations rather than solely on normative-legal reasoning.

## 2.    Method

This study employs a qualitative library research approach to examine the influence of Illuminative Philosophy (*Hikmah al-Ishrāq*) on the construction of Ayatollah Khomeini's political thought, particularly the concepts of the ideal society and *Wilāyat al-Faqīh*. The study focuses on the analysis of texts and ideas rather than empirical political behavior. Accordingly, the unit of analysis consists of key philosophical, mystical, and political texts relevant to Khomeini's thought and its intellectual genealogy.

The research is designed as a historical-intellectual inquiry combined with hermeneutic-conceptual analysis. The historical-intellectual dimension is used to situate Khomeini's ideas within the broader development of Shiʿi Islamic philosophy, especially the traditions of Illuminationist philosophy, *ʿirfān*, and twentieth-century Iranian religious-political thought. The hermeneutic-conceptual dimension is used to interpret the meanings of central concepts and to trace how metaphysical ideas were reformulated into political theory. This design is appropriate because the study seeks to explain conceptual continuity, transformation, and philosophical structure, rather than to measure social behavior quantitatively.

The study relies entirely on textual and documentary sources. The primary sources include Khomeini's major political and mystical works, especially *Hukūmat-e Islāmī* and selected writings on *wilāyah*, *khilāfah*, and spiritual authority. These sources are read alongside major texts from the illuminative philosophical tradition, particularly Suhrawardi and Mullā Ṣadrā, as well as classical works of political philosophy such as Plato and al-Fārābī for comparative purposes. Secondary sources consist of peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, and academic studies relevant to Khomeini, Shiʿi political theology, illuminative ontology, and Islamic political philosophy.

Data were collected through **systematic document analysis**. The researcher selected texts that are directly relevant to the study's main themes, then identified and classified recurring concepts such as *wilāyah*, the hierarchy of existence, spiritual authority, epistemic legitimacy, and the ideal society. After that, the researcher organized the materials according to thematic categories in order to map conceptual relations across the corpus. This procedure allows the study to move from textual description to analytical comparison.

The analysis was conducted in three stages. First, the researcher carried out data reduction by selecting passages and concepts directly related to the research problem (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Second, the researcher applied hermeneutic reading to interpret these concepts within their philosophical, theological, and historical contexts. Third, the researcher performed conceptual-comparative analysis to trace how the ontology of light and the gradation of existence were translated into a theory of political legitimacy in Khomeini's thought. Through these stages, the study explains in a systematic and argument-based manner how metaphysical and gnoseological structures informed Khomeini's construction of *Wilāyat al-Faqīh* and the ideal society.

## 3. Results

### Ontology of Light and the Hierarchy of Existence as the Foundation of Spiritual Leadership

Khomeini's intellectual horizon was not formed solely within the framework of jurisprudence (*fiqh*), but also within a wider Shiʿi philosophical and gnostic tradition cultivated in the scholarly milieu of Qom. The institutional resilience of the *ḥawza ʿilmīya* of Qom in the decades before the Iranian Revolution provided an intellectual environment in which legal reasoning, rational theology, and philosophical spirituality interacted in the formation of religious authority (Mesbahi, 2025). Within this setting, Khomeini's engagement with mystical and philosophical traditions developed alongside his juristic training, indicating that the foundation of his later political thought cannot be reduced to legal formalism alone.

Khomeini's intellectual formation in Qom was significantly shaped by Ayatollah Mohammad Ali Shahabadi, whose influence directed him toward the study of spiritual and gnostic texts (Ruhollah Khomeini, 1990). This formative phase is reflected in Khomeini's mystical writings, including *Miṣbāḥ al-Hidāyah ilā al-Khilāfah wa al-Wilāyah* and *Taʿlīqāt ʿalā Sharḥ Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, which show his engagement with the metaphysical language of *wilāyah*, divine manifestation, and spiritual ascent (Chittick, 2010). These works indicate that Khomeini understood authority not merely as legal competence, but as a reality connected to a deeper cosmological order.

This ontological structure corresponds to Suhrawardi's Illuminative Philosophy, which identifies *Nūr al-Anwār* as the highest source of reality. In illuminative ontology, all beings participate in light, and reality forms a vertical hierarchy from the most intense light to progressively weaker lights.

Knowledge does not arise solely from rational deduction; instead, it emerges through direct illumination (*ishrāq*), which presents reality within the consciousness of the subject (Bonmariage, 2020; Sinai, 2016). Consequently, epistemic authority correlates with ontological intensity: the closer one approaches the source of light, the greater one's capacity to know and to guide.

