

## WILLFUL LEADERSHIP AND RELIGIOUS HERITAGE IN ASIA: XI JINPING, VLADIMIR PUTIN, AND RECEP TAYYIP ERDOĞAN

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**Abstract.** *In a world marked by growing instability, Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin, and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan have emerged as key leaders aiming to restore their nations' former glory through ambitious, often imperial, political visions. Xi seeks a Sinocentric East Asia, Putin strives to reassert Russian dominance in Eurasia, and Erdoğan promotes a pan-Turkic identity across Central Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa. Despite their nations' secular or anti-religious pasts, all three incorporate religious traditions to legitimize their rule and reinforce cultural identity—Erdoğan most explicitly, and Xi and Putin through selective revival of religious heritage. Central to the analysis is the philosophical concept of "will," particularly as understood within each leader's civilizational and religious context. The study begins by exploring how different traditions conceptualize free will, shaping each leader's understanding of power, destiny, and national mission.*

**Key words:** *leadership, imperialism, religion, civilization, will*

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In an increasingly unstable global landscape, three political leaders have emerged as pivotal figures of the early twenty-first century: Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin, and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Each seeks to position himself as a transformative leader within a historical trajectory aimed at restoring the perceived greatness of their respective nations. Their political projects are marked by a revival of imperial aspirations: Xi envisions a Sinocentric East Asian order, Putin seeks to reassert Russian influence across Eurasia and parts of Europe, and Erdoğan pursues the unification of Turkic peoples and the extension of Turkish influence across Central Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa.

Despite the secular and, in some cases, explicitly anti-religious legacies of their countries—all three leaders have incorporated religious traditions into their political narratives as sources of legitimacy and cultural continuity. Xi and Putin, notwithstanding their nations' communist pasts, increasingly mobilize religious heritage to reinforce national identity and authority. Erdoğan's political trajectory, by contrast, has been explicitly grounded in his early religious formation, which has become a central pillar of his leadership.

This study is organized into three sections, each dedicated to one leader and national context. Each case is situated within a broader civilizational framework shaped by its foundational religious tradition, following Arnold Toynbee's theory of civilizational types. The analysis begins by examining the conceptualization of free will within each tradition before turning to the respective leaders, analyzing their political visions as reflected in official statements, biographical accounts, and media representations.

## **1. Europe vs. East Asia: Divergent Visions of Free Will**

Before we reflect the personality of Chinese leader Xi Jinping in the context of political "will" we must clarify the key notion of free will. First, we must mention that the notion of will in China is different when compared with European philosophical tradition. To clarify the fundamental differences between Chinese and European understandings of free will, it is essential to emphasize how cultural, philosophical, and historical contexts shape conceptions of human agency, autonomy, and moral responsibility. While Western thought has traditionally framed free will in terms of individual choice and rational deliberation, Chinese philosophy tends to approach it relationally, emphasizing harmony, moral cultivation, and alignment with natural or social order.

The European tradition of free will is deeply influenced by Christian theology, Greek philosophy, and Enlightenment rationalism. It often centers on the idea that individuals possess autonomous agency and the ability to make independent moral choices. As to ancient Greek thought, philosophers like Plato and Aristotle debated the nature of voluntary action and moral responsibility, with certain differences between them. Plato believed that true freedom comes from knowledge and rational control over desires. In works like *Republic* and *Phaedrus*, he suggests that the soul has three parts: reason, spirit, and appetite. True freedom is achieved when reason governs the other parts, aligning the soul with the Form of the Good. External constraints, ignorance, and uncontrolled desires enslave individuals, making them unfree. Thus, for Plato, free will is

not mere choice but the ability to choose wisely, guided by reason and philosophical understanding. Aristotle, for instance, distinguished between actions done voluntarily (with knowledge and intention) and involuntarily (due to ignorance or coercion), forming an early framework for discussions on free will (Aristotle 2009: III: 1–3).

Aristotle's view on free will is tied to his concepts of voluntary and involuntary actions, and in certain respects is closer to the Chinese notion of human will. In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle argues that a person acts freely when he acts voluntarily, meaning with knowledge and without external compulsion. He distinguishes between actions done out of ignorance (involuntary) and those done under external force (non-voluntary). Moral responsibility depends on voluntary actions, where reason and deliberation guide choices. Unlike Plato, Aristotle emphasizes practical wisdom (*phronesis*) in making virtuous decisions. Thus, free will, for Aristotle, is the capacity to deliberate and choose rationally in pursuit of the good life (*eudaimonia*) (Aristotle 2009: III, 1110a–1115a; VI, 1139a–1145a).

Early Christian theology, represented by St. Augustine, linked free will to divine grace and moral responsibility. Augustine argued that free will allows for moral choice, but human nature is inclined toward sin, requiring divine intervention for true moral freedom. His views on free will were primarily formulated in response to the Manichean determinism he previously adhered to and later rejected. In works such as *On Free Choice of the Will (De Libero Arbitrio)* and *The City of God (De Civitate Dei)*, Augustine developed the understanding of free will that reconciled human moral responsibility with divine grace.

Augustine argued that human beings possess free will as a God-given gift, essential for moral responsibility. In *On Free Choice of the Will*, he defines free will as the capacity to choose between good and evil, stating:

If there is no free will, then no one can be justly punished or rewarded for what they do. (Augustine 1993: I, 2)

According to Augustine, free will itself is inherently good because it allows human beings to choose righteousness. However, he acknowledges that it also introduces the possibility of sin when misused. His framework posits that evil arises not from God but from the misdirection of human will away from divine goodness. In other words, he tries to settle the problem of evil, which was explained in an unsatisfactory way by Manicheans. Against the Manicheans, who argued that evil was an independent substance opposed to good, Augustine contended that evil is not a substance but a privation of good (*privatio boni*). He explained that free will allows individuals to turn away from God, leading to moral evil. As he states in *Confessions*: For when the will abandons what is above itself and turns to what is lower, it becomes evil—not because that to which it turns is evil, but because the turning itself is perverse (Augustine 1993: I, 1). By framing evil as a result of human choice rather than divine causation, Augustine preserved both God's goodness and the moral responsibility of human beings.

A central aspect of Augustine's later thought, particularly in *The City of God* and his anti-Pelagian writings, is the necessity of divine grace for the proper exercise of free will.

Initially, Augustine emphasized human autonomy in choosing good or evil, but he later developed a more grace-dependent view. He argued that after the Fall, human will is corrupted and incapable of choosing good without God's intervention. In *The City of God*, he states:

Without the help of God's grace, a man's will can neither be turned to God, nor be good at all. (Augustin 1998: XXII: 30)

This view became foundational in Christian theology, influencing later debates on predestination and salvation. Here, we see that free will in the Christian cultural milieu is deeply connected to local religious beliefs. The same notion we shall see in the Chinese cultural system as well.

Enlightenment Rationalism appeared in the historic period when Christianity as a faith was supplanted by a different notion of God, explained in a more rational way as the source of self-realizing being. Thus, figures such as Descartes, Locke, and Kant emphasized rational autonomy, arguing that free will is essential to moral responsibility and human dignity. Kant viewed free will as a rational necessity, aligning with moral law rather than personal desire. Immanuel Kant posits that the will is the cause of our actions and that having a free will means being rational and not influenced by external forces. He articulates that "a free will and a will under moral laws are one and the same" (Kant 2012: III). This suggests that true freedom is not the absence of constraints but the ability to act according to moral self-legislation.

Baruch Spinoza, another influential philosopher of the period, offers a deterministic perspective. He argues that individuals believe they are free because they are conscious of their actions, but unaware of the causes that determine those actions. Spinoza states,

Because they think themselves free, those notions have arisen: praise and blame, sin and merit. (Kluz 2025)

Despite this determinism, Spinoza maintains that moral teachings and laws remain significant, as the consequences of actions—be they rewards or punishments—naturally follow, thereby guiding behavior.

In the realm of political philosophy, the principle of free will implies that politicians, as rational agents, are capable of autonomous decision-making, guided by moral principles rather than external influences. Kant's notion of autonomy suggests that political leaders should act according to self-imposed moral laws, ensuring that their actions align with universal ethical standards. This perspective emphasizes the responsibility of politicians to make choices that are not merely expedient but morally justifiable. Once more, we can trace the interiorization of free will here, but it has an outer source, namely God and his will. What differs is the theological shift from the notion of God as an external source, as it was thought in the Middle Ages, with the notion of the interior location of the transcendental inside the human conscience represented as moral law or category. Here, the free will is still dependent on an outer force, or God.

In summary, Enlightenment rationalism presents a nuanced discourse on free will, balancing between the autonomy of rational agents and the deterministic forces that may

influence actions. This philosophical dialogue underscores the moral responsibilities of individuals, particularly those in political roles.

Contemporary Western philosophy often frames free will in terms of the libertarian vs. compatibilist debate. Libertarians argue that free will is incompatible with determinism, while compatibilists (e.g., Hume, Frankfurt) argue that free will can coexist with causal determinism as long as actions align with one's internal motivations (Van Inwagen 1983). Peter Van Inwagen, in *An Essay on Free Will*, presents a well-known argument for the incompatibility of free will and determinism, commonly known as the *Consequence Argument*. His reasoning follows certain steps, viz. that the state of the world at any given time, together with the laws of nature, determines all future events. If determinism is true, then everything that happens, including human choices, is a consequence of the past and the laws of nature. (Van Inwagen 1983: 16). Van Inwagen argues that individuals have no control over the past and the laws of nature. Since no one can change what has already happened or alter the laws governing the universe, it follows that no one has control over the consequences of these facts, including their own actions (Van Inwagen 1983: 93).

