

# One

---

## Introduction

Now more than at any time for centuries, Alfarabi, a tenth-century Muslim political philosopher, is especially timely. This book is intended as an introduction to Alfarabi's thought not through a survey of his many writings but through an analysis especially of one of them, one with special relevance to our times. In his *Attainment of Happiness*, Alfarabi envisions the fulfillment of Islam's ambition to spread Islam, as *the* virtuous religion, to the inhabited world. Along the way, however, he raises a few questions: Is one religion suited to the great variety of human communities throughout the world? Is it possible for more than one virtuous religion to exist? If more than one virtuous religion can exist, how and why can they exist? One thing is certain: Alfarabi is not a premodern version of John Locke. Alfarabi's solution to intercommunal conflict, to the extent he intends to offer one, is *not* to pronounce all religions equal as long as they promote a characteristically modern morality and avoid interference in politics. (In this introduction, I will refer to this all-too-brief account of Locke's teaching, not even entertained by Alfarabi, as "tolerance," though I use the term loosely here.) On the contrary, Alfarabi describes a world filled with rank and hierarchy. (Furthermore, he does not separate religion from politics.) He has no qualms about pronouncing one religion superior to another—though he does so without pointing fingers. He describes in challenging ways what makes a religion truly virtuous. Rather than declaring in advance the superiority of Islam to all other religions, he analyzes what it takes to be virtuous and rightly guided and leaves it to his readers to compare existing religions with his account. Most importantly, he does not

exclude the possibility of a multiplicity of virtuous religions.<sup>1</sup> For a variety of reasons, Alfarabi was considered too radical for his times. At least to some extent, his time may have just arrived. I do not intend to offer a panacea. Alfarabi does not offer mechanisms or institutions of governance such as the separation of powers, which have the potential, if rightly instituted, to establish a balanced modern government. Rather, he is more interested in educating his reader than in offering institutional solutions. He seeks to explore and illuminate his readers' own hopes and aspirations—through a dialogue of sorts with them—one reader at a time. Such an education, though often difficult to come by in our loud and hurried times, is, I believe, especially important today, for both Muslim and non-Muslim alike.

In his *Attainment of Happiness*, Alfarabi extrapolates from insights that Plato developed in the *Republic*. In the *Republic*, Socrates envisions a perfectly just city (*polis*) as one in which all citizens are devoted solely to the common good. The harm done to the private good of most citizens in that city is familiar to most undergraduates. Alfarabi uses that insight and applies it to his own setting. He wonders what it would take for Islam to achieve its ambition to rule the world justly. He argues that it would require that not only every nation but also every city within every nation should be virtuous. Furthermore, to be truly just, the rulers of each nation would need to be philosopher-kings, and each city would need to have its own peculiar adaptations or imitations of philosophy suited to its particular climate and locale. In other words, a virtuous world regime would require a multiplicity of virtuous religions to match the multiplicity of virtuous nations.

Alfarabi does *not* intend this world regime to be a realistic or even an ideal plan. Rather, he seeks to persuade his reader that the effort to establish a just world regime is an impossibly high, even if a noble, goal. The *Attainment of Happiness*, like the *Republic*, is intended as a cautionary tale promoting political moderation. Above all, it seeks to educate the young and politically ambitious Muslim to temper his or her desire to spread the truths of Islam to the world as a whole. Once again, this form of political education is quite different from the modern focus on mechanisms and institutions of governance. It almost goes without saying that such institutions are indispensable. At the same time, mechanisms alone will not stand a chance in the face of citizens filled with religious zeal for the highest and noblest aspirations of the human heart.

There are obvious similarities between Alfarabi's claim that there can exist a multiplicity of virtuous religions and the liberal democrat's claim

that different religions need to coexist in tolerance. Nevertheless, the two claims are not synonymous. The former befits a world in which the primary form of political education is to temper the zeal and ambition of the young; the latter befits a world in which zeal and ambition are directed, for the most part, away from politics toward material acquisition. Could the former be used as a stepping-stone to the latter? Or could the former be used to complement the approach of the latter? There is room for argument, debate, and inquiry into these and related questions. This book seeks to spark such debate and to offer access to the premodern approach to the problem—a premodern approach with peculiar relevance in today's Middle East.