Mullā Ṣadrā systematically reformulated this illuminative framework in *Hikmah Muta'āliyah* through the theory of *tashkīk al-wujūd*. Ṣadrā affirmed that existence constitutes a single reality modulated in varying degrees of intensity (Sadra & ibn Ibrahim, 1981). The principle of *aṣālat al-wujūd* identifies existence as the primary reality, while essence remains merely a mental delimitation. Reality does not fragment ontologically; rather, it unfolds in graded intensities from the most perfect to the weakest. This hierarchy connects the physical world to divine reality within a single existential continuum. In his autobiography, Khomeini acknowledged the profound influence of Ṣadrā's works, such as *al-Asfār al-Arba'ah*, on his intellectual development. He understood that reason, revelation, and intuition originate from the same source, and therefore knowledge by presence (*'ilm ḥuḍūrī*) possesses ontological legitimacy (Rahman, 1987).

Within this horizon, Khomeini no longer defined leadership merely as the outcome of social consensus; he defined it as an existential station (*maqām*) within the hierarchy of being. In *Adab al-Ṣalāt*, Khomeini wrote:

> "The truth of the khilafah and wilayah … is the manifestation of divinity, which is the origin of existence and its perfection." (Ridgeon, 2014).

This statement indicates that *khilāfah* and *wilāyah* do not function merely as normative institutions; they express the ontological manifestation of divine reality. Khomeini further stated:

> "The said divine grace is the truth of 'The Expansive Existence' [*wujūd-i munbasit*] … and … 'Ali's General Guardianship." (Ridgeon, 2014).

The phrase *wujūd-i munbasit* reflects Ṣadrian influence regarding expansive and graded existence. Khomeini interpreted *wilāyah* as the esoteric dimension of *khilāfah*, which unites proximity to God with social responsibility. The concept of the Perfect Man reinforces this structure, placing him at the summit of spiritual hierarchy and describing his return to guide society after completing the fourth spiritual journey (*suluk*) (Damad, 2000; Motahhari, 1983). Thus, in Khomeini's thought, the leader constitutes a subject who has attained a specific existential intensity and therefore possesses the capacity to guide.

Khomeini further illustrated the connection between spiritual hierarchy and social leadership through an analogy in *Islamic Government*:

> "With respect to duty and position, there is indeed no difference between the guardian of a nation and the guardian of a minor." (R. Khomeini, 1983).

This statement does not merely present a juristic argument; it reflects an ontological assumption that society requires a mediator capable of translating cosmic order into social structure. If reality unfolds through graded intensities of existence and light, then spiritual authority occupies a higher position within that hierarchy. The leadership of the *faqih* thus becomes the social articulation of an ontological *maqām*.

This conceptual structure resonates with classical political philosophy. Plato argued that a city would not escape injustice until philosophers became rulers (*Republic*, V–VI). Al-Fārābī (1995) developed this idea in *al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah* by placing the imam at the cosmic center connected to the active intellect, thereby enabling him to project virtue into social order. This comparison demonstrates that the concept of the leader as the center of cosmic and social harmony transcends traditions.

**Tabel 1. Comparative Metaphysical Foundations of Political Leadership Across Philosophical Traditions**

| Tradition | Metaphysical Structure | Leadership Figure | Basis of Authority | Social Function |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |

| **Suhrawardi** | Hierarchy of light; *Nūr al-Anwār* | *Ḥakīm / ʿārif* | Direct illumination | Mediating cosmos and society |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Mullā Ṣadrā** | *Tashkīk al-wujūd*; gradation of existence | Subject with higher intensity of being | Ontological intensity | Ordering the moral hierarchy |
| **Plato** | Idea of the Good | Philosopher-king | Rational knowledge | Harmony of the polis |
| **Al-Fārābī** | Emanation; active intellect | Imam / *raʾīs al-fāḍil* | Unity of intellect and virtue | Collective happiness |
| **Khomeini** | *Wilāyah* as ontological manifestation | *Faqih* | Spiritual proximity and epistemic authority | Formation of the ideal society |

As shown in Table 1, the textual and conceptual evidence reveals four major patterns in the metaphysical foundations of political leadership across these traditions. First, reality is consistently understood as hierarchical rather than flat, whether expressed in the language of light, existence, intellect, or cosmic order. Second, authority is associated with degrees of ontological or epistemic intensity, rather than derived merely from institutional designation or procedural legitimacy. Third, spiritual leadership functions as a mediating principle that connects transcendent truth to social and political order. Fourth, Khomeini adopts and reformulates this broader metaphysical structure within a specifically Shiʿi framework by placing wilāyah at the center of authority during the occultation of the Imam. In this sense, Table 1 clarifies that, within Khomeini's intellectual horizon, leadership is constructed primarily as an ontological and spiritual station before it is articulated as a juridical or political office.

