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Al- Farabi: The Forgotten Genius

Authors
Akbar Ahmed
Frankie Martin
Dr. Amineh Hoti

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By Akbar Ahmed, Frankie Martin, Dr Amineh Hoti

Too many people, including, alas, scholars of religion, spend an inordinate amount of time impugning the religion of others while maintaining the supremacy of their own. They are not prepared to accept that anything good can be identified in any religion other than their own.

The relationship between faiths and how to adjust to living with neighbors belonging to different religions, ethnicities, and cultures is one of the formidable challenges to modern living in a time when there is widespread tension and conflict between faiths across the world.

Yet the answer may have been provided by one of the most influential philosophers of history who lived over a thousand years ago in the ninth and tenth centuries. He was named Abu Nasr Muhammad Al-Farabi, or Alpharabius, as he was known in the Latin West.

Al-Farabi was a polymath in an age of polymaths, widely known as the Golden Age of Islam. He was interested in the theory of music, metaphysics, ethics, philosophy, and astronomy. While he reportedly authored around one hundred works, only a fraction of them have survived. Al-Farabi was a champion of interfaith understanding, and argued that all religions represent a human attempt to understand God which is expressed in different ways.

Seeking happiness or *eudaimonia*

Just as Aristotle defined the aim of philosophy as discovering happiness or *eudaimonia*, Al-Farabi believed philosophy could help society find peace and happiness. In doing so, he was able to provide a valid philosophic template for other outstanding scholars of different religions and cultures.

Al-Farabi's ideas dominated science and philosophy far and wide and he influenced the leading philosophers of his age. His particular significance lay in popularizing and adapting Greek

philosophy in the Islamic tradition and he founded the field of political philosophy in Islam. Al-Farabi also initiated a specific school of thought which scholars have called "Farabism."[1] He was among the first to apply logic derived from Greek sources to revelation, which gave rise to the rationalist school of thinking called *kalam,* which was opposed by traditionalists.

Some of the greatest scholars in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam were influenced by and admired Al-Farabi. The towering Islamic scholar Avicenna, for example, called Al-Farabi "the most excellent of our predecessors,"[2] while Rabbi Maimonides said that Al-Farabi was "very great" and the author of the only book on logic one would ever need.[3] As for the Christians, the influence of Al-Farabi can be seen in scholars like Thomas Aquinas and Albertus Magnus, who adapted important concepts from Al-Farabi and commented on him. Al-Farabi was translated into Latin by the twelfth century Gerard of Cremona and others, and became an important source of classical Greek scholarship for Europeans.

Introducing *al-Muallim al-Thani*, "the Second Master"

Al-Farabi is the first Muslim philosopher ever to be given the designation "*muallim*" meaning teacher or master,[4] and he "established the main tradition of Islamic philosophy as we know it today."[5] So successful was Al-Farabi that he was known in history as *al-Muallim al-Thani*, or the Second Master, the First Master being Aristotle. Over a millennium after the death of Plato and Aristotle, Al-Farabi was widely acknowledged among Jews, Christians, and Muslims as the greatest authority on both philosophers. This speaks to "the tremendous significance of his role in recovering a tradition of Greek science that was perilously close to extinction by the time Al-Farabi emerged."[6] According to a contemporary American scholar and translator of Al-Farabi,

[1] Ian Richard Netton, *Al-Fārābī and His School* (New York: Routledge, 1992).
[2] David M. DiPasquale, *Alfarabi's Book of Dialectic (Kitāb al-Jadal): On the Starting Point of Islamic Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 208, note 35.
[3] DiPasquale, *Alfarabi's Book of Dialectic*, p. 205, note 27.
[4] DiPasquale, *Alfarabi's Book of Dialectic*, p. ix.
[5] Muhsin S. Mahdi, *Alfarabi and the Foundation of Islamic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 47.
[6] DiPasquale, *Alfarabi's Book of Dialectic*, p. ix.

David DiPasquale, Al-Farabi's work marked "the greatest founding (or 're-founding') of philosophy since the time of Socrates."[7]

And yet, today Al-Farabi is lamentably little known and his ideas are obscure. We are more likely to remember Al-Farabi's many disciples who went on to shape the societies and intellectual traditions of both East and West, providing the foundation for transformational movements such as the Scientific Revolution and Enlightenment, than the master himself.

For us, the authors, however, Al-Farabi is a great Mingler, someone who reaches out to embrace the "Other" regardless of religion, race, ethnicity, or nation. Here, we will focus on those aspects of Al-Farabi's thinking which concern human diversity, interfaith understanding, and promoting human unity. For our purposes it is his theory of religion and discussion of human groups that holds the most relevance. At the core of Al-Farabi's message is dialogue with the "Other" and enlarging circles of human association and fraternity in love. We would like to introduce this great thinker who analyzed and attempted to overcome what he understood as the barriers to human coexistence. At a time in which the planet is consumed by religious, ethnic, and national conflict, Al-Farabi provides us an important guide which can help us ameliorate our current difficult situation and change course.

Abu Nasr Muhammad Al-Farabi was born around 870 in present day Kazakhstan. His name suggests a region or place called Farab rather than a tribe or clan. Although little is known of his early life, he would have been aware of the great cultural and religious influences of religions other than Islam such as Buddhism, Christianity, animism, and high tribalism. This background may well explain his inclination to be inclusive in his approach to matters of faith. He was possibly of Persian, or Turkic, ethnicity. He is believed to have grown up in an Iranian Sogdian cultural milieu—this was the area of the "Silk Road" to China ruled by the Samanid Dynasty—and to have been a native speaker of the Sogdian language, the "veritable lingua franca of the fabled Silk Road civilization."[8] It has also been suggested that Al-Farabi's father served as a military officer to local rulers. In the centuries after Al-Farabi's death, legends circulated about

[7] DiPasquale, *Alfarabi's Book of Dialectic*, p. xii.
[8] DiPasquale, *Alfarabi's Book of Dialectic*, p. xi.

him in which he was portrayed as a "scholar-gipsy" wearing Sufi garb who shunned social conventions, for example working as a gardener at the height of his esteemed career.[9]

Such lack of information about Al-Farabi's background discloses an important truth about him—he was from the periphery of the Islamic world, not its centers based in cities such as Baghdad, Damascus, and Cairo. Additionally, unlike his great scholarly successors such as Avicenna and Averroes, Al-Farabi was not from a prominent well-to-do background or the holder of high office. Although born in Central Asia, he would drift to the great centers of Islam in Baghdad and Damascus, where he would die at an advanced age.

