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## Review

# Redefining the Muslim community: Ethnicity, religion, and politics in the thought of Alfarabi

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This book, based on a recent doctoral dissertation at the University of Chicago, is an erudite and a thoughtful study of a wide range of texts by the medieval Islamic philosopher Al-Farabi on the topic of the *umma*, an Arabic term whose two main meanings are ‘nation,’ on the one hand, and ‘universal Islamic community,’ on the other. Orwin treats the many passages in Farabi’s extensive corpus that illuminate this crucial term in Islamic political thought, with a focus on the relation between its two main meanings. Tensions between the nation (or nation-state) and the Islamic *umma* are as relevant to politics today as they have ever been, and anyone who reads this valuable book will walk away convinced that Farabi has something to teach us about those tensions.

The book’s references alone are a treasure trove and a monument to Orwin’s extensive and meticulous scholarly labor with original Arabic texts. He offers a compelling case that Farabi has reflected deeply on the topic of the *umma*, and that those reflections are essential to Farabi’s political thought as a whole – indeed to his whole philosophic *œuvre*, for his extensive adaptations of Greek philosophy turn out to reflect his understanding of the need to ‘adapt...philosophical idiom to the language of each Umma’ (p. 79). Orwin goes through numerous difficult Farabian texts with a fine-toothed comb, and at helpful moments interjects enlightening discussions of the earlier and contemporary texts that make up their background. His clear, forceful, and energetic writing style should be held up as a model for younger scholars, and avoids to an admirable degree the plodding and infelicitous self-reference that often marks a published dissertation.

Orwin is a third-generation Straussian, comfortable with his school and basic interpretive approach, who has read widely in the non-Straussian literature. His book never indicates that Farabi scholarship is probably the single area in the whole study of the history of political thought where Straussianism is held in the most



contempt by its more mainstream colleagues. Formerly warring interpretations of Xenophon, Plato, Maimonides, Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau have by now sat down to parley, but in the case of Farabi the battle lines remain drawn. *Redefining the Muslim Community* offers neither a new skirmish in that battle, nor an effort at a negotiated peace, nor indeed any attempt to induce defections from the other side, but what looks more like an exploratory mission through safely conquered territory. This is perhaps unavoidable in a book-length interpretive study. Its downside is that, if two fundamentally different approaches to Farabi have little to say to each other beyond polite citations, they will be unable to engage in the mutually enlightening – if spirited – dialogue that has recently enriched (for example) the world of Locke scholarship. It is hard to imagine any non-Straussian being moved by Orwin's interpretive conclusions, most of which rely on the argument *ex silentio* and/or on phrases like 'might well indicate,' 'leads me to suspect,' 'may contain an oblique reference to,' 'gives the impression,' 'one may wonder whether,' and 'Is it hasty to infer that...?' But even if readers skeptical of such an interpretive methodology do not find here any direct response to their basic objections, they will nonetheless find this book an indispensable guide to Farabi's thought on the *umma*. That alone may help advance a kind of unofficial truce in the battle mentioned above. Given Farabi's notoriously 'obscure writing style' (p. 7), his modern-day students should not expect to resolve all methodological disagreements before reading and learning from each other's books.

All scholars with an interest in Farabi, whatever their own interpretive approach may be, will profit from Orwin's impressive study. Less useful are Orwin's efforts in the book's frame to sell Farabi to political theorists with no such prior interest. Farabi is one of the towering geniuses of Islamic intellectual history: a monograph on his view of the *umma* requires no further justification. One needs no sweeping claim that the meaning of the nation is 'strangely neglected by the history of political philosophy' or that political philosophers prior to Farabi 'did not take the nation very seriously' (pp. 4, 15). For one could ignore Cicero, Herodotus, Plutarch, and others, and still note (as Orwin later does) that even Plato treats ethnic themes more satisfactorily in the *Menexenus*, *Laws*, and *Letters*, than he does in the famously anti-familial *Republic*, to which Orwin limits his discussion here (cf. pp. 24, 25, 27, 32, 211 n. 38). One should rather hope that this book will encourage other scholars to interpret the discussions of *ethnos* or *gens* in Plato and other classical thinkers with the same care that Orwin has applied to Farabi's scattershot passages on the *umma*. In the meantime, Orwin's work needs no such salesmanship. His discussion of why any reader of Farabi should 'be interested in the topic of the Umma at all' (pp. 66, 70), his extensive treatment of the *umma*'s relation to philosophy as Farabi understood the term (cf. p. 168), and some other passages with no obvious bearing on the questions posed by his political frame (see pp. 156–158, 180–183), show that his study is guided by a genuine interest in



understanding Farabi's own concerns. This fact should be bragged about, not concealed.

