

R.S. AL-FARABI: LIFE, WORKS AND SIGNIFICANCE

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This is a concise and readable book which, despite its brevity, constitutes a significant contribution to the study of al-Farabi, as well as offering valuable methodological principles for the study of traditional Islamic thinkers, and also serves to highlight the importance of making such studies in the context of the quest for a revival in Islam. One of Osman Bakr's main aims is to guide the reader through the current state of what is called "Farabian Studies"; and indeed the book is extremely well researched, with foot-notes and a bibliography comprehensively covering the important works in this area, both traditional and modern. In addition to this, he makes a useful critique of modern western methods of scholarship when applied to al-Farabi in particular, and, implicitly, to traditional thinkers in general. Rooted in doubt, the typical orientalist approach is all too prone to pedantry and rigidity, leading to an excessive pre-occupation with minor problems and apparent contradictions; against this, Osman Bakr emphasises the need to understand the thinker from within his own universe of meaning, so as to arrive at an integrated view of the relationship between different categories of thought, and thus resolve such apparent contradictions through comprehending the flexibility of concepts and perspectives. Such a comprehension escapes the narrow-minded orientalist, whose empiricist/positivist paradigm leads almost invariably to a mania for literalism and the compartmentalization of meanings within the narrow parameters defined by his own impoverished vision of things. The author hopes that his work will stimulate scholars into conducting more research on this monumental thinker, and calls attention to the vast wealth of wisdom

and knowledge waiting to be re-discovered, since comparatively few of al-Farabi's works have been seriously studied in recent times, the majority remaining still in manuscript form. In addition to serving this scholarly function, he also offers the non-specialist an accessible account of the philosopher's life and a breath-taking overview of the vast canvas of his thought.

Al-Farabi's title, "the second teacher" (mu'allim al-thani; the first being Aristotle) is due in large part to his instrumental role in the definition of the sciences, the setting of limits for each, and their inter-relationship, a schema which not only paved the way for the future development of these branches of knowledge, but also helped to ensure that this development would continue within the framework of faith and not lead away from it. In his famous book "Ihsa al 'ilum (The Enumeration of the Sciences) he listed the sciences under eight headings: linguistics, logic, mathematics, physics, metaphysics, politics, juridical science and theology. It is of note that al-Farabi himself has written on all of the above subjects, with the sole exception of juridical science. However, it was in the domain of logic that al-Farabi exerted the bulk of his effort, and for which he has become most renowned. He wrote commentaries on the entire Organon of Aristotle, explicating the system of logic in terms which could be readily grasped by the Arab and Islamic peoples; this was an extremely significant - if not providential - function, for thenceforth the tenets of the faith could be more rigorously defended by logical means against the arguments posed by non-Muslims; also, the process by which faith and reason came to reside in an harmonious and complementary relationship was greatly enhanced. A clear Arabic terminology for the science of logic was thus expounded and bequeathed as an abiding heritage to all the other branches of learning, allowing them to benefit from these invaluable tools of analysis. In a lucid and authoritative manner, then, al-Farabi rendered logic intelligible at the same time as revealing it as intrinsically Islamic insofar as the cause of the

faith can be served therewith, on the one hand, and to the extent that logic inheres in the very nature of Truth, on the other.

Turning to other areas, al-Farabi's work on politics were of such import that he is considered the very founder of political philosophy in Islam. In his elaboration of the principles of government he achieved a unique synthesis between the views of the Greek sages - in particular, Plato - and Islamic concepts derived from the Qur'an and Sunnah, and drawing from features of the Medinan state. The significance of his political treatises is further underlined, in today's world, by the sheer confusion which prevails in the domain of political ideology.

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Even in the realm of music, al-Farabi stands as an undisputed authority; his work *Kitab al-musiqā al-kabir* was considered a significant advance on the music theory of the Greeks, and was hailed as the greatest work on musicology in the Middle Ages.

Osman Bakr refers to al-Farabi's metaphysical writings as the crown of his work; indeed, one can regard his metaphysical understanding as the substance of his entire endeavour, for it was this which furnished him with the ability to harmonise the various facets of knowledge into a coherent whole; and it could even be said that it was this metaphysical discernment which was able to see and then integrate the essential truths contained in other systems of thought, such truths emanating from the one sole Truth that which is implied, at a profound level, in the very notion of Tawhid. One can indeed feel, in this survey of al-Farabi's work, the principle of Tawhid to be in operation: the unification of apparent diversity, through harmonising the principles involved in the different domains of knowledge, so that in expanding in different directions, the emphasis is always on the Divine origin

and end of all things, and the oneness of the Creator can be continuously affirmed by the harmony inherent in the diversity of His creation.

One also feels that this profound awareness permeated the entire soul of al-Farabi, and was not restricted to the domain of the mind alone; his musical compositions and his versatility as a performer should be recalled in this regard, as well as the fact that, as a practising Sufi, he lived concretely in accordance with the supernal truths which he expounded doctrinally. In this there is another important lesson for the present generation of Muslims, for whom solutions lie “out there”, in the world, rather than beginning in one’s own soul; indeed, one must turn to the spiritual world within as the necessary condition for working on the world without, in accordance with the prophetic designation of this condition as the Jihad al-Akbar, which continues throughout our lives; herein lies one answer to the question posed by Usman Bakr in his introduction, namely, the relevance of al-Farabi to today’s world.

