How Esoteric Was Classical Islamic Political Philosophy?

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Rasoul Namazi's *Leo Strauss and Islamic Political Thought* is a wonderful tour through, well, Leo Strauss's reading of medieval Islamic political philosophy (as well as, or including, the *Arabian Nights*) and much of the secondary literature surrounding both the reception of Strauss's ideas and methods and the obstruction of such a reception on the part of mainstream historical and philological scholarship. One of the many great virtues and contributions of Namazi's book is that it resists the traditional insularity of Straussian and non-Straussian schools alike, seeking to read with an open mind non- and anti-Straussian scholars while modestly yet confidently making a case for why non-Straussians should read Strauss on Islamic political philosophy.

Of course, the hallmarks of the Straussian approach are well known. They include the claim that the clash between theology and philosophy cannot be reconciled adequately at the level of theory and, therefore, becomes a political problem—the theological-political problem. Thus, Strauss tends to hold that genuine philosophers in the Platonic and Aristotelian tradition(s) cannot be genuine theists in the way that the Bible and Qurʾan require. Therefore, they must be "atheists" in Strauss's somewhat idiosyncratic use of the term. However, to be an atheist, or even a very heterodox or heretic theist, in a theocratic society is exceptionally dangerous. Thus, we arrive at Strauss's famous claim that many medieval philosophers wrote esoterically—they hid their true beliefs and teachings "between the lines" through a variety of rhetorical and literary devices, both to avoid persecution and for the pedagogical purpose of provoking potential philosophers and free-thinkers into a genuinely critical and nondoctrinal reading of their works.

For Namazi's goal of demonstrating to the widest possible audience that Strauss has valuable insights and methods and should not be categorically ignored and erased from scholarly debate, it is thus of some importance that Strauss's basic positions be original and add something to our appreciation of medieval Islamic political philosophers. Foremost among these positions is the claim that they wrote esoterically to mask their actual teachings and that Strauss has given us a guide to reading them between the lines. This is where I pick up, by focusing on the most directly political and

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theological writings of al-Fārābī. I ask what an esoteric approach to his writings on expressly religious and political matters gives us that an exoteric approach does not.

Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī (d. 339/950) treated political problems more explicitly and extensively over a greater number of texts than any other Muslim thinker until Ibn Khaldūn. These texts include *The Principles of the Opinions of the Citizens of the Virtuous City*,[1] *Political Governance*,[2] *The Attainment of Happiness*,[3] *Selected Aphorisms (of the Statesman)*,[4] *Enumeration of the Sciences*,[5] *Book of Religion*,[6] *The Harmonization of the Two Opinions of the Two Sages: Plato the Divine and Aristotle*,[7] and *Summary of Plato's Laws*.[8]

The question for the Straussian approach defended by Namazi pertains to how explicit and exoteric Fārābī's subordination of revealed religion to philosophy is. We can begin with Fārābī's famous theory of prophecy. Fārābī gives a naturalistic account of prophecy, which was to be profoundly influential on subsequent philosophers, particularly Ibn Sina:

> When [perfection] occurs in both parts of his rational faculty, namely the theoretical and the practical rational faculties, and also in his representative faculty, then it is this man who receives Divine Revelation, and God Almighty grants him Revelation through the mediation of the Active Intellect, so that the emanation from God Almighty to the Active

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[1]Abu Nasr al-Farabi, *On the Perfect State (Mabadiʾ araʾ ahl al-madina al-fadila)*, ed. and trans. Richard Walzer (Chicago: Kazi, 1988) (henceforth *Virtuous City*). For a revisionist interpretation of the structure of this work, arguing that it should be read as an answer to orthodox works outlining the principles of theology and creed in Islam, see Ulrich Rudolph, "Reflections on al-Fārābī's *Mabādiʾ ārāʾ ahl al-madīna al-fāḍila*," in *In the Age of Al-Fārābī: Arabic Philosophy in the Fourth/Tenth Century*, ed. Peter Adamson (London: Warburg Institute, 2008).

[2]Farabi, *Al-siyāsa al-madaniyya*, translated as "The Political Regime" by Charles Butterworth in *Medieval Political Philosophy: A Sourcebook*, 2nd ed., ed. Joshua Parens and Joseph C. Macfarland (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011) (henceforth *Regime*).

[3]Farabi, *Taḥsil al-saʿāda*, in *Alfarabi, Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*, trans. Muhsin Mahdi (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 13–50 (henceforth *Attainment*).