Orwin asserts repeatedly that the pre-Islamic meaning of *umma* should be translated by the Huntingtonian term 'civilization' rather than 'nation' (pp. 30, 53–54, 56–57, 86, 135, 194). But he also identifies as *ummas* nations such as the ancient Syrians, Turks, and Arabs, and the modern Italians, Germans, Estonians, Czechs, Kurds, and Berbers, none of whom are usually called civilizations (see pp. 53, 214 n. 42). If *umma* in its pre-Islamic sense did mean 'civilization,' then Islam would be an *umma* in both senses of the term (as in 'Islamic civilization,' p. 135). Only because the pre-Islamic sense means 'nation' can one say, as Orwin generally (and rightly) does say, that Islam is in one sense an *umma* that in another sense overlaps with multiple *ummas*.

Orwin's inclination to translate *umma* as 'civilization' may stem in part from an assumption that modern readers – at least those unfamiliar with the Old Testament (cf. p. 43) – will imagine the bond of a 'nation' merely in terms of 'blood and language,' in contradistinction to the Islamic community united by 'religion and faith' (pp. 12, 95). Yet Orwin also makes clear that for Farabi, 'ancestral customs' and 'ways of life,' including traditional mythologies and forms of worship, are essential to what constitutes a pre-Islamic nation (pp. 28–29, 36; 24, 56, 74). The ancient Greek nation held 'the sacred things...in common'; the term *umma* in its pre-Islamic sense 'often has pronounced religious undertones' (pp. 24, 91). It may therefore be more helpful to say, not that the term has 'an ethnic as well as a religious meaning' (p. 91), but that a study of Farabi reveals the inadequacy of this modern dichotomy (cf. also pp. 86–87, 113–114, 204). This would only sharpen Orwin's basic point about the conflict between ethnic ancestral *ummas* and the non-ethnic Islamic *umma*.

Orwin's practical conclusions offer several brief but penetrating insights into that conflict as it exists in the Muslim world today (pp. 94, 114–115, 195, 203). He suggests 'the Christian phenomenon of national churches,' borrowed from the Orthodox and Protestant worlds, as a model for a more politically stable Islam that is already to some extent present in India and Iran (pp. 124–125, 172). I find this suggestion persuasive. I am unsure how it fits with Orwin's alternative suggestion that 'Islamic civilization' today needs to pursue *more* unity as an international *umma* (p. 135). Nor am I sure that this book's scholarship on Farabi was either necessary or sufficient to produce these or any of its other practical recommendations. To take just one example: even if we needed Farabi to warn us against 'what we might call "national stereotyping"' (pp. 60, 80), Farabi turns out to have indulged in more of it than most of us would be comfortable with (pp. 63–64, 183, 214 n. 43).

Orwin's fellow medievalists will find some nits to pick. It would have been helpful for him to clarify how he is using modern categories like 'culture,' and the distinction between 'religion' and 'politics,' in a way that avoids distorting Farabi's



thought (e.g., pp. 85, 107, 113). He ought also to have explained how Farabian cosmology permits one to draw the Straussian distinction between ‘divine will and power’ on the one hand and ‘natural causes’ on the other (pp. 60–61, 91, 99). Some of us will be put off by Orwin’s assumption that ‘philosophers’ as such are ‘enticed’ by ‘subversive insinuations’ toward ‘rebellious thoughts’ against religion (pp. 101–102), or his assertion that religious authorities (*fuqaha*)—such as Averroes and Maimonides?) have questionable ‘judgment’ ‘by the nature of their trade’ and will ‘suppress’ theological ‘uncertainty’ because they are ‘unable to reconcile themselves’ to it (pp. 109–111). Orwin’s doubts as to Farabi’s view of the prophet Mohammed have better textual support (pp. 97, 101, 104, 183 with 200, and 134), but then they render strange Orwin’s apparent assumption that by ‘virtuous religion’ Farabi means something that actually existed in his day.

But these are intramural controversies. Orwin’s book is, to repeat, a valuable and well-researched survey from which we can learn much about a thinker who ought to be of enormous interest to us all.

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