Khomeini's distinctiveness becomes clearer when scholars interpret *Wilāyat al-Faqīh* not merely as a political theory but as a synthesis of metaphysics and institutional authority within Shiʾi modernity. In his lectures in Najaf, later compiled in *Islamic Government*, Khomeini insisted that the occultation of the Imam Mahdi does not create a vacuum of authority; rather, it requires normative deputation by a *faqih* who fulfills scholarly and moral qualifications (Kelidar, 2013). This reformulation marked a significant shift in Shiʾi political thought, transforming dispersed religious authority within the *marjaʿiyyat* into an institutionalized principle of governance (Arminjon, 2010). After 1979, the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran codified this doctrine by designating the *Vali-ye Faqih* as the highest authority, deriving legitimacy from God and the Hidden Imam as recognized by the *marājiʿ* (Mauriello, 2019; Osredkar & Azari, 2022).

Within Khomeini's framework, the leadership of the *faqih* functions simultaneously as an ontological node, because it rests on the continuity of *wilāyah* as the Imam's authority; as an epistemological node, because it relies on the competence of *ijtihad*; and as a socio-political node, because the state institutionalizes it within a modern constitutional structure. This integration reveals the paradox of Shiʾi modernity: a constitutional theocracy that seeks to unify divine sovereignty with contemporary state structures while remaining subject to critique regarding the concentration of power and the relationship between religious authority and popular sovereignty (Hirschl, 2012; Mavani, 2013).

### Transformation of Gnosis ('Irfan) into Political Legitimacy in Wilāyat al-Faqīh

One cannot understand *Wilāyat al-Faqīh* in Khomeini's thought as merely a normative juristic construction; rather, it constitutes a political articulation of the illuminative gnoseological structure that he developed within the horizon of *ʿirfan*. Within this framework, intuitive knowledge (*maʾrifah ḥuḍūrīyah*) functions as the ontological and epistemic basis of legitimate authority. Khomeini does not ground his argument in social contract theory or formal legal procedures; instead, he assumes that political authority becomes legitimate when it derives from epistemic and spiritual proximity to divine reality.

In Shi'i intellectual tradition, the concept of *wilāyah* refers to spiritual authority as the continuation of prophetic light and *imāmah*. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (S. H. Nasr, 1970) explains that, in Shi'i cosmology, the Imam does not merely serve as a legal leader; he manifests the inner reality of prophecy and functions as the axis of spiritual order. Henry Corbin (Corbin, 1971) argues that *wilāyah* represents the esoteric dimension of Islam that preserves the continuity of divine light after the closure of prophecy. Within this framework, authority does not arise from administrative appointment alone; it follows from one's epistemic position within the structure of divine knowledge.

Khomeini adopts this framework and operationalizes it within modern political conditions. In *Hukumat-e Islami*, he states:

"The governance of the faqih is a governance of law; it is not a personal governance. The faqih is entrusted with the implementation of divine law." (R. Khomeini, 1970).

This statement demonstrates that the *faqih* does not hold absolute power in a despotic sense; rather, he mediates divine law. However, Khomeini does not stop at normative legality. He further asserts:

"If the jurist possesses the qualities required by the law, then he possesses authority to govern." (R. Khomeini, 1983).

These "qualities" include not only juristic competence but also moral integrity, justice, and epistemic capacity. In this formulation, Khomeini does not define legitimacy as a popular mandate in the liberal sense; instead, he defines it as spiritual and intellectual qualification that enables the *faqih* to understand and implement divine law authentically.

The transformation of gnosis into political legitimacy becomes clearer when Khomeini links *wilāyah* to proximity to God achieved through spiritual journeying. He describes *wilāyah* as the inner dimension of *khilāfah* that entails social responsibility. Thus, intuitive knowledge does not remain a private mystical experience detached from the world; rather, it becomes the foundation of public responsibility. This structure parallels the model of the Perfect Man in Sufi tradition, where the figure who attains the highest proximity to God returns to guide society (Damad, 2000).