### ALFARABI'S LIFE AND HIS INFLUENCE

I need not repeat many of the details of Alfarabi's biography here.<sup>2</sup> Abu Nasr Muhammad al-Farabi (or Alfarabi) was born (in 870 C.E./256 A.H.) and reared on the easternmost reaches of the Islamic world in what is today Central Asia. He was a native speaker of a Turkic dialect, Soghdian. Although before adulthood he received a relatively traditional Muslim education there, he received much of his education, especially in Arabic and logic, from Christian scholars. Eventually he traveled to the heart of the Islamic lands residing in what are today Syria, Iraq, and Egypt, and he is likely to have spent time even in Byzantium. The most striking feature of Alfarabi's education is his deep exposure to a variety of languages, places, and religious and ethnic groups. Although such travels were by no means rare in his time, Alfarabi was clearly a cosmopolitan man. I do not mean to suggest that Alfarabi's biography dictated his philosophy, however. All I mean to suggest is that his life provided him with firsthand experience of the kind of diversity a ruler might face in attempting to establish a virtuous regime of the inhabited world. If any Muslim understood the differences among nations that would have to be reflected in any Islamic effort to spread Islam, that Muslim was Alfarabi.

It could be objected that Alfarabi's cosmopolitanism aside, the world has passed him by. After all, he is a little-studied, tenth-century thinker whose influence, with a few exceptions, seems not to have lasted beyond the thirteenth century. Yet his aborted influence is part of what gives his thought such relevance. The public the world over, including in the Middle East, wants to know what went wrong in the Muslim world. Why has it been left behind? Of course, many in the West leap to the conclusion

that Islam is the root of the problem. No one could deny that Islam has played some role. The question is whether the Islam that played a role is truly Islamic. I cannot enter into the details of the debate about whether Islam has an essence and whether that essence cannot be reformed. I have my suspicions that it not only can but also must be reformed. And if one wishes to continue thinking constructively about these matters, then one must assume it can be reformed. In any such reformation, it is essential that Muslims seek to assess where wrong turns were made in the tradition. I hope to persuade the reader that the turn, in the thirteenth century, away from Alfarabi's kind of political rationalism in Islam had deleterious effects. Now that turn was certainly overdetermined. It was not the result of a simple, conscious decision of a few. Rather, factors far beyond the control of individuals such as the Mongol sacking of Baghdad in 1258 contributed mightily to the demise of this rationalism. Obviously the conflict between Islam and Christendom did little to help matters. The rise of mystical and illuminationist philosophy within the Islamic world, however, was not the result solely of events. Rulers, jurists, and ulema made choices in favor of that trend within education. It also did not help that the two staunchest proponents of rationalism, Alfarabi and Averroes (Ibn Rushd), may have been prone to stating their positions too starkly. Above all, Avicenna (Ibn Sina), the most widely known Muslim philosopher in both the West and the Islamic world, contributed to the demise of rationalism by effacing the differences between philosophy and traditional theology.

Yet perhaps the greatest contributing factor to Islam's inability to adapt to the modern world was the relative absence of deep theological differences within the Islamic fold, at least until relatively late in its development. The largest dispute between Sunni and Shi'i was for centuries largely political or dynastic. In contrast, the wars of religion between Catholics and Protestants with their deep theological basis tore Europe apart in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These wars compelled political philosophers to think anew about the proper relation between religion and politics. Furthermore, Christianity's focus on the next life facilitated the separation of religion from politics. Consequently, European thinkers were enabled to give birth to the Enlightenment. These wars of religion, these unwanted spurs to reform, have contributed mightily to Western history. Ironically, Islam's greatest loss may have been being spared the scourge of more profoundly religious warfare within the house of Islam.

To return to Alfarabi, although the Islamic world was incapable for whatever reasons of assimilating Alfarabi's profound rationalism in the medieval period, it may stand to benefit from his instruction now. After all,

Alfarabi is not the purveyor of yet another panacea such as Pan-Arabism or Baathism or Pan-Islamism. Rather, he thinks through the highest ideals of Islam down to their clearest political implications. Unlike a political program or mechanism, this form of political education may be truly timeless.

Alfarabi is barely known in the West because most medieval Christian thinkers were interested in Muslim thinkers primarily as transmitters and modifiers of the metaphysical doctrines of Plato and Aristotle. In the medieval West, then, later thinkers such as Avicenna and Averroes made more extensive and more novel contributions in metaphysics than he and are, therefore, far more widely known in the West. Yet these very thinkers—not only Avicenna and Averroes but also Ibn Bajja and Ibn Tufayl—acknowledge Alfarabi's preeminence among political philosophers in and of Islam.