Harry Frankfurt, in his seminal paper *Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person* (1971), argues for a compatibilist view of free will, asserting that free will can coexist with determinism as long as actions align with an individual's internal motivations. He challenges the traditional incompatibilist view that free will requires the ability to do otherwise, proposing instead that free will depends on the structure of a person's will (Frankfurt 1971: 5-20). Frankfurt's theory redefines free will as the mere ability to do otherwise. This compatibilist framework allows free will to coexist with determinism, as long as a person's actions authentically reflect their internal motivations (Frankfurt 1971: 28–30).

## 2. Is There Free Will in Chinese Tradition?

In contrast to the Western emphasis on autonomous choice, Chinese philosophical traditions focus on relational agency, moral cultivation, and alignment with the greater cosmic or social order. Cosmic order (*tien*, 天) is analogous to the notion of God in Western tradition. Rather than seeing free will as an individualistic assertion of choice, Chinese thought tends to frame it as an evolving process that integrates personal, ethical, and natural considerations, and the role of an individual here is more a function than an individual acting. It should be mentioned that, unlike the more simplistic case in European religious history, the Chinese religious and social dimension has been aggravated by three religious traditions, Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. At the same time, China is in the state of active transition to modernity, which involves huge borrowings from the West, beginning with the May 4 Movement (1919).

In *Confucianism*, free will is acknowledged but is understood within the broader context of moral duty and social harmony. Confucius emphasized the cultivation of *de* (德, virtue) through ethical practice, education, and the proper maintenance of social relationships. The ideal person, or *junzi* (noble person), does not act based on mere

individual preference. Rather, they develop a form of inner freedom by aligning personal desires with moral principles and societal expectations. This suggests that while individuals possess agency, genuine freedom is achieved through moral self-cultivation and adherence to ethical norms (Confucius 2003: IV, XII).

Mencius, a key successor to Confucius, held that human nature is inherently good and that moral potential is present in all individuals from birth (Mencius 2004: 2A6, 6A6). According to Mencius, free will is exercised through the cultivation of this innate goodness, which flourishes in a nurturing environment. In the political realm, this view implies that rulers should govern not through fear or coercion, but by cultivating virtue in themselves and in their people (Ames & Hall, 1987: 71–89). Good governance, in this sense, is grounded in moral example and the encouragement of ethical growth, rather than in external control. Mencius' perspective lays the groundwork for a Confucian vision of leadership rooted in the moral autonomy of citizens and the benevolence of their leaders.

This understanding stands in contrast to many Western conceptions of free will, particularly the libertarian view, which posits that individuals can act independently of external determinants. In Confucian thought, autonomy is not defined by absolute freedom, but by the harmonization of individual will with social and moral structures (Xunzi 2014: 17–34). This perspective is further elaborated by Xunzi, who diverged from Mencius by arguing that human nature is inherently selfish and must be refined through disciplined moral training (Kane 1996). Within this framework, free will exists, but its proper expression depends on rigorous education and the internalization of ethical values.

The Confucian conception of free will carries important implications for governance and social ethics. Confucius advocated for leadership through moral example rather than coercion, envisioning a society where individuals voluntarily align themselves with righteousness (Ames & Hall 1987: 114–130). This vision is closely tied to the concept of *li* (禮, ritual propriety), which governs behavior through tradition and normative frameworks, encouraging individuals to make personal choices that contribute to collective harmony (Angle 2009: 43–59). It should be mentioned here that ritual in Chinese tradition is a means by which ethical forms are enforced in society. Unlike legalist traditions that rely on external enforcement and punitive measures, *li*, as a part of Confucianism, promotes a model of self-regulation grounded in moral cultivation.

Moreover, Confucian ethics provide a valuable contribution to contemporary debates on free will and determinism. Some modern scholars interpret Confucianism as presenting a compatibilist view—one in which free will is compatible with moral and social constraints (Nisbett 2003: 82–97). This resonates with insights from moral psychology, which suggest that human decision-making is deeply influenced by cultural and social factors while still allowing for ethical agency.

To sum up, Confucianism upholds a vision of free will not as unrestrained choice, but as the achievement of inner freedom through ethical self-cultivation. By integrating personal inclinations with moral obligations, individuals become truly autonomous in the

Confucian sense. This perspective highlights not only the moral dimension of free will but also its essential role in fostering social harmony and personal virtue.

*Daoism*, the second traditional philosophy of China, centers on living in harmony with the *Dao*—the ineffable, underlying principle of the cosmos. At the heart of Daoist thought lies the concept of *wu wei* (無為), often translated as “non-action” or “effortless action.” Far from implying passivity or indifference, *wu wei* denotes a mode of action that is spontaneous, unforced, and fully aligned with the natural flow of life (Hansen 1992: 202–209). This principle encourages individuals, especially those in positions of authority, to relinquish rigid desires and excessive control in favor of adaptive and responsive engagement with the world.

The literal translation of *wu wei*—with *wu* meaning “non” and *wei* meaning “action”—suggests “non-doing.” Yet Daoist texts clarify that this is not the absence of action, but rather a form of highly efficacious activity that flows from an intimate understanding of natural rhythms. Sinologist Jean-François Billeter describes *wuwei* as a “state of perfect knowledge of the coexistence of the situation and perceiver, perfect efficaciousness and the realization of a perfect economy of energy” (Billeter 2010: 35). In the *Dao De Jing*, attributed to Laozi, this principle is directly linked to effective leadership. In Chapter 2, Laozi writes:

Therefore the sage acts by doing nothing, teaches without speaking, attends all things without making claim on them, works for them without making them dependent, demands no honor for his deed. Because he demands no honor, he will never be dishonored. (Laozi 2004: II)

This passage illustrates that the ideal ruler—the sage—leads not by imposing his will, but by aligning his actions with the natural order and refraining from coercive intervention. By practicing *wu wei* (無為), public authorities create space for the spontaneous self-organization of society. This is further emphasized in Chapter 37:

The *Dao* abides in non-action, yet there is nothing it does not do. (Laozi 2004: II)

Laozi’s message is clear: true power lies in restraint, and true effectiveness in governance emerges from a ruler’s ability to act in accordance with the *Dao* rather than in opposition to it.

Zhuangzi, another foundational Daoist thinker, expands on this idea through vivid parables. In one well-known story, Cook Ding expertly butchers an ox with effortless grace, explaining that he allows his blade to follow the natural grain of the animal rather than force his way through it (Zhuangzi 2003: 50–52). This serves as a metaphor for governance: rulers, like Cook Ding, should not seek to dominate circumstances but to discern their contours and move within them effortlessly.

In another parable, Confucius and his disciples witness a man swimming unharmed through a violent waterfall. When asked how he survives, the man explains that he has learned to follow the currents, merging with the flow rather than resisting it (Billeter 2010: 35). This story highlights the Daoist conviction that true mastery comes from yielding to the forces of nature, not opposing them— an attitude that has deep implications for the exercise of authority.

Applied to politics, *wu wei* advocates for minimal intervention. In Chapter 3 of the *Dao De Jing*, Laozi states:

Therefore: The sage governs by emptying minds and filling bellies, weakening ambitions and strengthening bones. He keeps the people free from knowledge and desire and ensures that the clever do not dare to act. He acts without action, and there is nothing that goes unordered. (Laozi 2004: III)

Here, Laozi proposes a model of governance based not on suppression but on simplicity and alignment. By reducing social ambition and interference, the ruler enables a more natural, self-regulating order to emerge. In this context, free will is not expressed through domination or manipulation, but through the sage's ability to cultivate harmony by not acting against the Dao.

At its core, *wu wei* redefines the nature of freedom. Rather than emphasizing control or willful decision-making, Daoism views freedom as a form of spiritual and existential liberation. By shedding rigid desires, conceptual judgments, and artificial distinctions, individuals—and rulers in particular—can participate fully in the fluid, spontaneous unfolding of life (Hoff 1982: 83–85).

Zhuangzi further reinforces this vision by advocating for the transcendence of dualistic thinking. When individuals stop imposing rigid categories like right and wrong or success and failure, they become free to act with genuine spontaneity and ease (Zhuangzi 2003: 28–30). For public authorities, this implies a radical shift in leadership—from rule through imposition to rule through resonance with the natural and social order.

*Chinese Buddhism*, as the third component in the triad of classical Chinese philosophical and political thought alongside Confucianism and Daoism, offers a distinctive understanding of political power and ethical agency. Deeply shaped by *Mahāyāna* currents, especially those articulated in the works attributed to *Nāgārjuna* and transmitted through East Asian exegetical traditions, Chinese Buddhism presents a nuanced conception of free will—one that challenges modern ideals of absolute autonomy while affirming the possibility of moral responsibility within an interdependent reality.

Central to this framework is the doctrine of *yuanqi* (緣起, dependent origination), which, when joined with the cultivation of wisdom (*hui*, 慧) and ethical discipline (*jie*, 戒), offers individuals and governing authorities a path beyond ego-driven action toward mindful engagement in a relational world. This vision draws from the seminal insights of *Nāgārjuna's Zhong lun* (中論) (Ni 1993: 507) *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, as interpreted in Chinese and contemporary commentaries such as those by Jay L. Garfield (Garfield 199).

At the heart of Buddhist thought lies the principle of *yuanqi*, which teaches that all phenomena arise through conditions and are thus without independent existence. This radical insight destabilizes the notion of a self-sustaining, autonomous agent—whether personal or institutional. As *Nāgārjuna* writes in the *Zhong lun*:

All things arise through conditions; Thus, all things are empty of self-nature (中論 1994: XXIV, 19).

