

ABU NASR FARABI'S IDEAS ABOUT RELIGION

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Abstract

This article reflects the interaction between philosophy, religion and politics by revealing the role and rank of religion within the hierarchical system of al-Farabi's political philosophy. Also, his attitude to religion, ideas of religious openness are reflected.

Keywords. Abu Nasr Farabi, philosophy, religion, politics, milla, "Kitābu al-milla", "Kitābu al-huruf", jihad, hijrah, shari'a, fiqh, 'Imām, Neo-Platonic, Isma'ilism, Sufizm.

Introduction

Abu Nasr al-Farabi (257/870-339/950) is regarded as the founder of the tradition of political philosophy in Islam in which the main concern is political life and its relevance to human happiness and perfection. His important works on politics are "Al-Siyasah al-madaniyyah", "Mabadi' ārā' ahl al-madīnah al-fadilah", "Fuṣūl al-madani", "Taḥṣil al-sa'ada". Yet other books by him also have political relevance, even when their titles seem to be far from political concerns as "Kitābu al-milla" and "Kitābu al-huruf". The first two books mentioned above are the basic ones in al-Farabi's political philosophy, containing the fullest expression of his metaphysical views and presenting the main features of the ideal city/state and its ruler. They also reflect his attempt to reconcile "religion" with socio-political philosophy. All these books may indicate that he was anxious about the socio-political situation of his time, and thought that his philosophical writings could show the leader the right path towards establishing a virtuous city. It is important to note that al-Farabī stressed the Aristotelian notion of man as *zoon politikon*, who wants to be part of an association, of the community, of the city, and his fellow-citizens¹. Al-Farabi's understanding of religion as the ideology that shapes the mentality of a nation makes his political thought very important and relevant to our times.

¹ Hans Daiber. Political philosophy. // History of Islamic Philosophy. – London & New York: Routledge, 1996. -849 p.



Literature Analysis and Methods

In this article, Abu Nasr Farabi's works "Kitābu al-milla" and "Kitābu al-huruf" were used as the main source, and Turkish scientist Mahdi Muhsin's work "Al Farabi and the Foundation of Islamic Political Philosophy" was used as an additional source. Historical, logical, analysis and synthesis and objectivity methods of scientific knowledge were used in this article.

Discussion and Results

Religion is considered as the ideology that shapes the mentality of a nation. The life of persons in the community is based on the rules that their first ruler determines for them in order to seek the ultimate true happiness for all individuals in the community. This can be accomplished only if the first ruler and his rule are truly virtuous. Virtuous rulership and virtuous religion should be based on a "certain philosophy". Errant rulership leads to an ignorant city characterized by false opinions, i.e., false religion or false philosophy, and, therefore, cannot provide true happiness for the people.

Al-Farabi's openness towards the validity of other religions may resolve the tensions between different sects or religions within the same community and makes his political thought of special importance and relevance to our times.

Farabi dreams about a utopian city but is aware of the fact that most regimes are deficient and ignorant. This is reflected by his criticism of errant rulers and authorities who frighten people by the use of religion for their own benefits. There is a controversy among scholars about the kind and degree of al-Farabi's commitment to Shi'ism. This study refers to a personal prayer by al-Farabi known as "Magnificent Invocation" (Du'a'azīm) that was ignored by previous researchers, in order to suggest a resolution to this controversy.

On the other hand, religion in al-Farabi's thought fulfills the needs of the simple or common people who cannot live virtuously without being guided by the orders that they receive from a higher authority/leadership. This implies that the philosopher is free not to follow the orders of religion or to submit to religious figures. The rebellious attitude is clear here. Al-Farabi's philosophy maintains the Absoluteness of the One which nevertheless permits the phenomenon of multiplicity-of-religions as different "images" of a shared true philosophy, i.e., certain and demonstrative philosophy, formed according to the nature of each nation and its mentality. Thus his philosophy enables an open-minded and sincere dialogue between different religions.

Though he was better known as a Shi'ite, yet not all scholars agree about the kind and degree of his commitment to Shi'ism. To my mind, al-Farabi's personal prayer, known as "Magnificent Invocation" (Du'a'Azīm), that was almost neglected by previous scholars, can give us an answer to this riddle. The Du'a' unveils al-Farabi's hidden personality and emphasizes the claim that one's philosophy is the product of his sociopolitical background, education and personal temperament. It portrays the unique experience of the relationship



between man and God with subtle words that reveal the kindness, modesty and sensitive nature of al-Farabi's. But it also may shock the traditional Islamic person for its richness in expressions that manifest a clear Neo-Platonic emanationist view. This view does not contradict Isma'ilism and to some extent "Sufism". No matter to which stream he really belonged, al-Farabi lived as a man of principles who cared deeply for his nation and desired its good.

A Good and virtuous leader can help in the development of good, successful and happy community. For his leadership is combined with divine revelation or related to the Active Intellect. Therefore, the opinions and actions that he prescribes for his people are definitely virtuous and lead to the realization of human excellence.