### ALFARABI'S MANNER OF WRITING

Alfarabi is notorious for the caution with which he writes. I, like others before me,<sup>3</sup> have discussed the roots of this need for secretive or esoteric writing elsewhere. In his most explicit statement on the matter in his *Summary of Plato's "Laws,"* he discusses Plato's secretiveness by drawing an analogy between how Plato expresses himself and the actions of an abstemious ascetic who is hated by a ruler. That ascetic seeks to escape the city by imitating a drunk, in other words, by imitating the immoderation of those around him.<sup>4</sup> The arguments for interpreting this as sanctioning secretive writing need not be repeated here.

Rather, we may focus on the issue before us in reading Alfarabi's *Attainment of Happiness*, the possibility of a virtuous regime of the inhabited world, to see whether Alfarabi would not have every reason for treading lightly. The possibility of such a regime, indeed, the requirement that Muslims pursue a highly homogeneous form of such a regime, had come even by Alfarabi's time to be accepted within Islamic jurisprudence.<sup>5</sup> If Alfarabi were to declare openly that Islam's ambition for a virtuous regime of the inhabited world is doomed to failure, then he could be viewed as in some sense heretical. Consequently, he does not declare explicitly that the virtuous regime of the inhabited world is impossible. Indeed, many have read the *Attainment of Happiness* and assumed that it advocates the realization or attainment of such a regime. A philosopher's argument that something is impossible would seem at first to be wholly unnecessary. After all, isn't impossibility self-enforcing? That is, if such a regime really cannot

exist, then it never will. And if one attempts to realize such a plan, at best, then one will succeed in bringing into being a pale imitation of it. Why, then, should a philosopher make such an argument, as I am suggesting, between the lines? I believe that Alfarabi makes such an argument to prevent the unnecessary suffering of both rulers and ruled: the former, including the most intelligent and ambitious, run the risk of frittering away their abilities on a pale imitation of what they truly desire, while the latter run the risk of suffering at the hands of ambitious rulers. Alfarabi hopes to redirect these potential rulers' love of things high and noble toward the pursuit of knowledge rather than conquest. In this respect, he takes a page from the book of Plato's Socrates, who made strenuous efforts to prevent extraordinary individuals such as Alcibiades from wasting their gifts on the pursuit of empire.<sup>6</sup>

How, then, does Alfarabi go about communicating subtly his cautionary tale? He does not argue openly for caution. Indeed, if Alfarabi were not identified repeatedly as the leading logician in medieval Islam, and we were not confident that he knows what an argument is, then we might be tempted to suppose that he rarely argues anything, especially in his most renowned political writings. If one expects the explicit back and forth of a Platonic dialogue, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE*), or a medieval dialectical disputation, then one will generally be disappointed in Alfarabi. His arguments in his political writings are rarely openly dialectical, let alone demonstrative.<sup>7</sup> Rather, he writes descriptively and rhetorically.

The most prominent parts of his best-known political works, for example, the first parts of the *Virtuous City* and the *Political Regime*, contain his most rhetorical material. When he writes descriptively, he often states the conclusions of arguments without much of the argument leading up to them. For example, in his *Selected Aphorisms*, he offers prescriptions for political life highly reminiscent of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. His arguments become evident primarily when one compares his conclusions with Aristotle's. Small differences of conclusion often tell more than detailed and rigorous argument could. In (part ii of) the *Attainment of Happiness* (where Alfarabi turns to his plans for a virtuous regime of the inhabited world) his accounts are also largely descriptive. He describes what a regime of the inhabited world would require to be virtuous. He offers little, if any, argument for why such a regime would be desirable—after all, his religion has already offered the rationale. Furthermore, he does not describe such a regime in detail. Rather, he takes advantage of the universal, philosophic point of view (what is sometimes treated disparagingly in modern philosophy as the view from nowhere) to make the reader responsible for consid-

ering the possible details. In what follows, I refer to this aspect of his writing, especially pronounced in the *Attainment of Happiness* and even more so in the *Book of Religion*, as his “schematic” style. In leaving the filling in of details to the reader, he makes the reader responsible for confronting the real challenge of his argument.<sup>8</sup> For example, Alfarabi never specifies how many nations would be part of the virtuous regime of the inhabited world he discusses. But his claim that each component must be virtuous, especially in accordance with the virtuous standard of Plato’s *Republic*, boggles the mind when one seeks to envision it in any detail. By leaving the filling in of details to the reader, Alfarabi makes his attentive reader engage in a dialogue with his writings.