Here, Nāgārjuna affirms that all *dharmas*, including persons and political bodies, are marked by *kong* (空, emptiness), lacking inherent selfhood. The notion of an independently sovereign will—whether that of a ruler, government, or subject—is revealed as a construction born of ignorance (*wuming*, 無明).

Jay Garfield elucidates:

To say that an entity is empty is to say that it lacks essence or inherent existence—it is conditioned and relational. (Garfield 1995: 91)

This reading not only challenges the modern ideal of personal autonomy but also unsettles the idea that political institutions are self-legitimizing. In light of *kong*, governments and social structures must acknowledge that their existence and authority are contingent, arising within a web of relationships rather than from any intrinsic power.

Chinese Buddhism's emphasis on the *Zhongdao* (中道, Middle Way) is central to this discussion. Rejecting both *changjian* (常見, eternalism) and *duanjian* (斷見, nihilism), the Middle Way avoids absolutist assertions or total negations. Applied to governance, this path counsels neither authoritarian overreach nor passive abdication, but responsive and reflective authority. The *Jian ai jing* (見愛經 Kaccānagotta Sutta) expresses this balance:

The world mostly relies on the views of existence and non-existence... But with right understanding of arising and cessation, one transcends both. (Samyutta Nikāya 2005: 12.15)

By viewing all actions and structures as interdependent, both individuals and institutions are called to act not from dogma or self-interest, but with awareness of causality and a shared sense of responsibility. Importantly, despite denying an absolute, unconditioned will, Buddhism does not endorse moral passivity. Instead, it encourages the deliberate cultivation of *hui* (慧, wisdom) and *jie* (戒, ethical conduct), as the foundational elements of skillful action. This is especially vital in political life, where decisions affect countless lives. Moral leadership rooted in awareness of *yuanqi* and *kong* becomes an expression of interdependent agency, not authoritarian force. Nāgārjuna states:

Without reliance on the conventional, The ultimate truth cannot be taught.  
Without understanding the ultimate, Liberation cannot be attained. (中論1994: XXIV, 10)

This verse affirms that one must work within conventional frameworks—laws, institutions, norms—to approach ultimate insight (*zhendi*, 真諦). For rulers and officials, this implies a governance rooted in pragmatism and ethics while directed toward the reduction of suffering (*kǔ*, 苦). Buddhism identifies ego-based desires—greed (*tan*, 貪), anger (*chen*, 瞋), and delusion (*chi*, 痴)—as the sources of suffering. Nāgārjuna deconstructs the notion of a permanent self or fixed authority:

If the self were identical with the aggregates, it would arise and cease with them.  
If it were different from the aggregates, it would not share their characteristics. (中論 1994: XVIII, 10)

Such analysis has political significance: when leaders operate under the illusion of inherent legitimacy, they risk causing harm. Recognizing *wuwo* (無我, non-self) invites humility and compassion rather than domination.

The Buddhist understanding that actions arise from countless causal factors does not absolve responsibility. On the contrary, it deepens it. Through *nian* (念, mindfulness) and *guan* (觀, insight), agents—whether individuals or institutions—are empowered to act with wisdom and care. Garfield affirms:

The existence of regularities in causal relationships is what makes explanation and ethical discernment possible—it is not a denial of freedom but a condition for its wise use. (Garfield 1995: 98)

This approach embraces the complexity of conditions without falling into fatalism. It permits a responsive and compassionate mode of leadership - essential for just governance. To sum up, Chinese Buddhism, informed by the Mahāyāna vision and Nāgārjuna's profound dialectics, reconfigures the concept of free will. While it denies absolute autonomy, it affirms the possibility of ethical action within a dynamic, interrelated world. For both individuals and political authorities, this calls for engaged conduct—grounded in *hui* (wisdom), *bei* (compassion), and *jie* (ethical discipline)—that recognizes the emptiness of the self while honoring the weight of moral choice in the shared project of reducing suffering.

### 3. Xi Jinping: Willful Leadership Rooted in Chinese Tradition

Xi Jinping, General Secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC), President of the People's Republic of China, and Chairman of the Central Military Commission, has emerged as the most prominent Chinese leader since Deng Xiaoping. His leadership is marked by a forceful consolidation of power, a revitalized ideological framework, and an assertive international posture. However, Xi's authority is not derived merely from contemporary political maneuvering. His leadership style is profoundly shaped by a return to ancient Chinese political traditions—Confucian hierarchy, Daoist harmony, and Buddhist ethical interdependence—interwoven with post-Communist centralism and global pragmatism.

At the heart of Xi Jinping's political vision lies a willful assertion of order, stability, and moral renewal. In this, he draws heavily from Confucianism, particularly its emphasis on hierarchical governance, filial piety, and moral rectitude. Confucius advocated for a virtuous ruler (*junzi*, 君) who governs by moral example rather than coercion. Xi has revived Confucian language in state discourse, emphasizing the role of culture and values in nation-building. The concept of a "harmonious society" (*hexie shehui*, 和谐社会), though coined by Hu Jintao, is recast by Xi as part of a broader 'Chinese Dream' (*Zhongguo meng*, 中国梦), calling for national rejuvenation through social discipline, family loyalty, and patriotic education (Bell 2015: 103–106).

A deeper understanding of Xi Jinping's leadership requires attention to the personal trials that shaped his political will. Born in 1953 as the son of Xi Zhongxun, a veteran revolutionary and vice premier under Mao, Xi's early life was marked by both

privilege and dramatic reversal. At the age of 9, his father was purged during a political campaign; by 15, Xi himself was sent down to Liangjiahe, a remote village in Shaanxi Province, during the Cultural Revolution's mass rustication of urban youth. Living in a cave dwelling and performing arduous farm labor, Xi reportedly struggled to adapt, failing to escape once and being sent back under escort. Yet, over the course of seven years in Liangjiahe, he gradually earned the villagers' trust, joining the Communist Party at 20 after multiple rejections, and eventually became the village party secretary. Xi has described this period as formative, claiming it taught him "what the people need" and forged resilience in the face of hardship.

This personal narrative of exile and redemption would later inform Xi's political self-image as a leader forged through suffering and patient perseverance. It is no coincidence that his public speeches often draw on agrarian metaphors, grassroots connections, and moral fortitude. Biographers have noted that Xi's time in Liangjiahe exposed him to both the failures of Maoist extremism and the enduring strength of rural Chinese traditions—a dual lesson that would later animate his blend of ideological control and practical governance.

After returning to Beijing, Xi climbed the Party ranks steadily but without fanfare, working in Hebei, Fujian, Zhejiang, and Shanghai, where he cultivated a reputation as a cautious but capable administrator. His appointment to the Politburo Standing Committee in 2007 signaled his entry into China's top leadership circle, and by 2012, he succeeded Hu Jintao as General Secretary. Yet observers note that Xi's rise was not a smooth coronation; his apparent neutrality made him an acceptable compromise among Party factions, but once in power, he moved swiftly to consolidate authority, launching an anti-corruption campaign that ensnared rivals and allies alike. Xi's trajectory—from the caves of Liangjiahe to the apex of Chinese power—thus reinforces the essay's central theme: a willful leader whose political authority is deeply entwined with both personal perseverance and the revival of China's civilizational traditions.

Xi's frequent references to "great unity" (*datong*, 大同) and "benevolent governance" (*renzheng*, 仁政) echo Mencian political philosophy, where the ruler is seen as the ethical cornerstone of statecraft (Van Norden 2007: 78–82) is anti-corruption campaign, framed as a moral purge, exemplifies the Confucian belief that virtue begins at the top. It is not merely a tool for removing rivals, but an ideological attempt to restore public trust in the Party through ethical rectification. As Confucius asserted,

If the ruler is upright, all will go well without orders. (Confucius 2003: XII. 17)

Xi's projection of personal integrity is thus not only a political performance but a reassertion of the ruler's moral centrality in Chinese governance.

At the same time, Xi's leadership demonstrates a Daoist sensibility—one that values adaptability, non-contention, and alignment with natural rhythms. Laozi's (*Daodejing*, 道德经) ideal ruler governs, as mentioned earlier, with "non-action" (*wuwei*)—not inaction, but a non-coercive influence that allows harmony to emerge organically. Xi's foreign policy slogan, "a community of shared future for mankind" (*renlei mingyun gongtongti*, 人类命运共同体), reflects this Daoist vision of interconnectedness without

domination (Xi 2017: 577). His Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is less about overt empire-building and more about creating a web of mutual dependency, where Chinese influence flows through infrastructure, commerce, and diplomacy—like water, the Daoist metaphor for transformative power.

Daoist governance also implies an intuitive understanding of balance and the limits of force. Xi's strategy in addressing regional challenges—such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the South China Sea—has largely been one of calibrated pressure rather than overt warfare. He leverages legal tools, economic integration, and information management, embodying a kind of statecraft that mirrors the Daoist ideal of soft power. In many of his speeches, the imagery of nature—"mountains," "rivers," "seasons"—is invoked to frame China's development not as a confrontation with the West but as a harmonious evolution toward national destiny.

Moreover, Xi's engagement with Buddhist thought, particularly through Chinese Mahāyāna traditions, supports a governance model that stresses interdependence, moral causality, and the emptiness of ego. The Buddhist principle of dependent origination (*yuanqi*, 缘起) suggests that power and legitimacy arise through a network of causes and conditions, not through inherent authority (中论 1995: XXIV, 19). In Buddhist terms, governance rooted in compassion (*ci*, 慈) and wisdom (*hui*, 慧) is far more sustainable than rule-driven by personal desire or force.

