

BOOK REVIEW

Al-Farabi, *Fi Mabadi' Ara' Ahl Al-Madina Al-Fadila*, 7th Edition, Cairo: Dar El-Shorouq, 1996, Pp. 187.

This is a review of Al-Farabi's most famous book *Fi Mabadi' Ara' Ahl Al-Madina Al-Fadila* (The Book of the Principles of the Opinions of the People of the Virtuous City), usually known simply as *al-Madina al-Fadila* (The Virtuous City), a utopian treatise which espouses Neo-Platonic theories such as emanation, in which everything is said to flow from the One.

In this book, Al-Farabi, who is considered as the "second teacher" after Aristotle, borrows freely from Plato's *Republic* and *Laws* to construct a treatise on his idea of a utopian society. In such a society, Al-Farabi reasoned that a political system could be made to adhere to Islamic beliefs through the combined study of philosophy, hard sciences, mathematics, and religion. Such a political theology would result in an ordered society that recognizes the need for community and a hierarchal structure that revolves around the received knowledge of divine law by the community's prophets and philosophers.

Divided into two main parts, *The Ideal City* begins with a section on metaphysics, in which Al-Farabi elaborates upon his concepts of philosophy and religion. Accordingly, he explains the nature of the soul of the human being and its potentials within the stream of philosophy. In the second part, he presents his views on the qualities he believes identify the perfectly governed and populated state. Al-Farabi wants to construct, through the first part of the book, which is philosophical in nature, the general principles of his own virtuous city; while through the second part, which is socio-political, he wants to design that city. Therefore, the first part may be considered as a preliminary for the second.

Without any preface, Al Farabi begins the philosophical part with a topic on Divinity; he is not trying to argue or provide any evidence about the existence of Allah, rather he acknowledges Allah's existence. In the first nine out of thirty seven sections of his work, one cannot help noticing his belief in the oneness of Allah. He stated that Allah is One; nothing is like Allah in His attributes and essence; He is an immaterial substance, free of defects, eternal and he exists without any external cause.

There is nothing wrong with his general belief about Allah. But when he begins to explain the relation between Allah and the world, the Infinite and the finite, the connection between Allah and matter, and the dualism of spirit and matter, Muslim reader might be shocked and will raise a big question about whether the man who wrote the first nine sections of the book is really the same man who wrote the subsequent sections. His effort to explain the existence of the universe through emanation, not creation, was really in contradiction with the Holy Qur'an which states clearly in many verses that the skies, earth, angels, sun, moon, human, animals, plants, and other creatures are altogether *created* by Allah from nothing. There is no getting away from the fact that it is the Neo-Platonic element which dominates so much of Al-Farabi's interpretation of God. With Neo-platonism, the emphasis moves from the concept of creation to that of eternal emanation: God does not create the universe from nothing but 'engages' in eternal emanation of all that is below Him.

In his effort to explain the relation between God and the universe, Al-Farabi, placed the intellects of the Spheres between Allah and the world. Thus, he made the many proceed from the One by emanation. His theory is as follows: From the First Being (the One) comes forth the first intellect called the First Cause. From the first intellect thinking of the First Being flows forth a second intellect and a sphere. From the second intellect proceeds a third intellect and a sphere. The process goes on in necessary succession down to the lowest sphere, that of the moon. From the moon flows forth a pure intellect, called active intellect. Here ends the separate intellects, which are, by essence, intellects and intelligibles. Here is reached the lower end of the supersensible world (the world of ideas of Plato). These ten intellects, together with the nine spheres, constitute the second principle of Being. The active intellect, which is a bridge between heaven and earth, is the third principle. Finally matter and form appear as the fifth and sixth principles, and with these the series of spiritual existences is closed.

It should be noted that Al-Farabi's theory is based upon necessity as opposed to will. In other words, according to Al-Farabi, Allah does not have a choice whether or not to create the universe, but by virtue of His own existence, He causes it to be. This view also suggests that the universe is eternal, and both of these points were criticized and attacked fiercely by al-Ghazzali who decried him as an atheist and scorner of the Qur'an.

In his treatment of the human soul, Al-Farabi draws on a basic Aristotelian outline, which is informed by the commentaries of later Greek thinkers. He says it is composed of four faculties: The *appetitive* (the desire for, or aversion to an object of sense), the *sensitive* (the perception by the senses of corporeal substances), the *imaginative* (the faculty which retains images of sensible objects after they have been perceived, and then separates and combines them for a number of ends), and the *rational*, which is the faculty of intellection. According to Al-Farabi, it is the last of these which is unique to human beings and distinguishes them from plants and animals. It is also the only part of the soul to survive the death of the body.