This concept resonates with the figure of the *Qutb* in Sufism. The *Qutb* functions as the cosmic axis that maintains the world's balance through spiritual proximity. Bazzi (2022) shows that mystical leadership in modern Islamic contexts often operates as an agent of political mobilization grounded in spiritual legitimacy. Within this horizon, Khomeini transforms the structure of the *Qutb* into the figure of the constitutional *faqih*. He does not claim the title of *Qutb* in Sufi terminology; however, he positions the *faqih* as a mediator between divine law and society, a role structurally analogous to the *Qutb* as cosmic axis.

The relevance of gnosis as the basis of authority also appears in Khomeini's integration of reason, revelation, and intuition. He insists that valid knowledge must withstand rational demonstration while remaining consistent with revelation. This integration demonstrates that *ma'rifah ḥuḍūrīyah* does not function as anti-rational knowledge; rather, it represents a higher form of knowledge that later translates into legal language and institutional structure. Scholarship on Mullā Ṣadrā indicates that, in *Hikmah Muta'āliyah*, intuition and rational demonstration originate from the same source (Rahman, 1987). Khomeini adopts this principle to ensure that spiritual legitimacy remains accountable within public law.

The transformation of metaphysics into constitutional authority becomes even clearer when Khomeini reinterprets the concept of *maslaha* within the framework of state continuity. Nachman (Nachman, 2020) shows that Khomeini understands *maslaha* as a pragmatic principle to preserve the existence of the Islamic Republic. This principle does not eliminate metaphysical foundations; instead, it extends them into public policy. Thus, gnosis does not remain a purely spiritual discourse; it becomes the basis for adaptive political decision-making.

Contemporary scholarship on sovereignty further demonstrates how *Wilāyat al-Faqīh* translates into modern political theory. Brännström (Brännström, 2022) and Koláček (Koláček, 2025) argue that Khomeini's concept of sovereignty reflects a distinct form of political theology that differs from secular models. Khomeini does not define sovereignty as the absolute will of the people or the state; rather, he

defines it as guardianship over divine law exercised by the *faqih*. The concept of spiritual mediation thus transforms into a constitutional structure institutionalized in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

**Figure 1. Epistemic Translation Process in the Formation of *Wilāyat al-Faqīh***



The epistemic translation process connects metaphysical foundations to constitutional legitimacy in the formation of *Wilāyat al-Faqīh* (Figure 1). In the first stage, illuminative metaphysics draws upon the legacy of illuminative philosophy and gradational ontology, which conceives reality as hierarchical and oriented toward a transcendent source of light; this stage produces the understanding that certain individuals may attain higher intensities of spiritual proximity. In the second stage, Shi'i gnostic structure places *wilāyah* at the center of a gnoseological relationship that connects the Imam, as the source of divine authority, to the community of believers, including during the occultation. In the third stage, jurisprudential argumentation translates this metaphysical and gnostic structure into juristic reasoning through *ijtihad*, thereby recognizing the *faqih* as the Imam's normative deputy under law. Finally, the stage of constitutional legitimacy institutionalizes the entire epistemic structure within the modern state through the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Thus, the three mechanisms attached to the figure of the *faqih*—epistemic competence, moral-spiritual integrity, and formal authority—do not stand independently; rather, they emerge from a sequence of conceptual transformations that move from illuminative metaphysics to constitutional legitimacy. This structure confirms that *Wilāyat al-Faqīh* constitutes a political articulation of Shi'i cosmology and gnoseology that has undergone rationalization and institutionalization within modern state theory.

*Wilāyat al-Faqīh* does not merely represent a reaction to the political crisis of the Pahlavi regime; rather, it embodies a systematic translation of the Shi'i epistemic paradigm into the format of the modern state. Khomeini does not ground political legitimacy in the secularization of authority; instead, he grounds it in the transformation of the light of knowledge into the structure of public law. Within this framework, gnosis does not retreat before political modernity; rather, it reorganizes itself as a source of constitutional legitimacy.

## Concept of the Ideal Society as the Political Articulation of Illuminative Ontology

Khomeini does not reduce the concept of the ideal society in his thought to a model of a "sharīʿa state" in a merely normative-juridical sense. He constructs the idea of the ideal society as a moral and spiritual order that reflects the cosmic structure and hierarchy of values within Islamic ontology. In this framework, society does not function merely as an administrative entity, but as a space for realizing humanity's existential purpose as servant and vicegerent of God (Mesbahi, 2025).

In the tradition of classical political philosophy, Plato first formulated the concept of the ideal society systematically in the Republic. Plato argues that the ideal state must guard itself against changes that disrupt its order, because uncontrolled change produces decadence and corruption (Plato, 2000). He places the guardians and the philosopher-king at the center of the polis's moral and intellectual stability. The guardians must not pursue personal interests, wealth, or private ambition, because their moral integrity ensures social harmony. Within this structure, the ideal society assumes a hierarchical form and depends on leadership that possesses knowledge of the Good.

Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī adapts this model in Mabādi' ārā' Ahl al-Madīna al-Fāḍilah. He calls the ideal society *al-madīnah al-fāḍilah*, the virtuous city led by an imam or supreme leader who possesses knowledge of humanity's ultimate existential purpose (Walzer, 1967). This leader connects the cosmic order and the social order through his relation to the active intellect (Şahin & Tan, 2023). When this equilibrium collapses, society loses truth, happiness, and stability (Akhmetova, 2015). In al-Fārābī's

framework, the ideal society depends not only on law, but also on the correspondence between cosmic structure and political structure.

Khomeini operates within a similar conceptual horizon, yet he articulates it through a distinctively Shi'i framework. He views human beings as subjects who maintain two fundamental relations with God: an epistemic relation (knowledge of God) and a practical relation (servitude and service). The epistemic dimension requires conscious effort to know God's attributes through revelation and theological reflection. The practical dimension demands balanced action between individual obligation and social responsibility. Within this framework, the ideal society emerges when human relations with God, fellow human beings, and nature achieve ethical equilibrium.

Khomeini asserts that individual freedom must not damage social freedom, and he insists that human dignity must ground political evaluation rather than the interests of particular groups. He develops a collaborative model of society based on knowledge and morality, in which justice occupies a central position. In this framework, justice functions not only distributively but also ontologically, because it reflects divine order within social life. The principle of *maṣlaḥa* bridges individual interests and public interests, so that the ideal society orients itself toward the common good without sacrificing moral foundations.

Unlike secular models that separate religion and politics, Khomeini views Islamic government as the historical manifestation of divine will. In *Hukumat-e Islami*, he states that Islamic government constitutes governance by divine law and aims to establish social justice. This statement indicates that he does not position the state as autonomous from God, but as an instrument for realizing divine values. Islamic government therefore functions not merely as the enforcement of criminal law or ritual regulation, but as a moral project that forms faithful, just, and responsible human beings.

Khomeini also grounds his concept of the ideal society in the belief that the Qur'an serves simultaneously as spiritual guidance and political directive. The Qur'an regulates not only personal worship but also provides the foundation for public law and the orientation of daʿwa (Usman & Abdul Kadir, 2020). In this perspective, the ideal society organizes worldly and otherworldly relations in balance, so that divine law directs collective action.

One can explain the relation between ontology, ethics, and politics in constructing the ideal society as follows. Illuminative ontology affirms that reality possesses a graded structure and a divine telos. This structure generates an ethic that demands balance, justice, and harmony. Political institutions then translate this ethic into mechanisms that safeguard social equilibrium. The ideal society therefore constitutes a political articulation of ontological and ethical structure rather than a merely normative legal system.

This model shows that Khomeini's ideal society is hierarchical and teleological. He does not design this hierarchy as exploitative social stratification, but as a reflection of cosmic structure that places the *faqīh* at the center of moral and spiritual harmonization. The *faqīh* safeguards the balance between divine law and social dynamics, so that society can move toward its existential purpose. Figure 2 visualizes the conceptual sequence underlying Khomeini's construction of the ideal society. It demonstrates that the ideal society is theorized as the endpoint of a structured movement from illuminative ontology to hierarchy of existence, then to spiritual authority, and finally to *Wilāyat al-Faqīh* as the political mechanism through which transcendent order is translated into social order.

**Figure 2. Conceptual Pathway from Illuminative Ontology to the Ideal Society**



This model demonstrates that the ideal society represents the final stage of an epistemic and ontological chain that begins with metaphysics (Figure 2). The state does not stand as a neutral institution, but as an expression of structures of knowledge and value derived from divine reality. One cannot understand the concept of the ideal society in Khomeini's thought as a legalistic project or a form of normative revivalism. It constitutes an ontological-epistemological construction that integrates cosmic structure, the ethics of justice, and political institutions. His dialogue with Plato and al-Fārābī reveals continuity in the idea of leadership as the center of cosmic-social harmony. However, Khomeini introduces a distinctively Shi'i element by positioning the *faqīh* as the bearer of authority during the occultation of the Imam, so that the ideal society becomes a historical reflection of divine order.