Xi's speeches often invoke social responsibility and collective well-being, resonant with Buddhist ethics. His administration has promoted Sinicized Buddhism to serve national unity, especially in border regions like Tibet and Inner Mongolia. The use of Buddhism in soft power diplomacy—through monastic exchanges, temple restorations, and Chinese-funded Buddhist conferences—illustrates a moral-spiritual strategy aimed at shaping global perception. In this sense, Xi aligns with the Buddhist view that leadership must be skillful means (*fangbian*, 方便)—a pragmatic yet compassionate response to historical and social conditions.

Buddhist philosophy also informs Xi's domestic governance. The emphasis on ethical restraint, mindfulness (*nian*, 念), and the middle path (*zhongdao*, 中道) can be seen in his emphasis on moderation in development, sustainable growth, and targeted poverty alleviation. While not explicitly doctrinal, these approaches reflect the Buddhist belief that suffering can be alleviated through wise action and moral discipline. Xi's repeated invocation of the concept of "people-centered development" speaks to this orientation: the well-being of the populace is not only a political objective but a moral imperative.

Simultaneously, Xi's leadership reflects a post-Communist political realism, rooted in the Leninist architecture of the CPC but heavily modified by the reforms initiated under Deng Xiaoping. The centralization of power under Xi, especially the abolition of presidential term limits in 2018, reveals an intentional shift back toward strongman rule—justified through appeals to historical destiny and political continuity (Heilmann 2018: 212–215). Xi's "core leadership" status echoes Mao's symbolic centrality while discarding the ideological excesses of the Cultural Revolution. The CPC under Xi has been recast not merely as a political mechanism, but as the moral spine of the nation.

Yet, Xi diverges from ideological rigidity by embracing economic pragmatism and strategic internationalism. As head of a global economic power, Xi walks a tightrope between state-directed capitalism and authoritarian governance. His policies on artificial intelligence, green technology, and digital currency are future-facing, aimed at positioning China as a leader in the post-industrial global order (Lee, 2018: 145–156). While his rhetoric is steeped in Chinese tradition, his methods—rational bureaucracy, digital surveillance, and technocratic elites—bear the mark of modern efficiency and realism.

In international affairs, Xi projects an image of calculated confidence, derived from both traditional *realpolitik* and a deeper historical narrative of national recovery. Under his leadership, Chinese exceptionalism is not xenophobic isolationism, but a belief in cultural centrality—a modern echo of the *Tianxia* (天下) worldview, where China is seen as the moral pivot around which the global order orbits (Zhao 2021: 44–59).

Xi's version of global engagement, particularly through the Global Development Initiative (GDI) and the Global Security Initiative (GSI), proposes an alternative to Western liberal internationalism. These initiatives are framed as inclusive, sovereign-respecting, and development-centered values that draw from Confucian ideals of ethical governance and mutual respect. They also serve as strategic hedges against Western narratives of universal human rights and democracy, which Xi portrays as inapplicable to China in a particular context.

Culturally, Xi has spearheaded a renaissance of Chinese civilization discourse. By institutionalizing traditional culture through the education system, media, and public rituals, he is reimagining Chinese identity as both ancient and modern. This civilizational confidence serves a dual purpose: it reinforces internal cohesion and projects a coherent image to the world. Confucian temples, Daoist festivals, and Buddhist charities are not only spiritual endeavors but instruments of soft power under the rubric of cultural security.

In conclusion, Xi Jinping emerges as a willful yet complex leader, navigating between past and future, moral vision and strategic calculation. His governance reflects a synthesis of ancient Chinese traditions—Confucian moralism, Daoist flexibility, Buddhist ethics—and post-Communist centralized authority, all fused with modern pragmatism on the global stage. By invoking these rich philosophical legacies, Xi frames his rule not simply as political domination, but as an ethical mission to restore China's rightful place in the world. Whether this vision of his personal willfulness succeeds in balancing power with virtue remains one of the most defining questions of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

#### **4. The Divergence of Free Will: Russian Orthodoxy Against Western Christianity**

The concept of “will” in Russian philosophical and theological thought has acquired a particularly profound and often tragic resonance. It is frequently associated with themes of spiritual struggle, self-transcendence, and the pursuit of the absolute. Beyond its metaphysical dimensions, the notion of will in Russian intellectual history has also

assumed a political character, becoming an instrument for transforming reality, asserting determination, and making momentous decisions. To understand the philosophical and cultural environment in which contemporary Russian political leadership operates, and how it exercises its own conception of will, it is essential to examine the religious and philosophical foundations of will in Russian thought, particularly within the tradition of Christian Orthodoxy. This tradition remains the cornerstone of Russian philosophical discourse, akin to the foundational role religion plays in Chinese thought.

Following the revolutionary overthrow of the Romanov dynasty in 1917, Russian Orthodoxy was formally replaced by state atheism. However, key paradigmatic elements of Orthodoxy persisted, albeit in secularized forms. The veneration of saints found its analogue in the cultic treatment of Lenin's embalmed body, while party meetings and trade union assemblies often mirrored the ritual and confessional aspects of the Church, including practices resembling public penance for labor violations. Canonical citations of Marx, Engels, and Lenin supplanted scriptural references, and labor demonstrations on May 1 or commemorations of the October Revolution assumed the symbolic and performative functions of religious processions.

During the Soviet era, elements of Protestant ethics, as articulated by Max Weber, were selectively incorporated into educational and ideological programs, albeit without acknowledgment of their Western theological roots. After the collapse of Communism, the ideological vacuum was increasingly filled by the Russian Orthodox Church. Nevertheless, the underlying ideological framework—characterized by a narrative of civilizational opposition to the West—remained largely intact. It is important to note that this adversarial stance toward the West and Western Christianity had been a persistent feature of Russian ideological consciousness for centuries, long before the Bolshevik Revolution.

In Russian Orthodox theology, the concept of will is intricately tied to the doctrine of free will. Free will, according to the Orthodox Church, is not a mere abstract idea but a fundamental aspect of human nature, given by God. The Orthodox understanding of will is rooted in the biblical account of creation, where God endows Adam and Eve with the ability to choose between good and evil (Genesis 2:16–17). This divine gift of free will is considered essential for human dignity, as it allows individuals to freely choose their path toward salvation or fall into sin (Meyendorff 1974: 139).

The Orthodox Church teaches that human beings were created in the image of God, and this includes the gift of free will, which is the ability to choose good or evil (Lossky 1976: 111). The concept of free will, or *svoboda voli* (свобода воли), has significant theological and existential implications. It is through the exercise of free will that humans have the capacity to align their lives with God's divine plan or to turn away from it. The Christian notion of free will in the Orthodox tradition is distinct from libertarian or existentialist views found in Western philosophy, as it is always framed in relation to divine providence and grace (Hart 2005: 32).

For the Orthodox believer, exercising free will means the ability to choose to cooperate with God's will. This cooperation, however, is not forced; it is a free, loving response to God's invitation for communion and union (Ware 1995: 67). In this sense,

Orthodox Christianity emphasizes that true freedom is not the absence of constraints but the ability to align one's will with the divine will, which leads to salvation. This idea is exemplified in the teachings of the Church Fathers, such as St. Basil the Great and St. John Chrysostom, who emphasize that human will is the means by which salvation is achieved through cooperation, or synergy, with God's grace (Basil the Great, 2005: 88).

The Orthodox understanding of will is profoundly connected with the concept of *synergy*— cooperation between human free will and divine grace. The term *synergy* (синергия) refers to the collaboration between God's will and human will, which is central to the process of salvation (Lossky 1976: 114). In Orthodox theology, it is believed that while human beings have the ability to choose their actions, they cannot achieve salvation on their own. It is only through God's grace, working in cooperation with human free will, that the path to salvation becomes possible (Romanides 2002: 61).

In the famous words of St. Augustine, who greatly influenced Western Christian thought, human will was viewed as inherently weak due to the concept of original sin (Augustine 1999). However, Orthodox Christianity holds that while the fall of Adam and Eve brought about a rupture in the relationship between God and humanity, it did not destroy the inherent gift of free will (Ware, 1995: 72). In this tradition, the Church teaches that human beings retain the ability to choose, but their will is weakened by sin. This concept is central to Orthodox anthropology: while humanity's will is distorted by sin, it remains free, and the act of choosing to align with God's will is central to the healing of that will (Larchet 2002: 93).

The synergy of divine and human will is vividly illustrated in the Orthodox sacraments, such as baptism, which initiates the process of salvation. The believer is required to freely choose to enter into this process, but it is the grace of God that makes it effective. Through the mystery of baptism, the individual's free will is united with divine will, and the person becomes a part of the body of Christ (Meyendorff, 1974: 151). This theological foundation helps explain how Russian Orthodox thought reconciles human freedom with the idea of divine providence. This theological notion has, at times, been politicized into a form of messianism, as reflected in Vladimir Putin's vision of Russia's historic mission on the world stage (Laruelle 2019: 106).

In the context of the Fall, the Orthodox Church teaches that human beings abused their free will by choosing to disobey God's command. This act of disobedience did not destroy free will but made it more susceptible to error and sin. The statement from St. John's epistle, "We know that we are God's children, and that the whole world lies under the power of the evil one" (1 John 5:19), is often interpreted in Russian Orthodox thought as a lens for understanding cultural and spiritual conflict with the West. In this framing, the West becomes associated with moral decay, while Russia is perceived as a spiritual bulwark or savior.

The Orthodox Church emphasizes the restoration of the will through Christ's redemptive work. Christ's sacrifice on the cross and his resurrection are seen as the ultimate victory over sin and death, offering the possibility for the restoration of human will to its original, divine purpose. In the Orthodox view, Christ's resurrection serves as the model of true freedom, demonstrating how human will, when properly aligned with

God's will, leads to eternal life. The restoration of the human will is a process of healing and transformation that occurs throughout the believer's life, particularly through the sacraments, prayer, and ascetic practices (Lossky 1976: 128).