Within his explanation of the human soul, Al-Farabi gives special attention to the soul's *imaginative* faculty, which is essential to his interpretation of prophethood and prophetic knowledge. In addition to its ability to retain and manipulate sensible images of objects, he gives the imagination the function of imitation. By this he means the capacity to represent an object with an image other than its own. According to Al-Farabi, the prophet, in addition to his own intellectual capacity, has a very strong imaginative faculty, which allows him to receive an overflow of intelligibles from the active intellect. These intelligibles are then associated with symbols and images, which allow him to communicate abstract truths in a way that can be understood by ordinary people. Therefore what makes prophetic knowledge unique is not its content, which is also accessible to philosophers through demonstration and intellection, but rather the form that it is given by the prophet's imagination.

As we approach the socio-political part of his book, Al-Farabi ultimately indicates that philosophy is purer than religion because philosophy represents the study of verifiable truths by the intellectual elite. The truths that have been identified by the philosophers are subsequently converted into religious symbols that can be easily interpreted by the imaginations of the general people. Al-Farabi explains that a religion's validity lie in its ability to accurately convey philosophical concepts into readily identifiable religious symbolism. He further notes that each culture employs its own symbols to interpret the same philosophical truths. Although he believes that philosophy is superior over religion, he also contends that religion is necessary in order to make philosophical concepts understandable to the uneducated.

By this belief, Al-Farabi inverts previous Islamic theological methodology by insisting on the study of philosophy before attempting religious understanding,

whereas previous philosophers developed philosophical systems to support preexisting religious dogma.

In the socio-political part of this book, Al-Farabi asserts that men are by nature social - they work for the welfare of the society and in the long run serve the state. The people living in the state are called a nation (*ummah*). The city in which members of the society cooperate to achieve happiness is in reality the ideal city state (*al-madina al-fadilah*) - the society, the ideal society and the nation, the ideal nation.

The concept of happiness is essential to Al-Farabi's political philosophy. In a virtuous society (*al-ijtima' al-fadil*) and a virtuous city (*al-Madina al-fadila*), everyone cooperates to gain happiness through goodness. A virtuous world (*al-ma'mura al-fadila*) is one in which all nations collaborate to achieve universal happiness. A virtuous society strives to preserve the souls of all its inhabitants. Al-Farabi compares the functioning of an ideal city to the functioning of a healthy human body.

The idealized prince in *Al-Madina al-fadila* is an absolute ruler, whose soul is united with the "Active Intellect." Al-Farabi follows Plato in enumerating the qualities of a prince: he should possess the right natural disposition and exhibit the right attitude for a ruler; he will have perfected himself; he should be a good orator; he should have a strong physique, a good understanding and memory, love learning and truth, and be above worldly materialism. The prince assumes "absolute power" over the state and all others are subservient to him. Citizens are also classified in terms of the power and rights they enjoy, and each takes orders from those above them and has power over those below.

Those people with superior natural capacity and acquired virtue must perfect themselves by means of instruction in the theoretical sciences, and the development of character through the formation of good habits. A prince exercises his responsibility by using the abilities of the leaders beneath him to instruct and form the character of the lower classes, either by persuasion (for which they need a mastery of philosophy) or by compulsion, in order to make them do what is necessary to achieve their happiness, which includes their salvation.

Al-Farabi believes that philosophy naturally seeks political power, and that it is the duty of the philosopher to provide guidance the state. He claims that it is impossible to achieve an ideal state, but that effort should be made

to accomplish it. Al-Farabi, in this political part, attaches great importance to the cultivation of philosophy; hence the importance of the philosophical part of the book. If wisdom does not form a part of the state while other conditions are fulfilled entirely, the city will be best without a chief, but it will be exposed to destruction. The absence of philosophy would mean ignorance and the state without philosophy will be an ignorant or imperfect state. In fact, to Al-Farabi, the state without a philosopher to whom it maybe entrusted will perish in no time.

In general, in this work *Al-Madina al-fadila*, Al-Farabi aims to provide, to Muslims specifically and to humanity generally, a hierarchical ideal society based on a Neo-Platonic concept of the Divine, in which the responsibility of the absolute ruler is to educate and guide the people, by persuasion or force, to act in the manner that will achieve their ultimate happiness. This philosophical system is not entirely invented by Al-Farabi, but rather the majority of his philosophical output has been influenced by Aristotelian thought. His practical philosophy is unmistakably affected by his own sect Isma'ilism, that believes in the infallible *imam*, and was based on Plato's *Republic*. In addition, what he mentioned about the attributes and essence of God, emanation theory and emanated intellects are based on highly developed Plotinian emanation cosmology, and his speech about psychology is highly affected by Aristotle.

What Al-Farabi attained from this work contradicts directly with Islamic belief. By claiming that creatures are produced from Allah through emanation and are not created from nothing, he opens the door for the belief of unity of existence, the eternity of the universe, and the belief that Allah is so far away from the material world and is not concerned with it directly. Although many philosophers believe that the book of "*Al-Madina al-Fadila*" is one of the most notable works in political science, philosophy and education, however many opinions and theories included in the book were bitterly denounced by many Muslim philosophers and scholars and were labeled as corrupting elements of the Islamic faith.

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