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"Reason" and "Religion" in the Philosophy of Farabi

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Abstract

The discussion on the relationship between reason and religion has long been a fundamental issue among theologians and Muslim and non-Muslim philosophers. Among the Islamic scholars, Abu Nasr Farabi has had a crucial role in this field, because after Muslims became acquainted with Greece rationalism and this argument began to pursue that perhaps this phenomenon is an alien product, Farabi opened a new chapter on the Islamic philosophy by his belief that there is harmony and coordination between reason and religion. Using a descriptive-analytical method, the present article studies reason and religion and their relationship according to Farabi`s ideology. It addresses the meanings of reason and religion, theoretical and practical reasons and the relationship between these two, the role of active reason, connection with God and achieving bliss. Active reason had a special role in Farabi`s idea. According to him, it is the grace of active reason that is regarded as the source of knowledge in reason and religion. Therefore, the author concludes that religion and reason are the same in nature and that they are in perfect unity. Because of this Farabi believes that divine and rational knowledge together are the way towards bliss and immortality.

Keywords: religion, bliss, reason, active reason, Farabi.

Introduction

There is no doubt that the challenge between reason and religion, and historical efforts of rationalists and religious people in creating compatibility between them throughout history has had different motifs, because at first look reason is an indeterminate and growing issue while religion seems to be a divine and stable issue. Hence, the correlation between religion and reason requires successive efforts. It seems that, in today`s world, it is an essential effort to establish and prove the relationship between reason and religion because, as it is obvious, both reason without religion and religion without reason will lead to irreparable damages of the society as we have seen its effect in different political, cultural, economic, etc., fields during history.

The present research has tried to deal with this issue regarding the ideologies of Abu Nasr Farabi–known as the Second Teacher- (873-950). Therefore, it is inevitable to first deal with the literal and technical meanings of reason and religion and then state the relationship between these two. As it is well-known in the history of the Islamic philosophy, Farabi has had an important role in creationg harmony and compatibility between reason and religion. In what follows we prove that he believes in the unity of reason and religion in his own system of thought.

The literal meaning of reason

Literally speaking, reason has multiple meanings, namely wisdom, knowledge, understanding, sagacity, receiving intelligence and contrivance (Dehkhoda, 1968: Vol: 33). It is said about the literal meaning of reason (Aql in arabic) that reason is driven from the word "aqqal" and aqqal means a rope by which people tie the knees of a rouge camel. So, this concept is called "aql" (reason) because this inner force captures lusts and desires of human beings.

The technical meaning of reason

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Technically speaking, philosophers regard reason as having a broad nature by which people perceive the realities. Philosophers believe that the rational soul cannot be considered as being in the same level with the vegetative or animal soul, because when these souls are being put in creatures like man and animal, they will lose their differentiation and become united. However, reason is not apart from these souls, because philosophers believe that reason comes from out of minds i.e. it has divine aspects and after separation from the body's it is still immortal. This suggests that the beginning and the end of reason is different from other souls and after death it will survive (Moradi, 1970).

The literal meaning of religion
The term 'religion' is literally synonym with words like judgment, faith, shari`a, habit, judicial decree, etc. (Dehkhoda, 1968).

Religion: bonuses, Islam, habit, worship, continuous rain (Al-monjad, 1998).
Also, in quranic examples it is used in different meanings such as: penalty, audit, law, shari`a, obedience and servitude, submission to God, monotheism, worship of God, and the method and procedure (Ragheb Esfahani, 2006).

The technical meaning of religion
Here, religion is a set of practical programs that are in harmony with a world view which human establish or accept from others in order to reach to their bliss (Tabatabaei, 2009).

Religion: is a special method by which human can supply themselves with the prosperity and worldly interests as well as heavenly perfection and eternal real life. Therefore, shari`a is required to have rules that meet the worldly needs of human beings (Tabatabaei, 2009).