The notion of the will being healed and restored can be seen in the practice of *theosis*—the process of becoming one with God. *Theosis* is a central aspect of Orthodox spirituality, whereby the believer, through the grace of God, becomes divinized or united with God. This process involves the purification of the will and the gradual alignment of human desires and intentions with the divine will (Lossky 1967: 141).

Freedom in Russian Orthodox Christianity is not understood as the mere ability to act without external constraints, but as the capacity to choose the good, to align one's will with God's will (Larchet, 2002: 112). This understanding of freedom has significant implications for how will is understood in the context of political leadership. While secular leaders may emphasize autonomy and individual rights, Orthodox Christian leaders are called to exercise freedom in a moral and virtuous manner, guided by divine principles. The exercise of will in this framework is not merely about personal power or control, but about serving the greater good, in cooperation with God's will.

The concept of free will is not only important in personal salvation but also in the broader context of societal leadership. Russian Orthodox thought has historically placed great emphasis on the moral and ethical responsibilities of leaders. According to this tradition, political leaders are not simply empowered to act according to their own will but are seen as stewards of divine order (Valliere 2000: 214). The Orthodox Christian view of political leadership stresses the need for rulers to align their personal will with the greater good, seeking to uphold justice, righteousness, and the well-being of their people.

In the context of Russian history, figures such as Tsar Nicholas II were often viewed as divinely ordained leaders, responsible for guiding the Russian people toward spiritual and moral salvation. However, Orthodox theology also emphasizes that even rulers must exercise their free will in harmony with God's will, and their actions must be judged by divine standards (Riasanovsky 1959: 92). This underscores the role of will in governance: it is not enough to simply assert power; the ruler's will must be in alignment with divine justice and righteousness.

## **5. Vladimir Putin: Between Ilyin, Orthodoxy, and Soviet Brutality**

The resurgence of Russian authoritarianism under Vladimir Putin has roots not only in Soviet nostalgia or contemporary geopolitics but also in a selective ideological inheritance from prerevolutionary and émigré thinkers. Among the most influential of these is Ivan Alexandrovich Ilyin (1883–1954), a Russian émigré philosopher whose works have been repeatedly cited, quoted, and republished with the patronage of the Russian state. Vladimir Putin has personally supervised the repatriation of Ilyin's remains to Russia, ordered the dissemination of his texts to government officials, and referenced Ilyin in key speeches (Snyder 2018: 23–25). Therefore, we have a certain right to suggest that Putin's mentor, at least partly, is Ivan Ilyin, whose philosophy resonated with Putin's mind.

A fuller understanding of Putin's embrace of Ilyin's ideas must be situated within his personal and political trajectory. Born in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) in 1952 to a working-class family, Vladimir Putin's early years were marked by postwar scarcity and hardship. He studied law at Leningrad State University, graduating in 1975 under the mentorship of Anatoly Sobchak, a liberal-minded legal scholar who later became a reformist mayor. Yet, despite exposure to reformist thought, Putin chose a career in state security: upon graduation, he joined the KGB, embarking on a path that would shape his political instincts. His service included a posting in Dresden, East Germany, during the Cold War, where he witnessed firsthand the collapse of Soviet influence in Eastern Europe—a formative experience that would later deepen his skepticism of Western liberalism and revolutions.

Returning to Russia as the Soviet Union unraveled, Putin transitioned from the intelligence services to local politics. He rose rapidly in St. Petersburg's municipal government under Sobchak, managing foreign investment and business relations—a role that immersed him in the murky intersection of politics, oligarchic capital, and organized crime that characterized post-Soviet Russia. Allegations of involvement in corrupt schemes during this period, including questionable export deals of raw materials, surfaced but were never formally investigated. In the late 1990s, Putin was called to Moscow, where he held a series of administrative roles, culminating in his appointment as head of the Federal Security Service (FSB), the successor to the KGB. In 1999, President Boris Yeltsin unexpectedly named him Prime Minister and later Acting President, setting the stage for Putin's rise to national leadership.

Putin's early presidency was marked by efforts to restore state authority after the perceived chaos of the 1990s. His hardline approach to the Second Chechen War earned him both domestic support and international criticism for human rights abuses, including alleged war crimes in Grozny and the suppression of Chechen separatists. As he consolidated power, political opposition was steadily marginalized through legal harassment, media crackdowns, and selective prosecutions—most famously the imprisonment of oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky. Meanwhile, investigative journalists probing state corruption, such as Anna Politkovskaya, were assassinated under suspicious circumstances, contributing to an international reputation for fostering a climate of impunity. Over time, constitutional reforms, the co-option of state institutions, and electoral manipulation entrenched Putin's rule, transforming Russia's political system into a hybrid of formal democracy and de facto authoritarianism.

Putin's career reflects a fusion of legal expertise, security service discipline, and pragmatic authoritarianism. His life story—from a law student in Leningrad to a KGB officer, political operator, and finally Russia's paramount leader—offers a practical embodiment of Ilyin's vision of a ruler whose authority flows from strength, moral certainty, and the imperative of protecting the spiritual essence of the nation. His personal history of navigating, and at times exploiting, the informal networks of post-Soviet Russia reinforces his view that power must be centralized, controlled, and morally justified as a bulwark against chaos.

Ilyin's *On Resisting Evil by Force* (О сопротивлении злу силой) and other works provide a moral and metaphysical justification for authoritarian governance, the use of force, and the preservation of a spiritual and cultural Russian identity through state control. Ivan Ilyin was educated at Moscow University and was initially sympathetic to the liberal currents in Russian Orthodoxy and law. However, the Bolshevik Revolution profoundly altered his philosophical trajectory. He fled Russia in 1922 aboard the so-called "philosophers' ship" and eventually settled in Germany, later moving to Switzerland, from where he continued writing extensively on Russian statehood, law, Orthodoxy, and nationalism. Ilyin's philosophy blends Orthodox Christian morality, German idealism (notably Hegel), and a profound belief in Russian exceptionalism. He saw Russia not just as a nation-state but as a unique spiritual civilization. While he rejected Soviet communism as morally and spiritually bankrupt, he also distrusted liberal democracy, particularly as embodied by Western Europe and the United States.

In *On Resisting Evil by Force*, Ilyin argued against Tolstoyan pacifism and in favor of an active, righteous resistance to evil through strength, both personal and institutional (Ильин 1950: 27–35). This work became central to Putin's justification for restoring state power and engaging in militarized interventions. Putin has overtly embraced Ilyin's ideological project. In 2012, Ilyin's works were distributed to regional governors and state functionaries, including *On Russian Idea* (О русской идее), *The Path to Self-Evident* (Путь к очевидности), and *On Resisting Evil by Force* (Snyder 2018: 27).

Putin's admiration for Ilyin centers on several interlocking ideas. First of these ideas declares that the state is a moral force: Ilyin held that the state should not be a mere administrative apparatus but a moral and spiritual entity that reflects the national soul (Ильин 1949: 89–91). Putin often refers to the state as the embodiment of Russian identity and destiny. The second notion, formulated by Ilyin and exemplified by Putin, is the notion of authoritarianism as a moral necessity. Ilyin distrusted mass democracy and believed that only a "legal consciousness" embodied in a strong ruler could ensure the just order (Ильин 1949: 104–106). Putin echoes this in his dismissal of Western-style democracy as chaotic and inapplicable to Russia. The third principle by Ilyin is "spiritual nationalism," which contains the religious tradition mentioned already. Ilyin saw Russia as a sacred entity with a providential mission (Ильин 1948: 72). Putin's promotion of the Russian Orthodox Church, cultural traditionalism, and "spiritual bonds" (духовные скрепы) closely aligns with this view.

Ilyin's political ideas, in a paradoxical way, were transformed into action during Putin's rule in Russia. Ilyin wrote:

The Russian people must love and trust their ruler... this is not submission, it is love of the fatherland. (Ильин 1948: 75)

For Ilyin, true democracy lies not in procedures but in "moral unity with the leader." This concept is echoed in Putin's cultivated image as the indispensable leader–protector, reformer, and spiritual patriarch of the Russian state. Constitutional reforms in 2020, allowing Putin to remain in power until 2036, are a clear instantiation of Ilyin's political theology. This move consolidates power in a vertical, top-down governance model. Ilyin warned of the dangers of imported liberalism and its corrosive effects on Russian spiritual

life (Ильин 1949: 67). This warning finds concrete expression in Russia's "foreign agent" laws, used to label NGOs, independent media, and academics receiving foreign funding as threats to national sovereignty. Furthermore, the persecution of opposition figures such as Alexei Navalny, the dismantling of electoral competition, and the absorption of the judiciary into executive power all reflect a vision of politics where unity trumps plurality. Russian Orthodoxy for Ilyin was essential to national identity, and they argued that secularization would lead to moral collapse (Ильин 1993: 211). Under Putin, the Orthodox Church has returned to public life not only as a religious institution but as a political ally. The Church supports Kremlin policies, including military campaigns, and receives privileged status in education, media, and civil ceremonies. This alliance became especially visible in the post-2014 context, where the annexation of Crimea was partly justified through religious imagery (the "baptism of Rus" at Chersonesus) (Snyder 2018: 96).

