**Remembering Al-Farabi**

Dr Naazir Mahmood

Monday, Feb 07, 2022

The writer holds a PhD from the University of Birmingham, UK and works in Islamabad.

Remembering great minds who contributed to the flourishing of civilisations is a commendable activity. It reminds us how hundreds of years ago, those who sought knowledge travelled across countries despite hardships in their journeys and the paucity of resources. Abu Nasr Al-Farabi was one of such great personalities of the medieval period.

Many Central Asian countries claim to be his birthplace, but most historians agree that he was born in a city in Kazakhstan in the early 870s. His exact birth year is disputed, but most scholars agree that it was between 870 and 875. It was a pleasant surprise to know that Comstech and the government of Kazakhstan decided to celebrate Al-Farabi’s 1150th birth anniversary. When I received the proceedings of the Global Al-Farabi Forum organised by Comstech in Islamabad, it gave me immense pleasure to see a galaxy of scholars on Al-Farabi there.

The institution works under the guidance and supervision of the Organisation of Islamic Countries (OIC). It fact, it is the OIC Standing Committee on Scientific and Technological Cooperation. Its core mandate is to strengthen cooperation among OIC member states in science and technology. How far Comstech has been able or unable to fulfil its mandate in its 40 years of existence will require a detailed discussion. For now, let’s confine ourselves to the proceedings of the Global Al-Farabi Forum and how it enlightens us about that great intellectual, logician, mathematician, philosopher, and scientist.

He graced this globe over a thousand years ago, but his influence was felt far and wide for many centuries. An eminent philosopher of the classical Islamic period and one of the leading pioneers of universal learning with respect to the principles of Greek logic, he was a staunch promoter of social organisation based on collaboration and cooperation rather than conflicts based on ethnic or sectarian issues. Scholars have studied his writings across centuries and continents to learn his ideas on inter alia civilisation, history, and philosophy. The Global Al-Farabi Forum was one such forum where dozens of scholars met to talk about Al-Farabi.

Dr Khurshid Husnain and Dr Iqbal Choudhary deserve full credit for organising such an event despite the challenges that the Covid-19 pandemic posed, forcing it to be hybrid with both online and physical participation. But even more credit goes to the government of Kazakhstan which proposed and jointly organised the forum with Comstech. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, most Central Asian countries were able to reflect on their past in an independent way and opted for various personalities from history as their heroes. Rather than opting for a war warrior as its hero, Kazakhstan did the right thing and made Al-Farabi its iconic figure.

In this age of extremism and the so-called clash of civilisations, it is imperative that we select our heroes carefully. Those who created new traditions in intellectual and scientific exploration should become our ideals rather than those who built minarets of skulls. Muslim countries around the world can find plenty of luminaries in their history who made tremendous contributions to the advancement of learning and whose impact transcended the boundaries of the Muslim world. We may rejoice at the profound achievements of these personalities and at the same time commit ourselves to more intellectual growth in our countries rather than moving in circles.

If we need to galvanise our youth, we should try to give them inspirations from new learning and from pondering over philosophical and scientific challenges that our great teachers initiated over a thousand years back. But their initiatives were lost under empire building and under the shadow of an anti-intellectual onslaught by the clergy across most of Muslim-majority countries. In the 21st century, we need intellectual courage to challenge established narratives, just like Al-Farabi and others did centuries ago. For that we need profound scholarship and not a superficial pretense of learning that revolves around rituals.

Perhaps, at the heart of Al-Farabi’s work – and that of other scholars of that period – was an inherent universality of knowledge-seeking not hampered by narrow-mindedness. The resounding successes they achieved in various fields of learning could not be possible without an atmosphere of harmony and tolerance conducive to learning. To achieve that now, Al-Farabi Kazakh National University led by Dr Galimkair Mutanov and president of the Turkic Academy Darkhan Kyderali have been doing a lot in Central Asia for promoting a renewed culture of learning based on tolerance of different ideas and acceptance of diverse perspectives.

To quote a couple of examples of harmony and tolerance of that age, we see that Al-Farabi lived in Baghdad for decades and interacted with Christian scholars including cleric Yuhanna ibn Haylan, Yahya ibn Adi, and Abu Ishaq Ibrahim al-Baghdadi. From them he learned everything that he could and then managed to produce hundreds of scholarly works. Most of Al-Farabi’s books have been lost or buried in archives and book collections around the world, mostly in Europe. Still, over a hundred are known to exist, including over 40 on logic alone – a dozen books on metaphysics and another dozen commentaries on Aristotle and Plato.

Then we have his treatises on education, ethics, medicine, music, political science, psychology, and sociology. It is wrong to suggest – as some European scholars have done – that he was merely an Aristotelian logician, as his works include a number of non-Aristotelian discussions and elements. One of his major contributions was a categorisation of logic into two separate groups, the first being ‘idea’ and the second being ‘proof’.

One of his most significant works is his book ‘Enumeration of the Sciences’ – ‘(Ihsa al-ulum)’ – which became his most famous text around the world. Many scholars translated it into various languages as it was an encyclopedic survey of all that Al-Farabi believed knowledge could encompass in his day. Though it is short, it contains both philosophical and theological areas of knowledge that he classified in catalogues of various fields. He organised the sciences within his philosophic framework so that logic, mathematics, metaphysics, and physics culminated in political science that pursues happiness, to be realised in cities and nations.

Another of his major works is on music titled ‘Kitab al-Musiqa’ (the book of music) presenting mathematical and philosophical principles of music. In this he discussed various influences of music and their cosmic qualities such as the therapeutic effects of music on souls. He also dilated upon the question of intellect in his treatise the ‘Meanings of the Intellect’. Combining political science with philosophy and religion, he wrote ‘Al-Madina al-Fadila’ in which he theorised an ideal state as in Plato’s ‘The Republic’. He thought that religion uses symbols and persuasion to present the truth and it was a duty of the philosopher to provide guidance to the state. He drew a parallel from within the Islamic context and regarded what an ideal state meant.

Philosophically speaking, Al-Kindi was his predecessor and Al-Razi was his near contemporary, but Al-Farabi recast philosophy in a new framework in consonance with Islam. Al-Farabi also wrote a short piece ‘On Vacuum’ discussing the nature of the existence of void. He also dealt with the issues of social psychology and explained that isolated individuals could not achieve all the perfections by themselves, without the aid of other individuals. The list of topics that intrigued him is long and the Global Al-Farabi Forum had sessions covering many of his interests.

The plenary lecture by Dr Nomanul Haq tilted ‘Al-Farabi as a phenomenon of world culture’ is worth reading and so are contributions by other scholars.

Email: mnazir1964@yahoo.co.uk