As is often the case with great scholars, Al-Farabi himself had a great teacher. Following his early studies in Bukhara where he focused on Islamic sciences and music, the naturally gifted Al-Farabi felt the pull of Baghdad, the capital of the Abbasid Caliphate and well known to be the center of scholarship and learning in the Muslim world. First however, while in the city of Merv, in present-day Turkmenistan and an important stop on the Silk Road, Al-Farabi, then in his early twenties, met the Christian philosopher and cleric Yuhanna Ibn Haylan. This intercultural and interreligious meeting shaped history, because it was here that Ibn Haylan introduced Al-Farabi to Greek philosophy and Aristotelian thought. Ibn Haylan would become an essential influence in Al-Farabi's life and the only person he would call "teacher." Together, Al-Farabi and Ibn Haylan set out for Baghdad, where Al-Farabi settled down as Ibn Haylan's only Muslim student.

In Baghdad, Al-Farabi plunged into scholarship and learning as he broadened his horizons. He began to study Arabic grammar with the prominent philologist and grammarian Ibn al-Sarraj, who, it was said, agreed to instruct Al-Farabi in grammar in return for Al-Farabi teaching al-Sarraj music and logic. Al-Farabi also studied in Baghdad under Abu-Bishr Matta ibn Yunus, another Christian scholar of Aristotle who translated his works into Arabic. For years in Baghdad Al-Farabi was part of the intellectual life of the city as he continued his studies with Ibn Haylan.

Ibn Haylan belonged to a dying tradition. He was an adherent of the Alexandrian School of philosophy, which attempted to reconcile Greek philosophy and Christianity. Established in the

[9] Netton, *Al-Fārābī and His School*, p. 5.

second century AD as the first Christian institution of higher learning in the world in Alexandria, Egypt—the city founded by Alexander the Great and site of the famous Great Library—the school experienced a precipitous decline over the years amid Christian theological controversies and regional instability. Al-Farabi reported, for example, that Christian authorities had forbidden students to read Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics*, which concerns logic, demonstration, and the scientific method and formed an important part of the Alexandrian School curriculum. By the time Al-Farabi met Ibn Haylan, there were only a few students of the tradition remaining, including Ibn Haylan.[10] Now, Al-Farabi would himself become a master of this tradition. He stated that he was the first Muslim to study *Posterior Analytics*,[11] the text which provided the model for the field of logic in the Islamic tradition.[12]

When Al-Farabi made his claim about being the first Muslim to study *Posterior Analytics*, the Al-Farabi scholar Muhsin S. Mahdi explained, he may not have been speaking literally but meaning that "he was the first to read this book with a man who had spent years, perhaps a lifetime, studying and trying to understand it with a master, who in turn had done so with an earlier master, and so on."[13] This is because this particular school of thought was not only written, it was also passed down orally from teacher to student. It is this deep well of tradition Al-Farabi drew from which, Mahdi argues, separates Al-Farabi from other Muslim scholars such as Al-Kindi who also studied Greek works—as neither Al-Kindi nor any Islamic philosopher before Al-Farabi had such access, including the opportunity to study from a master of the tradition. Indeed, Al-Farabi's studies with Ibn Haylan stretched over decades.

When Al-Farabi was around forty years old, after living for many years in Baghdad, he relocated again. This time, he and Ibn Haylan travelled to Harran, known as "City of the Greeks," in what is today Turkey. That designation reflects the city's status as a major center of Greek learning—when the Byzantine Emperor Justinian abolished the Platonic Academy in Athens some four centuries prior, its leaders relocated to Harran and established a Platonic Academy there. Al-

[10] Mahdi, *Alfarabi and the Foundation of Islamic Political Philosophy*, p. 53.
[11] Mahdi, *Alfarabi and the Foundation of Islamic Political Philosophy*, p. 53.
[12] Deborah L. Black, "Logic in Islamic Philosophy." In Professor Edward Craig and Edward Craig, eds., *Concise Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 496.
[13] Mahdi, *Alfarabi and the Foundation of Islamic Political Philosophy*, p. 53.

Farabi spent the next eight years in the Byzantine Empire, possibly reaching Constantinople. He then returned to Baghdad, sometime between 910 and 920, where he taught and produced his greatest writings. We are not sure when Ibn Haylan passed away, but it was sometime before 932. In 942, possibly due to political tensions, Al-Farabi relocated to Damascus, where he lived for two years before conflicts led him to move again, this time to Egypt. Then, he returned again to Damascus where he was associated with the court of the Arab emir Sayf al-Dawla, and died in 950.

The unity of nations

As noted above, Al-Farabi's great importance for the Islamic tradition is in his reconciling philosophy, reason, and science with revelation and religion. In this, he incorporated Greek influences such as Aristotle and Plato with other scholars like Euclid and Ptolemy in the context of the model of the Prophet of Islam. For example, Al-Farabi's ideal ruler was a Prophet-Philosopher he called the Imam—we can see here clear influences of the life of the Prophet of Islam as head of the ideal or virtuous city of Medina; Plato's Philosopher-King, and Aristotle's ideas on the Virtuous City coming together.