Another feature of Alfarabi’s writing that will play a prominent role in this book, especially chapter 4, is the way Alfarabi compels his reader to think through shocking omissions. The most obvious examples are the following: In the *Attainment of Happiness (AH)* he is completely silent about prophecy, and in the portion of *Selected Aphorisms*, where one most expects a discussion of *jihād*, he is silent about it. The former silence is so striking because the inspiration for the entirety of *AH* is surely Islam, especially its ambition to bring virtue to the entire world. But Islam claims to be a revealed or prophetic religion. Yet Alfarabi, though he discusses prophecy in many of his works, is wholly silent about it in *AH*. Does this mean we should suppose that when Alfarabi wrote *AH* he did not have Islam in mind? On the contrary. At least in Alfarabi’s time, nothing but one of the revealed religions could have inspired the plan for a virtuous regime of the inhabited world.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, in the opening paragraphs of Alfarabi’s discussion of forms of war in *Aphorisms*, sec. 67, when he is discussing a form of war most like *jihād*, he never identifies it as just or as a form of *jihād*. As we will discover in the pages that follow, Alfarabi engages in a self-conscious strategy of omitting terms or elements of an argument or a plan that one most expects—to provoke thought.

## OVERVIEW

To recapitulate in a more orderly fashion, the three key parts of my argument are the following: (1) To think through Islam’s ambition to spread the virtuous religion of Islam to the entire world, Alfarabi compares its ambition to the model of the virtuous city in the *Republic*. Through an analysis of the *Republic*, I show that the virtuous city in that book is intended ultimately by Plato’s Socrates to be impossible.<sup>10</sup> I also show that Alfarabi

evinces his awareness in our key text, the *Attainment of Happiness*, that it is impossible. (2) Alfarabi adds to this his “a fortiori argument.” If Islam is to achieve its ambition of bringing its virtuous religion to the entire world, then every city and every nation must become virtuous in its own right. If it is impossible for one truly virtuous city to come into being, then a fortiori it is impossible for a virtuous regime of the inhabited world to come into being.<sup>11</sup> (3) Alfarabi adds to this his “multiplicity argument.” Each religion must be suited in each time and place to the national character of each people, influenced by environmental differences such as climate and food supply and conventional differences such as language. A virtuous regime of the inhabited world, then, would have to include a multiplicity of virtuous religions. Consequently, even if such a regime were possible, each part of the inhabited world would possess a different religion. In other words, a virtuous regime of the inhabited world would not be nearly as homogeneous as many traditionalist adherents of Islam expect it to be.

This book includes these three main arguments and others in the following manner: This chapter, chapter 1, is the book’s introduction. Chapter 2 is (1) on the impossibility of the virtuous city in the *Republic*. Chapter 3 is (2) the “a fortiori argument.” Chapter 4 expands upon a special thread in the “a fortiori argument,” Alfarabi’s position on *jihād*. If virtuous religion(s) is (are) to be spread throughout the world, then virtuous character would seem to need to be spread not only through persuasion but also by force. Although Alfarabi appears at first glance to promote *jihād*, closer analysis reveals a sophisticated and subtle critique of the traditional juridical justifications for *jihād*. Chapter 5 is (3) the “multiplicity argument.” Chapter 6 on the limits of human knowledge seeks to explain the connection between the inherent multiplicity of religions and Alfarabi’s assessment of the limits of human knowledge. If human beings could possess certain and exhaustive knowledge of the causes and grounds of the cosmos, which we cannot, then it might have been possible for one science to take the place of the many religions.

Finally, although Alfarabi’s *Attainment* is the main focus of this book, large sections of the book are devoted not only to other Alfarabian texts, especially the *Selected Aphorisms* and the *Political Regime*, but also to Plato’s *Republic* and Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. Without a proper understanding of Plato and Aristotle,<sup>12</sup> much in Alfarabi remains mysterious. At the same time, Alfarabi can only deepen readers’ understanding of Plato and Aristotle.