Virtuous leadership includes virtuous religion which is based on a "certain philosophy" while ignorant leadership leads to an ignorant city based on false opinions i.e., false religion or false philosophy, and, therefore, cannot provide true happiness for the people.

Al-Farabi gave rational and logical reasons for the supremacy of philosophy over religion, theology, jurisprudence and political science. All the latter fields depend on the philosophy that they imitate or manifest in their orders and actions. Their validity depends on the certainty of the philosophy that they represent. However, it is difficult to imagine that this approach to religion is acceptable by the traditional religious figures/authorities. Hence, the everlasting tension between philosophy and religion seems practically irresolvable.

"The treatment of divine and theoretical sciences within the framework of political books, leads to the subordination of religion to political philosophy and to philosophy in general"². Actually, religion is exposed in Farabi's writings without any confinement to the specificities of Islam, and his analysis may apply to any religion so long as it is virtuous and imitates philosophical truth. Though we may find some words that have an Islamic connotation or association, yet they are used as the "language" that the receptive readers, in his period, are ready to accept and able to understand. Farabi was cautious when he used words like jihad, hijrah, shari'a, fiqh, 'Imām as a means of self-protection from those who do not have the ability to understand the higher cosmic truth in a purely philosophical language, which is foreign to Islamic religion. Since not everyone has the ability to understand the language of philos recommended to use another language that is understood by the masses. Here the language of religion seems appropriate, and for this same reason, religion is subordinated to philosophy:

² Leaman, Oliver. An Introduction to Classical Islamic Philosophy. - Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. -P.67.



"Religion, if rendered human, comes after philosophy, in general, since it aims simply to instruct the multitude in theoretical and practical matters that have been inferred in philosophy, in such a way as to enable the multitude to understand them by persuasion ('iqna') or imaginative representation (takhyil), or both". The art of theology (ṣinā'atu al-kalām) and jurisprudence (fiqh) also "come after philosophy in time and are dependent upon it"³.

Thus, the word "religion" has a special meaning in al-Farabi's thought. It means the "imitative" or the "metaphoric" language of the philosophical vision of the whole universe as hierarchical⁴. Al-Farabi's view presupposes the principle that different audiences are capable of different levels of insight. The popular mind finds it difficult to rise above corporeal imagery.

When a religious figure, or any authority, asks the simple people to give up many of the cherished goods of this world, and frightens them with horrible suffering in Hell, he is a deceiver. He fools the people by his outward appearance and his way of life that is described as the divine way: "That mock appearance becomes a cause for being honored and respected [...]. Everybody submits himself to him, he is loved, and the fact that he gives in to his passions in everything is not disproved, on the contrary, the evil he does is considered by everybody as good"⁵.

Reading the above quotations out of their context may cause us to think that al-Farabi contradicts his own definition of religion (as brought up in a previous section). However, in this section of "Mabadi' ārā' ahl al-madīnah al-fadilah" he is speaking about the views of the ignorant city and the errant rulership rather than his own.

The last passage in the Book of Religion may perplex the reader. What he calls "common religion" (milla mushtarakah) can be understood as "one religion" that is common to a specific community. We may say it is the systematic laws, opinions and practices of Islam that bring together all people in the virtuous city in order to reach "the purpose that is sought after, namely, ultimate happiness"⁶.

Nevertheless, as shown earlier, al-Farabi does not exclude other religions from being virtuous, which means that there is a logical possibility of a multi-religious city. Can we see in this last passage of the Book of Religion a realistic attitude of al-Farabi's political view for it means that happiness, in the actual life of the community, cannot be achieved unless there is a common religion? This goes well with the assumption of Islamic political parties of today.

³ Mc Ginnis, Jon & David C. Reisman, trans. Classical Arabic Philosophy: An Anthology of Sources. Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 2007. - P. 89.

⁴ Hammond, Robert. The Philosophy of Al-Farabi and its Influence on Medieval Thought. New York: The Hobson Book Press, 1947. - P. 176.

⁵ Khalidi, Muhammad Ali. Al-Farabi On The Democratic City. // In British journal for the History of Philosophy 11(3) 2003. - P. 380.

⁶ Clara Srouji Shajrawi. The role of religion in al-Farabi's Virtuous City. Journal of Legal, Ethical and Regulatory Issues. Volume: 24. ISSN: 1544-0036. 2021. - P. 160.



Conclusion

Reading al-Farabi's writings carefully can disclose his type of personality and way of thinking. This information is especially helpful given the fact that otherwise little is known about his personal life "since he never talks about himself". Al-Farabi seems to be a humanist thinker who adores peace and justice, and eschews all the abhorrent forms (e.g. ethnic or religious) of discrimination. He wanted to create a perfect state that corresponds, in its hierarchical system, to the hierarchical system of the whole universe. This wish portrays his perfectionist tendencies. In this virtuous state, every group and each individual, according to their natural abilities, will strive to achieve peace, prosperity, justice and happiness for themselves and for the whole community. The difficulty of actualizing this utopian state may cause misery, especially to the intellectuals, to such an extent that they feel alienated and strangers in their community, as happened to al-Farabi and as is happening to many Arab intellectuals and writers in our days.

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