What is especially significant, however, is that like subsequent scholars such as Ibn Khaldun, who also discusses and draws from Al-Farabi, Al-Farabi was interested in examining human society, not just Muslim society. He consequently took certain terminology common in the Islamic tradition and applied it both to Muslims and non-Muslims in his studies of humanity. Thus his use of the term "*ummah*" refers both to the *ummah* or community of Muslims and also to the communities of other religions and cultures—there are many different *ummahs* in the world and his use of the term has been translated into English as "nation." This meaning associated with *ummah* is found in the Quran (43:22), where it refers to a group of people having a particular custom or way of life.[14] Similarly, Al-Farabi uses *madina* to refer to, according to one of his works, *Principles of the Opinions of the Inhabitants of the Virtuous City*, "a group of people who concur with one another in holding excellent views and who live near to one another

[14] Alexander Orwin, *Redefining the Muslim Community: Ethnicity, Religion, and Politics in the Thought of Alfarabi* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), p. 50.

in one place within closed walls or in tents, in an inn or in a house, on top of a mountain or beneath the ground."[15] The Arabic terms *sharia* or religious law and *sunna* or tradition, which have religious resonance for Muslims, were also applied to other nations by Al-Farabi to capture the fact that other diverse peoples have their own religious laws and traditions.

Al-Farabi was aware that human beings in different areas use different terminology and have different customs, but are engaged in similar pursuits and actions he felt he could identify and explain through his studies. Such was Al-Farabi's interest in studying different languages and cultures that, according to one biographical account, he knew over seventy languages.[16] In a single paragraph in his *Book of Letters (Kitab al-Huruf)* for example, Al-Farabi compares the conceptual meanings of words in Arabic, Greek, Persian, Syriac, and Sogdian,[17] thus demonstrating the connections between the different *ummahs* of humanity.

Furthermore, Al-Farabi did not consider philosophy and the scientific method to be "Greek" as such, but to be universal—it happened to be developed among the Greeks, and, he hoped, would now take root among the Muslims, and indeed humans in general. The Greeks themselves, Al-Farabi believed, had received such "demonstrative methods" from Egypt, which in turn had received them from Iraq.[18] Yet it is with Plato and Aristotle specifically that philosophy reached a particular apex which we can learn from. Al-Farabi wrote that Aristotle conducted his own inquires "just because he loved to do so," and we should follow his method with a similar gladness of heart in order to fulfill our own human potential, to acquire "the intellect for the sake of which man is made." [19] Al-Farabi proudly carried on this tradition in endeavoring to teach the world about philosophy so Muslims and others could understand and implement it within their own unique cultures and traditions—as he wrote, "philosophy must necessarily come into being in every man in the way possible for him."[20]

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[15] *Al-Farabi on the Perfect State: Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī's Mabādi' Ārā' Ahl al-Madīna al Fāḍila*. Translated by Richard Walzer. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), p. 53.
[16] DiPasquale, *Alfarabi's Book of Dialectic*, p. xi.
[17] *Alfarabi, Book of Letters (Kitāb al-Ḥurūf).* Translated by Charles E. Butterworth. (Berkeley: Zaytuna College, 2024), p. 136.
[18] *Alfarabi's Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*. Translated by Muhsin Mahdi. (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1962), p. 43.
[19] *Alfarabi's Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*, p. 130.
[20] *Alfarabi's Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*, p. 130.

And, we should note, not just men, for Al-Farabi wrote, concerning "the faculty of reason," "male and female do not differ."[21] On this point, the Al-Farabi scholar and translator Richard Walzer made a connection to Averroes, who drew on Al-Farabi's writing and asserted that "it is not impossible that there may be among women philosophers and rulers."[22]

While Al-Farabi's vast, extraordinary, and deep works "extend through all of the sciences and embrace every part of philosophy"[23]—including Al-Farabi's groundbreaking work on music theory and his inventing a five string ud instrument[24]—we will focus here on one main element in his thinking: his views on religion, social groups, and promoting human coexistence.

We will begin by explaining what Al-Farabi meant when he discussed philosophy and the necessity for humans to have an awareness of it. Philosophy, Al-Farabi believed, was universal because it concerned itself with the unity of being, the totality of what is. Philosophy is essentially an ordered comprehension and awareness of different levels of reality going from a surface level awareness, where we see things that appear different, to a perspective of unity where we understand the interconnectedness of everything. It is the realization that, as Al-Farabi asserted, each thing has something "which belongs to the other and the other has something which belongs to the first. In that way each of them has as it were a claim to something it ought to receive from the other."[25]

As we pursue this line of thinking, through applying our reason and faculties, our awareness soars ever higher, until, Al-Farabi taught, it "ascends from the more perfect to more and more perfect."[26] Al-Farabi described the process of discernment and acquiring knowledge as ascending

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[21] *Al-Farabi on the Perfect State*, p. 197.
[22] *Al-Farabi on the Perfect State*, p. 401.
[23] Charles E. Butterworth, "Preface." In *Alfarabi, The Political Writings: Selected Aphorisms and Other Texts*. Translated by Charles E. Butterworth. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), p. x.
[24] Inna Narodiskaya, "The Philosophy of Music by Abu Nasr Muhammad al-Farabi." *Asian Music*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2009, p. 134.
[25] *Al-Farabi on the Perfect State*, p. 161.
[26] *Alfarabi, The Political Writings: Selected Aphorisms and Other Texts*. Translated by Charles E. Butterworth. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), p. 109.