One could say that this spiritual imperative is implicit in Osman Bakr’s assertion, in response to his own question:

Just as al-Farabi responded to the urgent needs of the Islamic world in coming to terms with intellectual challenges from non-Muslim sources,”... It is now our turn to formulate a veritable Islamic response to the challenge of our times, namely the challenge of secular modern thought”. By definition, secular thought entirely excludes all notions of spiritual development, and must therefore be countered most emphatically at this very fundamental level, before proceeding to other secondary matters. The importance of establishing this priority of the spiritual over the material emerges very clearly if we dwell a little on the way in which we can benefit from al-Farabi and the great philosophers and sages of the Islamic tradition in relation to this challenge of our times.

In such a study of these figures, it is important not so much to register the specific Islamic responses to this or that particular idea of a Plato or an

Aristotle, but rather to appreciate the principles involved in the formulation of these responses, and then to apply these principles concretely to our current situation. The key principle guiding this process can be said to have been discernment between the essential and the non essential; and on the basis of this discernment, a recognition of that which could be assimilated into the Islamic framework and that which must be rejected. In this way, those positive features of other philosophical traditions were not only absorbed into the Islamic world and Islamised, but indeed served to enrich that world, adding further to its vitality, comprehensiveness and self-confidence. Now in today's world, the scope and intensity of the intellectual challenge far exceeds that faced by our medieval ancestors, but this serves only to further underline the necessity of basing all our efforts upon that principle of discernment referred to above; and this intellectual discernment of the essential can arise only out of a spiritual consciousness shaped and infused by the barakah of the Qur'an and the soul of the Holy Prophet (upon him be peace and blessings) and nourished by the genuine fruits of the Islamic tradition; it is in this way that the study of such a towering figure as al-Farabi can be regarded as a complement to that ever present imperative of Divine Guidance by the sources of the Islamic revelation.

However, many are the proponents of the current Islamic revival who reject the Islamic civilization of the past, along with its great philosophers, in the name of an ostensible return to the pristine purity of the apostolic age, and in the belief that the Qur'an and the Sunnah provide the necessary and sufficient directives for all aspects of contemporary society; to this we would reply that while these sources of Divine Guidance do indeed contain all requisite principles - either explicitly or implicitly - the concrete application thereof to any given social reality is another issue; and we have much to learn from the ways in which this application was effected in variegated historical circumstances and-in the light of the elaboration and explication of tenets and principles contained within the sources of Revelation. It must be stressed that if these sources are regarded as universally applicable, then they must by

definition be of a principial nature, requiring interpretation and creative application to different circumstances, rather than offering detailed and precise “programmes” for the innumerable possibilities of social organisation. We thus return again to that essential pre-requisite for any authentic and integral revival of Islam: consciousness of the essential truths of the faith, which alone can give rise to a correct discernment between that which is in conformity with the spirit of Islam, and that which contradicts it.

A very basic point must be made in this connection: one of the most insidious - because so largely unnoticed - influences of modern secular thought upon Muslims is the downgrading of contemplation in relation to action. Because western ideologies are so exclusively concerned with this world, the emphasis is placed entirely on action, on “changing the world”; the traditional subordination of action to contemplation is thus subverted, and one is made to forget the essential truth that action in the world is but a secondary mode of our obedience to the Spirit, and that unless action be the fruit of contemplation upon the Spirit, it will be either futile or destructive. And the priority of consciousness preceding action is indisputably established in the Prophetic paradigm itself: social organisation in Medina coming only after spiritual perfection in Mecca. In the light of the above it should be clear that in prescribing their remedies for the malaise of western secularism, many modern Muslims are unwittingly reinforcing some of the most powerful root causes of the illness itself, whilst addressing themselves only to some of the more obvious symptoms. This is particularly apparent in the quest for an Islamic science which pretends to ‘Islamize’ western science whilst not even recognition, let alone rejecting, the anti-metaphysical, anti-religious premises on which western science is predicated, and over-looking the fundamentally anti-religious values embodied in western technology. On the level of society we see a bewildering variety of contradictory ‘solutions’ to political, economic and social problems, but all too little attention directed to that spiritual consciousness without which all such ‘solutions’ are quite ineffectual and contribute only to further confusion. Unless the attempts at reviving

Islam be built upon the foundation of spiritual awareness, and supported by the pillars of intellectual discernment and ethical rectitude, then the edifice collapses. It is to these essentials that a book such as this is addressed. The endeavour to submit to the Divine is an imperative which calls forth all our resources, and it would be unwise to turn our backs on the guiding lights of our heritage, those luminaries who had realized to such a high degree the essential truths of the Islamic Revelation, and who were thus enabled to impart to us those keys of understanding of which we stand in such urgent need today.