[4]Farabi, *Fuṣūl muntazaʿa*, in *The Political Writings: "Selected Aphorisms" and Other Texts*, trans. Charles Butterworth (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 1–67 (henceforth *Aphorisms*).

[5]Farabi, *Ihsāʾ al-ʿulūm*, in *Political Writings*, 76–84.

[6]Farabi, *Kitāb al-milla*, in *Political Writings*, 93–113 (henceforth *Religion*).

[7]Farabi, *Kitāb al-jamʿ bayn raʾyay al-ḥakīmayn, Aflāṭūn al-Ilāhī wa Arisṭūtālīs*, in *Political Writings*, 125–67 (henceforth *Harmonization*). For doubts on al-Fārābi's authorship of this text, see Marwan Rashed, "On the Authorship of the Treatise *On the Harmonization of the Opinions of the Two Sages* attributed to al-Fārābī," *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 19, no. 1 (2009): 43–82.

[8]Farabi, *Jawāmiʿ Kitāb al-nawāmīs li-Aflāṭūn*. Extract translated by Muhsin Mahdi in *Medieval Political Philosophy: A Sourcebook*, ed. Ralph Lerner and Muhsin Mahdi (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1972), 83–94.

Intellect is passed on to his Passive Intellect through the mediation of the Acquired Intellect, and then to the faculty of representation.[9]

The problem with this from a theological perspective is that prophecy is not a miracle or gift of a free and willing God, but a law-governed phenomenon that could in principle occur at any time that its conditions were met. And yet, this heretical view is presented explicitly and exoterically.

Throughout his writings, Fārābī never really hides his view that the revealed law of Islam (the *sharīʿa*) and its practical science (*fiqh*) are marginalized and diminished in comparison to philosophy nor his quite provocative view that "religion" (usually: *milla*) is at best a public representation through symbolic and affective language of philosophical truth: "the determined opinions in the virtuous religion are either the truth or a likeness of the truth."[10] But even if a virtuous religion asserts opinions that approximate the truth, there is "no link or true congruence between one who has received revelation and who is perfect in theoretical knowledge, and one who has received revelation without having become perfect in theoretical knowledge."[11] Religion is a local attempt to direct the multitude (*jumhūr*) to a close-enough simulacrum of what can be authentically known only by the few through philosophical demonstration (*burhān*).[12]

The purpose of exposing the many to the kinds of images and metaphors that approximate philosophical truth is largely political. It is important for their good that they be ruled in accordance with truth, but it is equally important that they form opinions that induce them to accept their place within a harmoniously organized polis. "The descriptions of the things comprised by the opinions of religion ought to be such as to bring the citizens to imagine everything in the city . . . so that what is described will be likenesses the citizens will follow in their ranks and actions."[13] There can be many religions that each approximate truth in different ways appropriate for different nations,[14] but only one unchanging philosophical truth. In both aspects of religion—its regulation of opinions and of actions—it is subordinate to philosophy.[15]

The religious sciences are downgraded, without quite being degraded. While there is no path to true virtue and perfection except through theoretical philosophy, the revealed law can be regarded as an acceptable shortcut to the rules one ought to follow: "Another way [other than the true philosophical path] is for someone to be given the practical part by a revelation that

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[9]Farabi, *Virtuous City*, chap. 15, p. 245.
[10]Farabi, *Religion*, §4, p. 97.
[11]Ibid.
[12]Farabi, *Virtuous City*, chap. 17, p. 279; *Harmonization*, §61, p. 159; *Regime*, §90, p. 45; *Attainment*, §50, p. 41.
[13]Farabi, *Religion*, §2, p. 95.
[14]Farabi, *Attainment*, §45, p. 39.
[15]Farabi, *Religion*, §5, p. 97.

directs him toward a determination of each thing that he ought to prefer or avoid."[16] Fārābī regards looking to *fiqh* for practical guidance as a kind of heteronomous rule-following for those incapable of achieving genuine practical virtue. Elsewhere he suggests that religious law, at its highest, is a locally acceptable way of working out particulars that are undetermined by philosophical universals: "the practical things in religion are those universals made determinate by stipulations restricting them. . . . All virtuous laws are subordinate to the universals of practical philosophy."[17]

If medieval philosophers in the Islamic and Jewish traditions often sought to express heterodox and heretical ideas by writing esoterically, my question for Namazi is: With esotericists like al-Fārābī, who needs exotericists?

[16]Farabi, *Aphorisms*, §94, p. 63.
[17]Farabi, *Religion*, §5, p. 97.