"from that which is best known to us to that which is unknown."[27] Then, our awareness "does not cease ascending like this in bringing about cognizance of things until it finally reaches the Deity, may His praise be magnified."[28] Scientific inquiry thus culminates in investigating "the principle common to all existing beings, namely, the thing that should be called God."[29] The ultimate level of awareness in philosophy is, Al-Farabi argued, when we attain this perception of perfect unity, when we reach "a level at which it is impossible for there to be anything but one being—one in number and one in every aspect of oneness."[30]

In pursuit of the loving God

Understanding philosophy, Al-Farabi contended, is having a "cognizance" of the "harmony" of "beings," "of how they are linked together, how they are organized, how their actions are organized, and how they mutually support one another so that despite their multiplicity they might be like one thing."[31] In keeping with Plato, however, such a pursuit is an ideal to orient and inspire us—and, crucially, to teach and guide political rulers. While we may never get there, by pursuing the ideal we can better ourselves and fulfill the potential that God has given us. Essentially, the more we pursue knowledge and make sense of the universe, for example, the more human we become and the closer to the perfection of God we ascend.

This awareness brings happiness, which as noted above Al-Farabi believed was the goal of philosophy. This is because upon gaining this awareness, one is then in sync with our true nature and the world and universe we are born into and are a part of. As Al-Farabi put it, "the ultimate goal for the sake of which the human being comes about is happiness…Therefore, wisdom is what seizes upon the thing that is truly happiness."[32] There is a pleasure in pursuing an awareness of the unity of all, which he writes is "beautiful" beyond any comparison. Whatever

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[27] Alfarabi, "The Letter Concerning the Intellect." In Arthur Hyman and James J. Walsh, eds., *Philosophy in the Middle Ages: The Christian, Islamic, and Jewish Traditions.* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1973), p. 219.
[28] *Alfarabi, The Political Writings*, p. 111.
[29] Al-Fārābī, "The Aims of Aristotle's Metaphysics." In Jon McGinnis and David C. Reisman, eds. *Classical Arabic Philosophy: An Anthology of Sources*. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2007), p. 79.
[30] *Alfarabi, The Political Writings*, pp. 109-110.
[31] *Alfarabi, The Political Writings*, p. 110.
[32] *Alfarabi, The Political Writings*, p. 35.

we choose to call God, the "One" or First Cause—and Al-Farabi notes that there are many names for God[33]—God is not neutral but good, perfect, and loving. Al-Farabi calls God "the first object of love,"[34] "the primary beloved," and the "primary object of passion."[35] We experience feelings of "pleasure, happiness, delight, and joy" in our perception of God.[36] A philosopher, be they a ruler or in any other position, even a private individual, should attempt to guide people along this loving path for "the benefit of all."[37] Al-Farabi calls for such people "to live in harmony with the people, love them, and prefer doing what is useful to them and leads to the betterment of their condition."[38] This is true even if no one follows them, they must still stick to this mission. The philosopher's objective is similar, Al-Farabi states, to a doctor in trying to help others.[39]

Once Al-Farabi has established the principles of philosophy in understanding unity, he then moves on to address diversity. There is a logical connection between the two, because we must first understand the universal to fully grasp the particular, to know the purpose of the whole before knowing the purpose of its parts. Otherwise, we will lack context and the full picture.[40] This is characteristic of those we are calling Minglers who at once consider the importance of the particular and the universal at the same time—of being concerned with one's "own people" concurrently with all of humanity.

As Al-Farabi explained in his own philosophical way, something can be seen as separate from another thing from one perspective, and thus having its own identity and integrity, but also unified with it from another perspective—as he put it, "identical from the standpoint of what is common…variable from the standpoint of what is not common."[41] If one only sees the universal big picture and not the specific cases, they are in danger of being remote from society and out of

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[33] *Alfarabi, The Political Writings, Volume II: "Political Regime" and "Summary of Plato's Laws."* Translated by Charles E. Butterworth. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015), p. 44.
[34] *Al-Farabi on the Perfect State*, p. 119.
[35] *Alfarabi, The Political Writings, Volume II*, p. 42.
[36] Al-Fārābī, "The Principles of Existing Things." In Jon McGinnis and David C. Reisman, eds. *Classical Arabic Philosophy: An Anthology of Sources*. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2007), p. 90.
[37] *Alfarabi's Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*, p. 44.
[38] DiPasquale, *Alfarabi's Book of Dialectic*, p. 39
[39] *Alfarabi's Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*, p. 49.
[40] Joshua Parens, *An Islamic Philosophy of Virtuous Religions: Introducing Alfarabi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), p. 110.
[41] DiPasquale, *Alfarabi's Book of Dialectic*, p. 97.

touch with the real world and its people. Conversely, if their attention only is focused on one specific community, they will miss the essential ways in which that community is connected to other communities and to humanity and the world at large.

In one of his most important insights, in the context of humanity, Al-Farabi argues that while the underlying truth of philosophy, unity, is within the capacity of "all men" to grasp,[42] they will not all grasp such insights in the exact same way. While all of us are searching for truth and in some fashion trying to get closer to God, to do what is right, and to implement and follow good laws, the ways in which we do so will differ according to the local situation in which we find ourselves.

Understanding religion and human difference

The key to explaining the variation lies in human groups. Humans being social creatures, they will always form groups, and these groups play a significant role in determining the particularities of our own experiences. Al-Farabi contended that our groups, our tribes, villages, communities, cities, and *ummas*, shaped as they are by climate, food sources, soil, and topography, form our language, physical features and appearances, customs, manners and upbringing (*adab*), and our own unique worldviews. Within one's own language and context, arts flourish such as music, oral storytelling, poetry, writing, rhetoric, and linguistic science.[43] Such elements help determine a certain common disposition, character, or ethos (*khulq*) of the group."[44] As Al-Farabi asserted, "from the mutual help of these differences and their being mixed arise different minglings according to which the temperaments of nations and their states of character differ."[45]

As humans in each community and region, over many years, strive to understand God and act towards the good and ideal, societies develop certain beliefs which Al-Farabi characterizes as

[42] *Al-Farabi on the Perfect State*, p. 243.
[43] Orwin, *Redefining the Muslim Community*, pp. 54-55.
[44] *Al-Farabi on the Perfect State*, p. 431.
[45] *Alfarabi, The Political Writings, Volume II*, p. 62.

religion. Religion is very important to understand as, Al-Farabi writes, it determines "the actions by which the mutual dealings of the inhabitants of the cities are regulated."[46]

With impeccable logic, Al-Farabi argues that as each religion represents a particular community's understanding of the divine, all religions of the world are in fact valid paths to the divine. As God was defined as Merciful and Kind, and as one of God's names was *Haqq* or truth, all religions, including those beyond the Abrahamic ones, illuminate a valid path to the divine. These religions are a testimony to the integrity and truthfulness of the mercy and kindness of God. Al-Farabi believed that religion—all religions—are part of human efforts to approach Universal Truth. This was as unequivocally a universal embrace as possible.