Contemporary scholarship further reinforces the conceptual strength of the ideal society in Khomeini's thought by mapping its characteristics, obstacles, and strategies of realization. Marvi and Forqani (2014) show that in Khomeini's discourse, the ideal society does not correspond to liberal civil society, but to a religious community grounded in *tawḥīd*, moral participation, and collective solidarity oriented toward transcendent goals. Hasanpour and Rabbani (2022) argue that Khomeini's "good society" features the supremacy of divine law, just leadership, ethical civic consciousness, and a balance between freedom and responsibility, while it faces obstacles such as value secularization, social inequality, and abuse of power. In their subsequent study, Hasanpour and Rabbani (Hasanpour & Rabbani, 2024) map this model as an operational normative structure that political institutions, moral education, and mechanisms of power oversight can implement, even as it confronts the challenges of political modernity and social pluralism. Furthermore, Khoyi, Seyed Bagheri, and Rezapour (2025) emphasize that Khomeini's strategy of political justice relies on integrating religious legitimacy, responsible distribution of power, and orientation toward public welfare. Within Khomeini's horizon, the ideal society thus functions not merely as a metaphysical vision, but as a normative-institutional model that demands the reconstruction of public ethics, structural justice, and the leadership of the *faqīh* as guardian of the balance between transcendent values and historical dynamics.

## 4.  Discussion

This study shows that Khomeini positions the ideal society as a moral-spiritual order that represents a hierarchy of values within the cosmic structure of Islam, so that the state functions as an instrument for realizing humanity's existential purpose as servant and vicegerent of God. This study also shows that the legitimacy of *Wilāyat al-Faqīh* does not derive solely from juridical arguments, but rests on an ontological-illuminative framework that integrates intuitive knowledge, moral integrity, and the institutionalization of public law. These findings confirm that the concept of the leadership of

the *faqīh* operates as an ontological, epistemological, and socio-political nexus that sustains the continuity of Shi'i authority during the occultation of the Imam.

This study explains these findings through a causal relationship that begins with the illuminative assumption of reality as a hierarchy of light and gradation of existence. Illuminative ontology views reality as a layered structure that places spiritual proximity as an indicator of the capacity to know and guide, so that epistemic authority possesses an ontological foundation inherent in the structure of being. Khomeini applies this assumption when he interprets *khilāfah* and *wilāyah* as divine manifestations operating in history through figures who meet spiritual and intellectual qualifications, so that leadership does not depend solely on administrative procedures. He then transforms the Shi'i gnoseological structure of *wilāyah* into jurisprudential argumentation through *ijtihād*, so that the *faqīh* acquires the status of the Imam's normative deputy and gains authority to implement divine law in the public sphere. This process prevents metaphysics from remaining abstract theology, because metaphysics becomes a device of legitimacy that connects knowledge, ethics, and state order. This relationship explains why Khomeini views the ideal society as an ethical equilibrium among human relations with God, fellow human beings, and nature, because for Khomeini social balance reflects cosmic order derived from divine reality.

This argumentative structure resonates theoretically with the model of the ideal society in Plato and al-Fārābī. Plato places the philosopher-king as the figure who possesses knowledge of the Idea of the Good and therefore deserves to lead the polis to preserve moral harmony, so that leadership legitimacy rests on epistemic capacity rather than mere political consensus. Al-Fārābī adapts this model by positioning the imam or *ra'īs al-fāḍil* as a mediator between the active intellect and society, so that political order represents a higher cosmic structure. Khomeini operates within a similar conceptual horizon, but he articulates this structure through Suhrawardi's illuminative ontology and Mullā Ṣadrā's synthesis of *tashkīk al-wujūd*, so that *Wilāyat al-Faqīh* appears as the political articulation of the hierarchy of existence. This study shows that Khomeini's concept of the ideal society does not derive merely from normative jurisprudence, but from an ontological-illuminative paradigm that challenges the assumptions of secularization theory and affirms that metaphysics can function as a source of political legitimacy in modernity.