In *On Resisting Evil by Force*, Ilyin claimed that force was justified in the presence of absolute evil (Ильин 1950: 56). Putin has echoed this logic repeatedly, especially in relation to NATO, liberalism, and Ukraine. The 2014 annexation of Crimea and the 2022 invasion of Ukraine are framed as necessary interventions to protect Russians and preserve a spiritually unified nation (Ильин 1950: 61). The language used in Putin's speeches is deeply Ilyinian: references to Russia's historical mission, betrayal by the West, and the need for unity against 'moral decay.' The concept of a 'Russian World' (Русский мир), which transcends borders and legitimizes intervention in neighboring states, is a direct echo of Ilyin's transnational conception of Russia. The idea of the state as a moral actor can justify nearly any action under the banner of virtue, including war, censorship, and political persecution. This creates a closed ideological loop where dissent is not only criminal but heretical.

Ivan Ilyin's writings offer a metaphysical scaffolding for the policies and ideology of Vladimir Putin. From the centralization of power to the use of religious symbolism in foreign policy, Ilyin's vision permeates the Russian state's self-understanding. His idea of resisting evil through state-led force has become a central tenet of Putin's domestic and international behavior. As Russia continues to assert itself globally while restricting internal dissent, the legacy of Ilyin serves not only as a historical curiosity but as an active ideological instrument in the hands of Russian willful dictator Putin.

## **6. Muslim Leadership: Navigating Divine Will and Human Choice**

The modern Muslim political leader is never merely a bureaucratic manager of state affairs. In the deep memory of Islamic civilization, leadership is charged with sacred symbolism and metaphysical tension. Especially in historically rich contexts such as Turkey, where empire, faith, and modern statehood intersect, the political figure becomes the embodiment of religious continuity and historical destiny. A leader like Tayyip Erdoğan, with a humble background, profound religiosity, and imperial imagination, appears to unite within himself the forces of nation, history, and the divine. Religion, as Toynbee argued, forms the core of a civilization's spirit—its ability to regenerate and reorient itself in times of crisis. Therefore, to understand the symbolic and spiritual

undercurrents in the figure of a contemporary Muslim leader, one must return to the theological roots of Islam itself, especially its views on free will, divine justice, and moral responsibility.

Sunni Islamic theology, through the *Ash'ari*, *Maturidi*, and *Mu'tazili* traditions, discusses human agency in relation to divine sovereignty. These theological insights serve as the implicit standard by which leaders in Muslim societies are morally measured. The ideal Islamic ruler is neither a fatalistic executor of divine will nor an autonomous agent acting independently of moral law, but a figure suspended between divine decree and human volition, shaping the destiny of a nation through both spiritual awareness and ethical autonomy.

The cornerstone of Islamic theology is *tawhid*—the concept of the oneness and absolute sovereignty of God over all existence. God is not only the creator of the universe, but also the sustainer of its moral and metaphysical order. This cosmic unity entails that nothing escapes God's knowledge or will. Yet the *Qur'an* also asserts that human beings are responsible for their actions. As one verse declares:

Indeed, Allah does not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves. (Qur'an 13: 11)

This dual affirmation—of God's power and man's agency—lies at the heart of Islamic debates on free will (*ikhtiyar*) and predestination (*qadar*).

Sunni theologians have wrestled for centuries with this tension: how can humans be held accountable if God is the sole cause of all things? In political terms, how can a ruler be judged just or unjust, visionary or tyrannical, if history is ultimately shaped by divine will? The responses to this question gave rise to divergent schools of thought—most notably the *Ash'ari*, *Maturidi*, and *Mu'tazili*.

Founded by Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'ari (d. 935), the *Ash'ari* school took a middle path between rigid determinism and radical free will. *Ash'ari* theology holds that God creates all acts, including human actions, but human beings “acquire” these acts through intention and will.<sup>1</sup> This doctrine, known as *kasb* (acquisition), preserves divine omnipotence while allowing a space—however narrow—for human responsibility. In *Ash'ari* thought, when a person chooses to act, God creates the act, but the individual acquires it by virtue of their moral intention. This model avoids the philosophical trap of attributing independent causal power to humans (which would limit God), while still maintaining a framework for moral accountability. Such a framework was especially influential in the political realm. Al-Ghazali, a major *Ash'ari* thinker, argued that rulers, although subject to divine will, bear moral responsibility due to their intentions and choices within the created framework. The ruler is described as “the shadow of God on earth,” a phrase that communicates both his authority and his ultimate accountability before God. This theological vision encourages rulers to act with humility and fear of

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<sup>1</sup> R.M. Frank explains the Ash'arite view that while God is the sole creator of all acts, humans “acquire” these acts by their volition or intention, thus bearing moral responsibility without being creators of their own acts (Frank 1977).

divine judgment, knowing that while they do not create history, they are still responsible for how they navigate its tides.

The *Maturidi* School is about rational agency and the empowered leader. Abu Mansur al-Maturidi (d. 944), founder of the *Maturidi* school, advanced a more rationalist and anthropocentric view of free will. *Maturidi* theology affirms that God creates human capacity, but humans are the true agents of their acts. Unlike the *Ash'aris*, *Maturidis* reject the idea of mere acquisition and instead uphold genuine causal agency for human beings. In this book, U. Rudolph provides a detailed analysis of *Maturidi* theology, highlighting how *Maturidis* insisted that humans are true authors of their acts, not mere recipients or “acquirers” of divine acts as in *Ash'ari* doctrine. Specifically, he notes that while both schools aim to reconcile divine omnipotence and human responsibility, *Maturidis* grant a real causal power to human volition, moving closer to an affirmation of moral agency grounded in human rationality (Rudolph 2015)

This Rudolph allows for a more robust conception of political leadership. According to *Maturidi* doctrine, a ruler is not merely navigating within a field of predestined acts but is genuinely shaping the moral trajectory of his society through his own reasoned and volitional acts. The capacity to deliberate, choose, and bear consequences becomes essential to rulership. The *Maturidi* emphasis on rationality also connects deeply with governance. Leadership must not be impulsive or driven solely by charismatic authority, but grounded in *hikmah* (wisdom), *shura* (consultation), and rational foresight. This rational-moral synthesis gives the *Maturidi* model of free will a strong ethical basis for political decision-making.

The *Mu'tazila*, the earliest systematic theologians of Islam, offered the most radical defense of free will. They held that God cannot be unjust and therefore cannot punish humans for actions He caused. Consequently, human beings are entirely responsible for their own actions. This belief elevates human rationality and moral autonomy to a nearly sacred status. As Fazlur Rahman argues, *Mu'tazili* theology, in conjunction with *Ash'ari* views, explains that for *Mu'tazilis*, God's justice necessitates free will to preserve moral accountability. The *Mu'tazili* position shaped the political theology of early Islamic empires. Caliphs justified their legitimacy not on the basis of fate, but on their fulfillment of moral obligations—upholding justice (*adl*), preventing oppression (*zulm*), and enacting ethical law (*shari'a*). In this view, political power is not a divine accident, but a moral trust, the abuse of which demands redress and potentially revolution (Rahman 1979). This vision resonates with modern political consciousness. A leader who believes his power is merely a divine gift risks becoming despotic. But a leader who understands his position as a moral trial, shaped by personal will and judged by divine justice, is more likely to align power with virtue.

So, the classical Islamic tradition outlines clear qualities for righteous leadership. The *Qur'an* and *Hadith* emphasize values such as justice, wisdom, consultation, piety, and strength of will. A famous *hadith* states:

Each of you is a shepherd, and each of you is responsible for his flock. (Al-Bukhari *Hadith* 893: 13)

This pastoral metaphor communicates the essential ethic of care, responsibility, and guardianship. Ibn Khaldun, in his *Muqaddimah*, describes the ruler as the bearer of *'asabiyyah* (group solidarity), without which civilization collapses. For him, successful rulers unify people not just politically, but spiritually, giving them a sense of purpose and continuity (Ibn Khaldun 1967 I, 1–3). The notion of “renewing civilization” is not foreign to modern leaders who seek to revive imperial memories and religious identities. In this sense, a ruler who appears to merge religious consciousness, personal will, and historical awareness may evoke the archetype of the caliph or *mujaddid* (renewer), even in a secular political context.

Islamic theology does not support fatalism; rather, it invites moral consciousness in the face of divine grandeur. A political leader is not a passive executor of divine plans but a moral agent navigating a predestined field with accountability. Leaders who arise from the people, shaped by hardship and piety, and who act with clarity and resolve, often draw upon this unspoken theological heritage. In such cases, the leader’s will becomes the nation’s will, and his moral choices become civilizational pivots. Sunni theology teaches that divine sovereignty and human freedom coexist, and it is within this paradox that the Muslim ruler must live. He is chosen by history, but he must choose his path. He is given the power to shape destiny, but will be judged by the justice he enacts, the consultation he respects, and the piety he upholds. Thus, the Sunni Islamic tradition offers a rich and nuanced view of human freedom, moral responsibility, and divine justice. From the *Ash'ari* synthesis of acquisition, to the *Maturidi* emphasis on rational agency, and the *Mu'tazili* celebration of full autonomy, Islamic theology has never been silent about the ethical stakes of power. In the figure of the Muslim political leader—especially one emerging from a post-imperial, religiously conscious society—these theological legacies continue to echo. Such a leader stands at the intersection of faith, history, and choice. He is, as the tradition teaches, answerable to God, responsible to his people, and bound by moral law, even as he shapes the fate of nations.

## **7. Faith, Free Will, and Power: The Islamic Foundations of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Political Journey**

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was born on February 26, 1954, in the Kasımpaşa neighborhood of Istanbul, into a pious and working-class family originally from Rize on Turkey’s Black Sea coast. Raised in a conservative environment, young Erdoğan’s upbringing was steeped in traditional Sunni Islamic values. His family was devout but not destitute—his father was a ship captain on the Bosphorus—and they instilled in him a respect for religion and hard work. As a boy, Erdoğan famously sold *simit* (bread rings) and lemonade on the streets to help support his family, a humble beginning that later bolstered his image as a “man of the people.”