Al-Farabi repeatedly stressed, underscoring the importance of the point, that while the objective of religions is the same in providing a path to the good, happiness, and the divine, they must necessarily take shape within the context of specific human communities. As such, the forms they take are quite distinct. Every religion is expressed through what Al-Farabi calls "symbols." Logically, as each culture and people are different, the symbols they use to express their religion will also be different. The symbols of religion consist of stories, ideas, rituals and "actions by which God is praised,"[47] art, architecture, and so on. They are images or representations of the Universal Truth.

Al-Farabi points out how distinct these symbols are from one another, asserting, for example, that "it is possible to represent these things to one group and one nation by objects other than those by which they are represented to another group and another nation. Thus it may be possible for the religions of virtuous nations and virtuous cities to differ even if they all pursue the very same happiness…these things are represented to each group or nation by things of which they are more cognizant,"[48] by "symbols which are best known to them."[49] The youth who grow up in

[46] *Alfarabi, The Political Writings*, p. 96.
[47] *Alfarabi, The Political Writings*, p. 80.
[48] *Alfarabi, The Political Writings, Volume II*, pp. 74-75.
[49] *Al-Farabi on the Perfect State*, p. 281.

different cultures are inculcated and enculturated in these particular ways, as Al-Farabi says, "whether they realize it or not."[50]

This means that a plethora of things may differ about various religions—for example, they offer different origin stories and prophecies of the end times. As Al-Farabi explains, "look into the books compiled about 'beginnings,' the accounts related in them, and the traditions recounted from their predecessors to see marvelous things: one says that at the outset there was water, and it was set in motion; foam gathered from which the earth was constituted; and smoke rose up from which the heavens were arranged. Then [look into] what the Jews, the Magians [Zoroastrians], and the rest of the nations say…And [look into] what there is in all their accounts about what will eventually happen to the heavens."[51]

Where we err, for Al-Farabi, is when we take ideas and symbols from one religion and attempt to project or impose them on another. Each religion has its own integrity in its symbols, which are representations of the ultimate truth of the One as far as that specific society sees it. Therefore, if you take the symbols and understandings about God from one society and try to apply them to another, you may run into problems of comprehension and discord. That is unless there has been a period of dialogue and time for people to meet each other in a dialectical process of give and take and adjust to each other and their respective symbols and conceptual terminology in empathy and knowledge. Al-Farabi himself was engaged in such a project in connecting Arabic and Islamic concepts and culture with Greek and Christian concepts and culture.

Reconciling reason and revelation, science and religion

After defining the unity of God (in philosophy) as well as the diversity of approaches to understanding God (in religion), Al-Farabi proceeds to explain the essential connection between the two. It is here where we come to one of Al-Farabi's most influential and long-lasting contributions, noted above, which would profoundly impact both the Islamic world and the West

[50] DiPasquale, *Alfarabi's Book of Dialectic*, p. 20
[51] *Alfarabi, The Political Writings*, p. 157.

and influence the Islamic, Jewish, and Christian traditions—the reconciling of reason and revelation, science and religion.

Al-Farabi informs us that philosophy is in fact engaged in the same pursuit as religion—that is trying to understand God. As Al-Farabi asserts, both religion and philosophy "supply knowledge about the first principle and cause of the beings, and both give an account of the ultimate end for the sake of which man is made—that is, supreme happiness."[52] Philosophy is based in "demonstration," the scientific method and empirical observation, while religion is the accumulated results of years upon years of peoples grappling with the same questions and expressing answers to these questions.

There is, however, a difference in the numbers of people involved with each. While philosophy, which takes years to master—recall Al-Farabi's decades of study with Ibn Haylan—and is consequently accessible to a comparatively small number of people, including, we may hope, our rulers, religion is for everyone. The same insights, as Al-Farabi writes, "are *philosophy* when they are in the soul of the legislator. They are *religion* when they are in the souls of the multitude."[53]

There is thus an essential and unbroken unity between philosophy and religion. Even if a philosopher wanted to, they cannot be "above the fray" of their own society and its religion, for example, because they are raised in that society. What a person "understands first of all" while growing up, Al-Farabi observes, "are generally accepted opinions."[54] It is in this context that the philosophical journey, should one choose to pursue it, must originate.

If one becomes a philosopher, particularly if they seek to rule as a political leader, they must truly understand the population they are ruling, and to do this they must be fully versed in religion. It will do a philosopher no good to stop at the "cognizance of the universals" which they attain through philosophy and science. No, the philosopher must, Al-Farabi insists, have "lengthy

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[52] *Alfarabi's Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*, p. 44.
[53] *Alfarabi: Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*. Translated by Muhsin Mahdi. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), p. 47.
[54] DiPasquale, *Alfarabi's Book of Dialectic*, p. 32.

experience with individual instances" to be able to "determine actions with respect to what he observes in each community, each city, each nation, each group, or each person."[55] This is not a vision of a remote scholar or ruler—as Al-Farabi reminds us, "he, too, is one of them [the general population or multitude of people]; for his ultimate purpose is their purpose as well."[56]