This study situates these findings within a broader scholarly conversation through comparison with previous research. Studies that emphasize the political-revolutionary and institutional aspects of *Wilāyat al-Faqīh* explain the context of the Pahlavi crisis, mass mobilization, and the transformation of Shi'i quietism into constitutional theocracy, but they tend to limit their analysis to constitutional law, sovereignty, and power strategies (Brännström, 2022; B Ghamari-Tabrizi, 2012; Koláček, 2025; M. Mahdavi, 2012; S I Moya Mena, 2019; Nachman, 2020; V. Nasr, 2006; Sachedina, 1998). Studies that map the ideal society and "good society" in Khomeini's thought describe normative features, implementation obstacles, and tensions with modernity, but they do not systematically derive those normative features from the ontological and epistemological structure of Islamic philosophy (Hasanpour & Rabbani, 2024). Studies on the relationship between Shi'ism, Sufism, and *'irfān* affirm the continuity between *imāmah* and gnosis and highlight Khomeini's mystical dimension, but they often stop at biographical or symbolic readings without explaining the conceptual mechanism that transforms illumination into political institutions (Bazzi, 2022; Corbin, 1971; S. H. Nasr, 1970; Ridgeon, 2014). The novelty of this study emerges when it connects three domains that scholars usually separate, namely Suhrawardi's ontology of light, Mullā Ṣadrā's ontological synthesis, and Khomeini's theory of the state, so that it explains *Wilāyat al-Faqīh* as a political articulation of an ontological-illuminative paradigm rather than merely a juridical derivation or revolutionary response.

Historically, this study shows that the Islamic Republic of Iran formed through the rearticulation of Shi'i religious authority within the structure of the modern state without eliminating its theological foundation. Khomeini formulated the framework of *Wilāyat al-Faqīh* in his lectures in Najaf by asserting that a *faqīh* who meets scientific and moral qualifications must lead society to ensure the continuity of divine law (Kelidar, 2013). This transformation altered the pattern of Shi'i political quietism into an active model of governance institutionalized constitutionally (Arminjon, 2010). The Constitution of the

Islamic Republic of Iran then positioned the *Vali-ye Faqih* as the highest authority overseeing the harmony between positive law and *sharīʿa*, so that the state combined a republican form with transcendent legitimacy (Mauriello, 2019; Osredkar & Azari, 2022). This history of institutionalization demonstrates that political modernity in Iran does not follow the classical path of secularization, because the modern state integrates metaphysical authority into its constitutional design (Hirschl, 2012).

Socially, this study shows that Khomeini positions the ideal society as a space for transforming public ethics oriented toward forming collective character. Khomeini assigns the state the role of moral cultivation, strengthening religious solidarity, and distributing social justice in accordance with the principle of *tawḥīd* (Marvi & Forqani, 2014). Hasanpour and Rabbani (Hasanpour & Rabbani, 2022) identify that Khomeini's good society features the supremacy of divine law, just leadership, and responsible civic participation in maintaining the balance between rights and duties. Hasanpour and Rabbani (Hasanpour & Rabbani, 2024) show that institutions can operationalize this model through political-religious education and value-based oversight of power. Khoyi et al. (Khoyi et al., 2025) emphasize that Khomeini's strategy of political justice requires integrating religious legitimacy with distributive policies oriented toward public welfare. The ideal society thus functions as a normative framework that shapes social practice and the orientation of justice in collective life.

Ideologically, this study shows that *Wilāyat al-Faqīh* functions as a paradigm of legitimacy that reconfigures the concept of sovereignty in modern Islamic political theory. Khomeini shifts the center of legitimacy from the will of the people or the state toward divine legal authority exercised by a *faqīh* who possesses *ijtihād* competence and moral integrity (Kelidar, 2013). The state then institutionalizes this paradigm by positioning the *faqīh* as the guardian of the political system's ideological and normative direction (Mauriello, 2019). Arminjon (2010) explains that this configuration creates a unique synthesis between modern constitutional form and Shi'i theological foundations. Public debates that emerged after the 2009 political crisis demonstrate that this model faces challenges in balancing religious authority and participatory aspirations (Mavani, 2013). At the same time, Iran's experience shows that religion can function as a source of institutional design and ideological framework for the modern state, so that the assumption of a total separation between religion and politics in secularization theory does not fully apply in the post-revolutionary Shi'i context (Hirschl, 2012).

This study also requires reflection on the functions and dysfunctions of the constructed ideal society. The study identifies positive functions because the ontological-illuminative paradigm provides a strong foundation for public ethics, reinforces social justice orientation, and offers a moral framework to resist value corruption in social change. The study also identifies an integrative function because the concept of *wilāyah* and the role of the *faqīh* provide symbolic and institutional mechanisms that maintain the coherence of the religious community in situations of legitimacy crisis.