This early immersion in Istanbul’s street life, combined with a strict religious home, shaped Erdoğan’s character and worldview from a young age. For his secondary education, Erdoğan attended an İmam Hatip school, a state-run religious vocational high school originally established to train imams and preachers (Butler 2018). This was somewhat uncommon in the 1960s–1970s, as such schools were often stigmatized under

Turkey's secular regime (Aydıntaşbaş 2018). At Imam Hatip, Erdoğan received intensive instruction in Islam alongside a standard curriculum, nurturing both his religious literacy and his ambitions. He later recalled the “tough days” of his Imam Hatip schooling, noting the “spirit in the school that drove its students to success” despite the second-class status secular authorities accorded to religious education at the time (Poyrazlar 2024).

By his teens, Erdoğan was deeply involved in religious activities—he was known as an adept reciter of Quranic verses and developed a reputation as a charismatic orator in Islamist circles. Notably, Erdoğan had been associated with political Islam since high school, where he gained a reputation as a charismatic orator in its cause. This early melding of faith and politics set the stage for his life's trajectory. Erdoğan's educational path also introduced him to Turkey's nascent Islamist political movement.

While studying business administration at Marmara University in the 1970s, he met Necmettin Erbakan, the veteran Islamist politician who would become his mentor. Erbakan was the leader of the *Milli Görüş* (“National Vision”) movement, which espoused an explicitly Islamic worldview: it was anti-secular, distrustful of Western influence, proud of the Ottoman-Islamic imperial past, and staunchly nationalist. As a teenager in the 1970s, Erdoğan eagerly embraced the ethos of *Milli Görüş*, which “was anti-secular, anti-Western, proud of the Ottoman Empire's past grandeur, nationalist, and hostile to the elites of the Kemalist establishment.” The young Erdoğan joined the nationalist-Islamic National Turkish Student Union, an anti-communist student group, and by 1976 he became the head of the Istanbul youth wing of Erbakan's National Salvation Party (MSP). This early activism demonstrates how Erdoğan's religious upbringing directly fueled his entry into politics: he saw Turkey's secular elite (heirs of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's staunchly secular republic) as oppressors of the pious masses—a view that became a “key element that structured his political personality”, defined by “the fight against the arrogance of the Kemalist establishment” in the name of a “nationalist Islam” (Livet 2018).

In summary, Erdoğan's formative years were shaped by a blend of conservative Islamic faith, modest economic circumstances, and exposure to Islamist political ideology. By the time he entered adulthood, he was a committed follower of political Islam and a protégé of Erbakan. These early religious influences planted the seeds of an ambition: to elevate Turkey's Islamic identity and the standing of its pious underclasses, which he believed had been marginalized under rigid secular rule.

Erdoğan's rise in politics occurred through Turkey's Islamist party circuit during a period of tumultuous struggle between Islamists and the secular state. After a military coup in 1980 temporarily banned overtly religious parties, Erbakan regrouped under the Welfare Party (*Refah Partisi, RP*) in the 1980s. Erdoğan threw himself into RP's work, quickly becoming one of its brightest stars. In 1994, at the age of 40, he achieved a breakthrough victory by being elected Mayor of Istanbul on the Welfare Party ticket. His win as the first Islamist mayor of Turkey's largest city shocked the secular establishment. Many secularists feared that the fiery young politician might impose sharia-based rules on cosmopolitan Istanbul—rumors swirled that he would ban alcohol and segregate the sexes.

However, as mayor (1994–1998), Erdoğan defied his detractors' worst expectations by governing pragmatically. He focused on addressing pressing urban problems, such as traffic congestion, water shortages, and pollution, earning a reputation as a competent administrator rather than an ideologue. This period showcased Erdoğan's political acumen, as he balanced his Islamist instincts with the practical demands of governance, thereby reassuring a wary public. Still, he did not entirely conceal his religious and political worldview.

In a 1997 speech in Siirt, during a time of mounting tension between the Islamist-led government and Turkey's secular military, Mayor Erdoğan recited an Islamist poem that famously proclaimed: "The mosques are our barracks, the domes our helmets, the minarets our bayonets and the faithful our soldiers." These lines (originally by nationalist poet Ziya Gökalp) extolled the mosque as the fortress of the Islamic community—an unmistakably provocative metaphor amid Turkey's charged secular-religious divide. The speech was deemed an incitement to religious hatred by the courts. In 1998, Erdoğan was convicted and sentenced to ten months in prison (of which he served four) for this recital, effectively ending his mayoral tenure. He was also banned from political office by the verdict. The harsh reaction to Erdoğan's Islamist rhetoric must be understood in context.

Erbakan was forced from power, the Welfare Party was soon outlawed, and devout Muslims in public positions came under heightened scrutiny. Erdoğan's prosecution in 1998 for the Siirt speech was a continuation of this secularist vigilance. The episode burnished his credentials among religious conservatives—he became a "martyr" of sorts for the cause of Islamic expression in politics—but it also taught him a lesson about the power of Turkey's secular establishment.

After serving his brief prison term, Erdoğan in 2001, and other young reformist ex-members of Welfare (notably Abdullah Gül) split from Erbakan's camp and founded the *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (AKP)—the Justice and Development Party. The AKP leaders consciously advocated a "modernized" version of political Islam, often dubbed "conservative democracy," that emphasized democracy, economic development, and a clean government, while deemphasizing overt religious rhetoric. Erdoğan and Gül had concluded that Erbakan's confrontational Islamist stance was outdated and impractical.

They cited examples like the United States, where religious freedom (e.g., women wearing headscarves in universities) coexisted with a secular state, to argue that devout Muslims could thrive under a liberal democracy. In effect, the AKP presented itself not as an Islamist party, but as a conservative, pro-Western, democratic movement. This repositioning was strategic: it aimed to reassure Turkey's secular institutions (and Western allies) that the AKP would not impose a theocracy. Indeed, Erdoğan at the time even publicly affirmed secularism as a guarantor of religious freedom: "I am a Muslim, but I am the prime minister of a secular state... One must not be afraid of secularism," he advised Arab Islamists during a 2011 visit to Egypt, highlighting that a secular state should "respect all religions" and remain impartial among faiths (White 2013: 104).

Such statements were calculated to allay fears that Erdoğan still harbored a secret Islamist agenda. The AKP's moderate image, combined with Erdoğan's personal charisma and the public's fatigue with unstable secular coalitions, led to a landslide AKP victory in

the 2002 general elections. Thus began Erdoğan's national leadership—first as Prime Minister (2003–2014) and later as President (2014–present)—during which he would gradually shed the constraints of Turkey's secular framework and pursue a bold vision influenced by his Islamist upbringing.

A critical chapter in Erdoğan's story is his complex, and ultimately bitter, relationship with Islamic preacher Fethullah Gülen. Gülen, an influential cleric who led a global faith-based network (often referred to as the *Hizmet* or "Service" movement), was once seen as a natural ally of Erdoğan's AKP. Both Erdoğan and Gülen hailed from Islamist backgrounds, but their approaches differed. Gülen's movement focused on education, media, and quietly building influence within state institutions (police, judiciary, bureaucracy), while avoiding open electoral politics. In the early 2000s, their interests converged: Erdoğan's AKP lacked experienced cadres in the state after decades of secularist dominance, and Gülen's followers were eager to gain political patronage for their expanding network. Erdoğan was never a formal "follower" of Gülen, but he certainly welcomed Gülen's support; the two men forged an informal alliance aimed at undermining the secular establishment that had marginalized both the AKP's Islamists and Gülen's congregation.

Throughout Erdoğan's first decade in power, this tacit alliance paid dividends for both sides. Gülenist adherents—who had spent years carefully inserting themselves into key state organs—helped the AKP neutralize the secular military and bureaucracy.

In the power struggle between the old Kemalist elite and the new Islamic-oriented actors, Erdoğan and Gülen were aligned. "Not long after Erdoğan's rise to power in 2003, Gülen's movement saw an opportunity to bring its political influence out of the shadows," leveraging the AKP's ascendancy. In turn, Erdoğan benefited from Gülen's extensive social network, which included media outlets, business associations, and schools, that helped project Turkey's soft power abroad and buttress AKP's Islamic conservative agenda at home (Balci 2014). During this period, Erdoğan's government granted Gülen's institutions free rein – Gülen's schools flourished, his media thrived, and sympathetic officials rose to prominent positions. There is little to suggest Erdoğan was ever a "follower" or disciple of Gülen in an ideological sense; rather, their relationship was one of mutual benefit and a shared Islamic conservative outlook. This alliance, however, began to fray as power competition and policy disagreements surfaced.

Tensions grew apparent by late 2011–2012, when Gülen's cadres, feeling emboldened, reportedly clashed with Erdoğan when Gülen-influenced prosecutors attempted to interrogate Hakan Fidan, the head of Turkey's intelligence agency (and a close Erdoğan confidant), in what was seen as a challenge to Erdoğan's authority. Erdoğan intervened furiously. This incident marked the beginning of the open rift: Erdoğan realized the Gülenists in his midst could turn against him.

The breaking point came in December 2013, when police and prosecutors associated with Gülen launched a massive corruption investigation into Erdoğan's inner circle. Raids and leaks implicated high-level officials and even members of Erdoğan's own family in bribery schemes (Poyrazlar 2024). Erdoğan perceived this as nothing short of an attempted coup by Gülen's "parallel state" within the state. He famously denounced the

corruption probe as a “dirty operation” and swiftly removed or reassigned thousands of police and judges suspected of Gülenist leanings.