To illustrate this point, Al-Farabi uses a dramatic example.[57] He asks us to imagine two people, the first who "has learned all of what is contained in Aristotle's books" but behaves in a way "contrary to what is considered to be good" according to social norms, and another person who "has no knowledge about the sciences that the first person has learned" but, in contrast, "all of his actions are in accordance with what is considered to be good" by society. Surprisingly for such an admirer of Aristotle, Al-Farabi informs us that "This second person is closer to becoming a philosopher than the first." This is because if someone devotes themselves purely to theory, "without all of his actions being in accordance with what is held to be good by the common opinion," they are going to be swimming against the tide in society and will be at cross-purposes with what should be their goal, namely to facilitate accord, harmony, and happiness among peoples. The lesson is, as summarized by the Al-Farabi scholar Alexander Orwin, that "each philosopher must choose to express his most universal thoughts in the particular language of a given Umma."[58] Al-Farabi noted, for instance, that many of the examples that Aristotle gives would not be understood by Arabs, and he "recommends replacing all the Greek examples adduced by Aristotle with Arabic examples suited to his own language, place, and time."[59] Conversely, references Arabs would be familiar with such as camels may not make sense to Greeks.[60] As Al-Farabi argued, "No one can discover what is most noble according to the followers of a particular religion unless his moral virtues are the specific virtues of that religion."[61]

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[55] *Alfarabi, The Political Writings*, p. 106.
[56] *Alfarabi, Book of Letters*, p. 232.
[57] Janne Mattila, *The Eudaimonist Ethics of al-Fārābī and Avicenna* (Leiden: Brill, 2022), p. 196.
[58] Orwin, *Redefining the Muslim Community*, p. 79.
[59] Orwin, *Redefining the Muslim Community*, p. 82.
[60] Orwin, *Redefining the Muslim Community*, p. 123.
[61] Parens, *An Islamic Philosophy of Virtuous Religions*, p. 46.

Indeed, even within a society, according to Al-Farabi's analysis, religious ideas develop over time and they can also change over time in the context of public opinion and which leaders and ideas are seen to have legitimacy in society. Religions are shaped often by charismatic leaders who attract followers. Extraordinary people experiencing revelation from the divine, for example, must make their case to the population which will either accept or reject them—in the case of the great founders of religions they are accepted, and subsequent religious leaders and judges attempt to live up to their example and interpret the teachings they laid down for the present time and dispense justice. If a person does not live in such a "virtuous" community under a wise leader, they may follow the recorded teachings of great past figures from their own religions and attempt to live up to them, even if they reside in places where the majority of people do not follow those teachings. Indeed, people must always be on guard to detect the ways in which religion may be misused for goals not in accordance with the founders of religions and the divine path, such as the worldly pursuit of wealth and power.[62] In putting forth a theory of the patterns of religious change within a society, Al-Farabi anticipated Ibn Khaldun who similarly wrote of social patterns, in his case within tribal society.

Analyzing human groups

Al-Farabi presents an innovative social science paradigm in his analysis of human groups, to which his discussion of religion and his ideas on how to bring peoples closer together are related. Al-Farabi sought to understand, why and how do humans form groups? He was aware that humans tend to cooperate in different endeavors, indeed they must to be humans, arguing that humans "cannot complete their necessary affairs nor gain their most excellent state except by coming together as many associations in a single dwelling-place. Some human associations are large, some medium, and some small."[63] He also observed other species doing the same thing, noting "some species of animals and plants are able to gain their necessary affairs only by individual members coming together with one another in an association."[64]

[62] See *Al-Farabi on the Perfect State*, pp. 305-309.
[63] *Alfarabi, The Political Writings, Volume II*, p. 60.
[64] *Alfarabi, The Political Writings, Volume II*, p. 14.

According to Al-Farabi, humans are held together in groups via different kinds of "bonds." Traditional laws and customs, for example, can bond people together in facilitating group solidarity, or *asabiyyah*, he wrote.[65] One clear example of this are tribal societies, for instance the "Turk and Arab inhabitants of the wilderness."[66] In tribal society, the bond between people is characterized by descent from a common ancestor and the pursuit of "honor." While *asabiyyah* leads to group solidarity, Al-Farabi explains, it can also lead to conflict—group feeling can lead to a "struggle for domination…hatred, and the [desire for] coercion."[67] Al-Farabi warns that the "love of honor," when excessive, is transformed into the "love of domination."[68]

The desire to dominate others such as foreigners can be observed in human society, for example, as some people "love to dominate to spill a human being's blood, some love to dominate for his money, and some love to dominate over his soul so as to enslave him."[69] Such societies believe that they and their way of life are superior to others, and particularly through descent from specific ancestors which brings prestige—they have a dislike of others with a "different ancestry."[70] Yet even in these societies, different groups can come together "in an emergency" if attacked by an outside force, although this is a temporary bond based on necessity.[71] Additionally, the larger the number of people who claim descent from a common ancestor, particularly if the ancestor lived in the remote past rather than more recently, the "weaker" the bond between them.[72]

Al-Farabi also observed that people in tribal societies, particularly in rural areas, generally tend to preserve their culture and language to a greater extent than those in cities—city folk are "more ready to comply in understanding…that to which they have not become habituated."[73] Also, those who live on the borders between different *ummahs* tend to be "more likely to fancy the

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[65] *Alfarabi, The Political Writings, Volume II*, p. 145.
[66] *Alfarabi, The Political Writings, Volume II*, p. 89.
[67] *Alfarabi, The Political Writings, Volume II*, p. 145.
[68] Parens, *An Islamic Philosophy of Virtuous Religions*, p. 82.
[69] *Alfarabi, The Political Writings, Volume II*, p. 81.
[70] *Al-Farabi on the Perfect State,* p. 295.
[71] *Al-Farabi on the Perfect State,* p. 295.
[72] *Al-Farabi on the Perfect State,* p. 295.
[73] *Alfarabi, Book of Letters*, p. 224.