However, this study also identifies potential dysfunction because a conception of authority grounded in epistemic and spiritual intensity can encourage the concentration of power within a single institution, weaken public corrective mechanisms, and create tension between claims of divine representation and social plurality. Studies on theocratic-authoritarian regimes, for example Machitidze (2024), show that centralizing power in a supreme religious leader often produces extensive control over domestic policy and public discourse, as seen in the Taliban model in Afghanistan, which places religious authority at the center of political decision-making. Theocratic regimes frequently use religious justification to limit opposition and frame criticism as a threat to moral order, so that political critique becomes a matter of spiritual loyalty (Driskell & Nelson, 2017). Mechanisms of religious discourse control, such as standardizing sermons or official religious narratives, show how the state can manipulate religious discourse to preserve power stability (Bourlond, 2025). In the Iranian context, this dynamic reveals a combination of theocracy and authoritarianism that continues to confront social movements and the political consciousness of urban society (Rostami-Povey, 2013). Literature on policy design in authoritarian regimes shows that regimes often justify power concentration through arguments of stability and political uncertainty, while international cooperation among authoritarian regimes can reinforce patterns of democracy prevention (von Soest, 2015). Dysfunction in the model of

*Wilāyat al-Faqīh* can therefore be understood as part of the structural problem of theocratic-authoritarian regimes, in which strong religious legitimacy can reduce the space for public deliberation and narrow social pluralism.

This study proposes an action plan as a direct response to the potential concentration of power, manipulation of religious discourse, and narrowing of public deliberation in such theocratic-authoritarian models. First, the state must establish a transparent and independently institutionalized system of constitutional accountability, because strong oversight mechanisms can prevent excessive centralization of authority and maintain a balance between religious legitimacy and public control. Second, religious institutions must guarantee interpretive plurality through open scholarly forums and protection of differing *ijtihād*, because such protection can prevent the monopolization of religious discourse and avoid reducing political criticism to spiritual loyalty. Third, the state must expand public deliberative space through civil society participation, relatively autonomous media, and inclusive consultative mechanisms, because deliberative space can strengthen social correction of policies justified in the name of religious stability. Fourth, policymakers must functionally differentiate moral authority from technocratic administration in public policy formulation, because such differentiation can prevent the use of theological legitimacy to justify pragmatic political decisions. This action plan places *Wilāyat al-Faqīh* within a framework of public ethics open to institutional correction, so that spiritual legitimacy remains intact without sacrificing social plurality and democratic dynamics in modern society.

## 5. Conclusion

This study concludes that Ayatollah Khomeini's concept of the ideal society cannot be understood merely as a normative-juridical model of Islamic government, nor solely as a revolutionary response to the political crisis of the Pahlavi era. Rather, it rests on a deeper ontological and gnoseological foundation derived from Illuminative Philosophy (*Hikmah al-Ishrāq*), Shiʿi *ʿirfān*, and Mullā Ṣadrā's gradational ontology. The findings show that Khomeini constructs political leadership through a metaphysical framework in which reality is hierarchical, authority corresponds to degrees of spiritual and epistemic intensity, and the *faqīh* functions as a mediator between transcendent truth and social order. Within this framework, *Wilāyat al-Faqīh* emerges not simply as a legal doctrine, but as the political articulation of an ontological structure that ultimately culminates in the construction of the ideal society as a moral-spiritual, hierarchical, and teleological order.

The main scholarly contribution of this study lies in its integrative reading of Khomeini's political thought through the combined lenses of illuminative ontology, Shiʿi gnosis, and Islamic political philosophy. Unlike previous studies that tend to emphasize revolutionary politics, constitutional structure, ideological formulation, or biographical mysticism in isolation, this study demonstrates the conceptual mechanism through which metaphysics is translated into political legitimacy and then into a model of the ideal society. In doing so, the research contributes to the study of modern Islamic political theory by showing that metaphysics is not merely a theological background, but an active source of legitimacy, social order, and state formation. The study also contributes a comparative framework that places Khomeini in dialogue with Suhrawardi, Mullā Ṣadrā, Plato, and al-Fārābī, thereby enriching the understanding of leadership as the mediation of a higher order of reality across different philosophical traditions.

At the same time, this study has several limitations. Because it is based on qualitative library research and hermeneutic-conceptual analysis, it remains confined to the level of texts, concepts, and intellectual structures. It does not examine empirically how the ontological-illuminative paradigm of *Wilāyat al-Faqīh* has been implemented, negotiated, or contested in the socio-political practices of the Islamic Republic of Iran. In addition, the study focuses primarily on Khomeini and the major philosophical traditions that shaped his thought, without extending its comparison to broader Sunni political theology, contemporary post-Khomeini reinterpretations, or empirical debates on governance and pluralism in present-day Iran. Future research should therefore develop more historically grounded and empirically oriented studies on the institutional, social, and political effects of this

metaphysical paradigm, while also expanding comparative analysis across Islamic traditions and modern theopolitical models.

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