From that point on, a vicious feud ensued. Erdoğan publicly broke with Gülen, accusing him of treason and of running a “Fethullahist Terror Organization” (FETÖ) aiming to overthrow the elected government. Gülen, who had been living in self-imposed exile in the United States since 1999, denied orchestrating the graft probe, but the rupture was irreversible. The AKP-Gülen partnership that had shaped Turkey’s 2000s gave way to open warfare in the 2010s: media outlets linked to Gülen were seized or shut, businesses associated with his movement were confiscated, and a purge of suspected Gülenists in state institutions gathered steam. This conflict culminated violently on July 15, 2016, when a faction of the military attempted a coup d’état against Erdoğan’s government. Ankara immediately blamed Fethullah Gülen and his loyalists for orchestrating the coup attempt, pointing to the involvement of officers believed to be part of the Gülen network. The putsch failed after thousands of citizens heeded Erdoğan’s call to resist in the streets, but it resulted in some 250 deaths and shook the nation deeply. In its aftermath, Erdoğan’s government formally designated Gülen’s movement as a terrorist organization (Cagaptay 2017: 103–110).

Once entrenched in power, Erdoğan increasingly pursued policies that reflected his long-held desire to restore Islamic identity in Turkey’s public sphere and reclaim a sense of national greatness rooted in Ottoman-Islamic history. Over his years in office, he has orchestrated a steady reversal of some Kemalist secularist policies, while simultaneously championing a new blend of Islam and Turkish nationalism. Key moments and initiatives illustrate how Erdoğan’s personal beliefs have intersected with—and gradually transformed—Turkey’s traditionally secular framework.

Erdoğan’s political philosophy is informed by *Ash’ari* and *Maturidi* schools, which acknowledge God’s sovereignty but emphasize human responsibility. Throughout his political career, Erdoğan has frequently invoked religious themes, underscoring the idea that human beings are free to make choices, but those choices are ultimately part of a divine plan (Çaksu 2005: 114–118).

In his speeches and policies, Erdoğan often draws on Islamic themes of justice, morality, and free will. His public rhetoric emphasizes the idea that human beings are free to make choices, but those choices are ultimately part of a broader divine purpose. This aligns with the *Ash’ari* and *Maturidi* interpretation of free will, where human actions are granted by God, yet individuals are still morally responsible for them. Erdoğan’s political worldview incorporates the Turkish interpretation of free will, highlighting human agency while maintaining respect for divine authority. He often portrays himself as a leader who is chosen by God to lead Turkey, echoing the theological notion that human agency and divine will are not mutually exclusive. For Erdoğan, human freedom is intertwined with divine justice, and his political decisions are seen as a means to fulfill what he perceives as God’s will for Turkey’s future. His leadership is not framed merely as a product of political maneuvering, but as part of a larger divine plan, where his free will as a leader is exercised in service to what he understands to be Turkey’s national destiny.

Erdoğan's approach to governance and his political actions reflect a clear emphasis on both individual autonomy and divine sovereignty. He often positions himself as a man of action— someone who exercises *ikhtiyar* (free choice) within the context of divine destiny. His political decisions, such as the transition from a parliamentary system to a presidential system, are portrayed as manifestations of Turkey's need to assert its independence and sovereignty in the modern world. In this view, Erdoğan's decisions are not only political but also deeply spiritual, in line with his interpretation of Islam that stresses the importance of moral responsibility and the exercise of free will.

In practice, Erdoğan's emphasis on free will is reflected in his efforts to empower individuals and communities, particularly in rural and conservative areas. His government has introduced policies that emphasize individual rights and responsibilities, such as promoting religious education and increasing the role of Islam in public life. These policies can be seen as an attempt to provide individuals with the opportunity to exercise their free will in accordance with Islamic principles, without undermining the sovereignty of the state or the divine order. In this sense, Erdoğan aligns his political authority with a divine mandate, positioning himself as a steward of both human freedom and divine justice.

Erdoğan's commitment to Turkey's political autonomy also mirrors the *Maturidi* understanding of free will. Just as *Maturidi* thought emphasizes the active role of human beings in making choices, Erdoğan's policies aim to give Turks the ability to shape their own future while recognizing the importance of divine guidance. Erdoğan's "New Turkey" vision, which seeks to create a more independent and powerful state, draws upon this interpretation of free will, emphasizing human agency in national development while remaining firmly rooted in a divine framework.

One of the most compelling aspects of Erdoğan's political philosophy is his framing of justice and accountability, concepts that are central to Islamic teachings on free will. Erdoğan frequently speaks of justice as a divine command, often referencing God's ultimate judgment in matters of both personal and political life. This notion of divine justice is a cornerstone of Sunni Islamic thought, particularly in the Turkish interpretation, which asserts that while individuals have the capacity to choose their actions, they are ultimately accountable to God for their choices (Diyanet 2002: 88–92).

Erdoğan's policies are often framed within the context of *adl* (justice), a core Islamic value. His leadership emphasizes that individuals must be held accountable for their actions, both at the individual and societal levels. This is particularly evident in his approach to governance, where he often calls for social and political reforms that aim to align Turkey with Islamic moral principles. Erdoğan's emphasis on justice in governance reflects his belief in a society where individuals exercise their free will to contribute to the common good, while also recognizing the ultimate sovereignty of God in shaping the nation's destiny.

At the same time, Erdoğan's public statements suggest a deep belief in divine predestination, or *qadar*, which is central to Islamic thought. He frequently invokes the idea that the challenges Turkey faces—whether in terms of political opposition, economic difficulties, or foreign relations—are part of God's plan, and that humans must navigate

these challenges with both humility and determination. This reflects the *Ash'ari* understanding of *qadar*, where God is seen as the ultimate cause of all events, but humans are still responsible for their choices and actions.

Erdoğan's public persona as a strong, decisive leader can also be understood through the lens of free will as understood in Turkish Sunni Islamic philosophy. In Turkish culture, the leader is often viewed as a figure who must act decisively, drawing on both personal agency and divine inspiration. Erdoğan's image as a leader who exercises *ikhtiyar* (free will) to navigate complex political and social landscapes aligns with the Turkish interpretation of Sunni Islam, which places a strong emphasis on personal responsibility in the face of divine will.

Moreover, Erdoğan's consistent appeal to Islamic values in his speeches underscores the relationship between human agency and divine justice in his leadership. His political actions, such as resisting foreign influence and asserting Turkey's role as a powerful regional player, reflect his belief in Turkey's ability to shape its own destiny. However, he also presents these actions as part of a broader divine narrative, in which human choice is guided by divine wisdom. This dual understanding of free will—as both an exercise of human agency and a submission to divine will—shapes his approach to both national and international politics (Diyanet 2002: 88–92).

Examining Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's political career through the lens of the Turkish interpretation of free will in Sunni Islam reveals that his leadership is shaped by a delicate balance between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. The Turkish theological tradition, particularly the *Ash'ari* and *Maturidi* schools, provides a framework for understanding how Erdoğan views his role as a political leader: as someone who exercises *ikhtiyar* (free will) while acknowledging the ultimate authority of God.

Erdoğan's policies and actions reflect his commitment to a vision of Turkey that is both free and accountable. He portrays himself as a leader who has the freedom to choose, but whose choices are made within the broader context of a divine plan. This belief in human agency, paired with a deep sense of divine justice, underpins Erdoğan's political philosophy and his approach to governance.

Thus, the Turkish interpretation of free will in Sunni Islam offers a powerful lens through which to understand Erdoğan's leadership style. It is a vision of governance that blends human autonomy with divine will, where individual responsibility and accountability are key components of both personal and national development. As Turkey continues to evolve politically and socially, Erdoğan's leadership will likely remain a central figure in understanding the ongoing relationship between religion, politics, and the exercise of free will in the modern Islamic world.

## 8. Conclusions

Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin, and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan each exemplify a form of willful, charismatic leadership rooted in their civilizations' historical, cultural, and religious legacies. Xi's governance blends Confucian moralism, Daoist flexibility, and Buddhist

ethics into a unique synthesis that reimagines Chinese identity as both ancient and modern. Through initiatives such as the Global Development Initiative and the Global Security Initiative, Xi offers an alternative to Western liberal internationalism, emphasizing sovereignty, mutual respect, and ethical governance. His civilizational project, supported by education, media, and ritual revival, aims to foster internal cohesion while projecting Chinese cultural confidence globally—positioning his leadership not merely as political, but as an ethical mission to restore China’s rightful status.

In Russia, Vladimir Putin draws upon a different set of civilizational and religious resources, heavily influenced by Russian Orthodox thought and the nationalist philosophy of Ivan Ilyin. For Putin, political will is inseparable from a sacred duty to preserve Russia’s moral and spiritual essence. Echoing Ilyin’s belief in the state as a moral force and authoritarianism as a necessity for just order, Putin has framed his rule as a defense of Russia’s providential destiny against perceived Western decadence and chaos. His promotion of the Russian Orthodox Church, embrace of “spiritual bonds,” and consolidation of centralized power reflect a fusion of personal willfulness and a theological vision of Russia as a sacred entity, destined for a unique role in world history.

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s leadership similarly intertwines personal ambition with the religious and civilizational currents of Sunni Islam and Ottoman heritage. Grounded in the Islamic value of *adl* (justice) and shaped by his early exposure to political Islam, Erdoğan envisions governance as a moral responsibility before both society and God. His emphasis on *qadar* (divine predestination) informs a leadership style that balances humility before fate with active political reform aimed at elevating Turkey’s Islamic identity. By reversing secularist policies and championing a blend of Turkish nationalism and Islamic values, Erdoğan seeks not only political consolidation but a cultural reawakening—a restoration of Turkey’s Ottoman-Islamic greatness within a modern, contested world order.

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