foreignness of their neighbors. For when they do business with [neighboring nations], they will need to converse in an idiom strange to their own tongues."[74]

In cities and other places there are a variety of different bonds between human beings, such as speaking a common language or legislating common laws, as is the case with nations or *ummahs*, intermarrying, taking oaths, signing treaties such as those forming alliances, physical proximity such as "common residence," eating or drinking together, sharing in a common community tragedy or triumph, "or being together in places in which each may need the other, for instance companionship in overland travel and on ships."[75]

Then there are people who live in democratic cities, which can be chaotic, but aside from Al-Farabi's ideal community guided by wise philosophers, he feels they have the best form of government, especially those which welcome foreigners and treat them the same as "natives." Democracy, Al-Farabi said, "is like an embroidered garment replete with colored figures and dyes. Everyone loves it and loves to dwell in it, because every human being who has a passion or desire for anything is able to gain it in this city."[76] The inhabitants of democracies "consist of countless similar and dissimilar groups" which, if in another place, would be "kept separate."[77] In a democracy, however, "The nations repair to it and dwell in it, so it becomes great beyond measure. People of every tribe are procreated in it."[78] "Rather than subjugate the Ummas," Al-Farabi writes, "the democratic city receives them into its bosom with open arms.[79] Democracies are the ideal breeding grounds for the eventual development of the virtuous or perfect city, as they permit people of wisdom, ability, and talent to rise from within them.[80]

If societies in the present don't quite accord with this vision, Al-Farabi argued, the way to improve them is not through force—he never supports violence of any kind.[81] Al-Farabi makes

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[74] *Alfarabi, Book of Letters*, p. 226.
[75] *Al-Farabi on the Perfect State*, p. 299.
[76] *Alfarabi, The Political Writings, Volume II*, p. 21.
[77] *Alfarabi, The Political Writings, Volume II*, p. 86.
[78] *Alfarabi, The Political Writings, Volume II*, p. 87.
[79] Orwin, *Redefining the Muslim Community*, p. 184.
[80] *Al-Farabi on the Perfect State*, p. 454.
[81] *Al-Farabi on the Perfect State*, p. 451.

clear that he disagrees with other scholars who, he notes, asserted that conflict, warfare, and violence between human groups is "natural" and even should be praised or encouraged.[82]

A message of love and dialogue

Instead, Al-Farabi's message is of love and dialogue between peoples. While he notes the different varieties of human societies and their bonds that bring people together such as honor or descent, Al-Farabi argues that the supreme bond is love—hence love is the best and most effective human bond. He states that love is "derived from the First"[83] and it is through "love" that "human beings are connected."[84]

Al-Farabi's advice for any aspiring ruler concerning their own group or community, be it a city or nation, is to fully appreciate the diversity of the people. They should use their reason to investigate the local characteristics, including customs, religion, language, and culture of each part and attempt to harmonize them into the whole, as Al-Farabi said, which is the process of the "discovery of things that are common."[85] For each city or group, the rulers—and Al-Farabi believes that the ideal community could have one or multiple rulers working together—should acknowledge each specific characteristics "so that the voluntary good things might be fully realized in every single city."[86]

Human cooperation in pursuit of the good, and forged through love, is the way to attain the ideal human community, be it at a local or national level. As Al-Farabi argues, "man cannot attain the perfection, for the sake of which his inborn nature has been given to him, unless many (societies of) people who co-operate come together who each supply everybody else with some particular need of his, so that as a result of the contribution of the whole community all the things are

[82] *Al-Farabi on the Perfect State*, pp. 289-291.
[83] *Al-Farabi on the Perfect State*, p. 97.
[84] *Al-Farabi on the Perfect State*, p. 97.
[85] Parens, *An Islamic Philosophy of Virtuous Religions*, p. 92.
[86] *Alfarabi, The Political Writings*, p. 113.

brought together which everybody needs in order to preserve himself and to attain perfection."[87] He elaborated, "the nation in which all of its cities co-operate…is the excellent nation."[88]

The same is true for an excellent and happy world. To bring that about, Al-Farabi argued that we should try to achieve world peace and human coexistence though love and dialogue. In terms of bringing people of different religions and nations together, keeping in mind Al-Farabi's exhortation to discover "things that are common," he proposes a few unitary principles which he believes all people would agree with. They include worshipping God in some manner, honoring one's parents, and "treating well those who treat others well."[89] Yet he also notes that even these may require further testing and determination to allow for local varieties and expressions, which can only occur through dialogue among peoples.[90]

The logic of attempting to bring about ever larger circles of human association and fraternity, Al-Farabi explains, is that as humans forge more bonds with one another, societies become more "perfect," i.e. closer to approximating the unity of the divine One which we aspire to reach in love. Hence, Al-Farabi tells us that the greatest form of the perfect society is "the union of all the societies in the inhabitable world."[91] This is Al-Farabi's vision, writing, "the excellent universal state will arise only when all the nations in it co-operate for the purpose of reaching felicity."[92]

Writing a thousand years before the establishment of international organizations like the United Nations, Al-Farabi gave practical steps on how to achieve this unity. He called for the rulers of nations to form "associations" and he envisioned what he called "an association of many nations coming together and helping one another."[93] Lest we think that he may support different peoples being subsumed into some kind of uniform hegemonic formation, he makes clear that "The

[87] *Al-Farabi on the Perfect State*, p. 229.
[88] *Al-Farabi on the Perfect State*, p. 231.
[89] DiPasquale, *Alfarabi's Book of Dialectic*, p. 83.
[90] DiPasquale, *Alfarabi's Book of Dialectic*, p. 83; Orwin, *Redefining the Muslim Community*, p. 139.
[91] *Al-Farabi on the Perfect State*, p. 229.
[92] *Al-Farabi on the Perfect State,* p. 231.
[93] *Alfarabi, The Political Writings, Volume II*, p. 70.

unqualifiedly perfect human association is divided into nations"[94] which "cooperate" with each other. [95]

Through a process of dialogue, the "association of these kings" in "many nations" and religious communities should come together to determine what they may differ on, what they have in common, the ways in which each community may become happy, and what unique talents and contributions each nation or *ummah* could make for the happiness and well-being of humanity as a whole. Al-Farabi believes the result of such accord will be that "their whole association is like a single king due to the agreement in their endeavors, purposes, opinions, and ways of life."[96]

We should not misunderstand Al-Farabi as providing a kind of manifesto that should be implemented literally. It is rather a vision for a kind of process which we can follow. The core of his vision is centered on respectful human contact across cultural and religious boundaries. It is an organic process that, he is convinced, if pursued will lead to greater knowledge and understanding. For example, he writes that through interpersonal contact, our ideas and perceptions can be brought more in accordance with each other, and bridges can be built. New kinds of public opinions can be formed uniting diverse peoples, he states, "through which the meeting of different nations occurs despite the separation of their homes and differences in their natural character and languages; and through which there exists sociability [*uns*] between them; from which common actions between them originate, as well as the moral appreciation [*istiḥsān*] of what they approve between them."[97]

As noted above, Al-Farabi's influence in the Islamic world has been vast. Muslim giants like Avicenna, Averroes, Ibn Tufayl, and Mulla Sadra all valued Al-Farabi's ideas. There are also similarities and connections between Al-Farabi and Sufism. The broad themes of universal peace and compassion are common to the Sufi vision and at its heart is the concept of love. Sufis are essential Minglers almost by definition.

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[94] *Alfarabi, The Political Writings, Volume II*, p. 15.
[95] Parens, *An Islamic Philosophy of Virtuous Religions*, p. 89.
[96] *Alfarabi, The Political Writings, Volume II*, p. 70.
[97] DiPasquale, *Alfarabi's Book of Dialectic*, p. 19.

The difference concerning Al-Farabi is in the method. Al-Farabi arrived at his conclusions on the unity of existence and the universal embrace of all peoples and religions on the basis of philosophical reasoning and logic. Maulana Rumi and Ibn Arabi would arrive at the same theological point two centuries later through Sufi intuition and meditation. A famous poem by Ibn Arabi captures the essence of universal humanism which encapsulated his celebrated concept of *wahdat-ul-wajud* or the Unity of Being. Ibn Arabi's widely cited poem, generally known as "my heart can take on any form" employs the symbolism of a gazelle in a meadow which represents the delicate and sensitive heart. The heart, the poet points out, can receive and welcome diverse and different elements and what unites them and draws them together is the power of love. Just as Ibn Arabi arrived at this conclusion through the heart, Al-Farabi relied on his head and the use of philosophy.

But there was and is opposition to Al-Farabi's ideas of inclusivity. Al-Ghazali, the most celebrated orthodox Islamic scholar of his time, disapproved of Al-Farabi's inclusive position as he felt it denied the supremacy of Islam in his classic study, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*.

A philosopher for our times

The theological controversies notwithstanding, Al-Farabi has given us a body of brilliant and original, indeed pioneering, intellectual work. He has provided a way to address how to understand the beliefs and identities of others, which can help promote harmony in society without compromising dignity, integrity, and honor.

Today when there is so much religious, national, and ethnic conflict across the world, we are looking for a way out of the morass. Perhaps Al-Farabi's time has finally come. We note that there are an increasing number of studies on Al-Farabi over the past few years, and new translations of his work in European languages, for example, continue to appear. Not only that, but new Al-Farabi works continue to be unearthed in different parts of the world.

The deserved renewal of Al-Farabi echoes the life journey of Al-Farabi himself. Over one thousand years after Plato and Aristotle, Al-Farabi recognized their importance at a time when their books and ideas were in danger of being lost. He took those ideas and implemented them anew for his own society and times—in his case the Abbasid Caliphate—in writings that changed and shaped history. Through his work, generations of Islamic scholars, and subsequently those of other religions, gained insight into understanding and appreciating the majesty, love, and wonder of God and creation through the tools of philosophy and science.

We can say something similar about Al-Farabi, who lived over one thousand years before us. Despite the advances of modernity, we remain in many ways lost and in the darkness of ignorance, particularly when it comes to reaching out to and understanding the "Other" and in our inability to work together to solve humanity's common problems. In Al-Farabi's ideas we have an optimistic vision for facilitating greater accord, peace, dialogue, and coexistence between diverse peoples. We could not ask for a better guide and teacher in pursuing these noble goals in our troubled times.

Akbar Ahmed

Ambassador Akbar Ahmed is Distinguished Professor of International Relations and holds the Ibn Khaldun Chair of Islamic Studies at the American University, School of International Service. He is also a global fellow at the Wilson Center Washington DC. His academic career included appointments such as Nonresident Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution; the First Distinguished Chair of Middle East and Islamic Studies at the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, MD; the Iqbal Fellow and Fellow of Selwyn College at the University of Cambridge; and teaching positions at Harvard and Princeton universities. Ahmed dedicated more than three decades to the Civil Service of Pakistan, where his posts included Commissioner in Balochistan, Political Agent in the Tribal Areas, and Pakistan High Commissioner to the UK and Ireland.

Frankie Martin

Frankie Martin is a doctoral candidate in anthropology at American University and a senior researcher for Akbar Ahmed's quartet of Brookings Institution Press studies on Western-Islamic relations.

Amineh Hoti

Amineh Ahmed Hoti is Fellow-Commoner at Lucy Cavendish College, University of Cambridge. She was also a senior researcher for Akbar Ahmed's quartet of Brookings Institution Press studies on Western-Islamic relations. Her most recent book is *Gems and Jewels: The Religions of Pakistan* (2021).