The meaning of reason from the viewpoint of Farabi
Farabi considers reason as being incorporeal. He has stated some proofs for the incorporeity of reason, such as: reason perceives contemplative and intelligible phenomena and these contemplative phenomena are incorporeal, so the thing which perceives them, i.e. reason, is also incorporeal. Another proof is that human reason and soul can directly perceive things itself without using physical tools. Another one is that human reason can perceive paradoxes and such things cannot be present in material world. Finally, reason becomes more powerful in old age and disabilities or decays of material things will not ruin it, so it is incorporeal (Moradi, 1970).
Farabi thinks that the theoretical and practical reason has three types: potential, acquired, actual and active reason.

a) Potential reason
Farabi indicates that human reason in this stage needs other affairs to become acquired and to complete its comprehension (Farabi, 1992).

b) Acquired reason
Farabi believes that the acquired reason is the same as possible reason. He has said that "this kind of reason manifests potential reason but it has the material of actual reason" (ibid.).

c) Actual reason
The actual reason has great importance in Farabi`s works. Reaching of human to this level of reason is being considered as the perfection of his bliss and is achieving all completive things in human reason and their unity with human reason and consequently, assimilates actual soul to incorporeal issues and can perceive these issues in active reason. This means that connecting intuitive reason to incorporeal reason is related to God and their supreme levels are acquired by prophets (Farabi, 2006).

d) Active reason
Farabi thinks that this reason understands all reasons and benefits from them and transfers such graces to human beings and the nature. By benefitting from active reason in the path of practical reason, human can reach to desirable perfection. Then, by accompanying it with theoretical reason, they can be a perfect human and reach. To active reason (Farabi, 1982).
As Farabi suggests, the potential and worldly reason is considered as the lowest level of reason and it is as a substance for acquired reason. Again, the acquired reason manifests potential reason but it has the material of actual reason. Then, the actual reason manifests acquired reason but has the material of active reason, which is not of human anymore.

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The first two reasons, as Farabi has stated, cannot perceive completive that are incorporeal and they are dependent of material world. However, the actual reason has reached to a stage where it can directly get the completive from the active reason. It does not in need of the material world and will not be ruined by its inexistence.
Farabi states that the active reason is called "Rooh-ol-Amin" or "Rooh-ol-Ghodos" and regards it as the last celestial reasons that are depart from human that is not present in the material world. Such kind of reason is always active.
In this classification, reason can reach from a lower level –potential reason- to perfection and a higher level that is called the active reason. Then, he can reach from the active reason to the final perfection. However, this path towards perfection can be completed using the active reason. The perfection and bliss of human in these levels is in reaching to active reason and uniting with it. So, Farabi points out to the complete unity and uniqueness of religion and reason when defining and classifying them.

Dividing reason to theoretical and practical reason
Much has been said about the practical and theoretical reason and the differences between these two. Nevertheless, one of the most important questions that is being asked in this field, is that whether human beings have two reasons, one of which is called theoretical and the other one is called practical, or there is one reason that has two different aspects? People who think that reason is unique, say that the differences is related to its belongings. In other words, the difference between the theoretical and practical reason is nothing but the differences between its belongings. What is perceived by reason, and it is among the affairs that are said that it deserves to be done or it is recommended to be left, it will be inevitably related to practical reasons. But if it is among the affairs that are not related to doing or leaving something, it will be regarded as theoretical reason.
Farabi is among people who think that the differences between these two reasons are related to the differences between the belongings of the perceptions of these two. He says: "the rational mentality in human has two essential parts: the theoretical mentality is a force by which human perceive those kinds of knowledge that will not be acted in practice. However, the practical mentality is the kind of force that is acted according to the will of human beings" (Farabi, 1982).
Farabi believes that by the use of the active reason, human can reach to maturity and become incorporeal and then reach to the active reason. The kind of force that the active reason gives to human, leads them to the desired spiritual perfection, so that he can be familiar with theoretical and practical divine knowledge. The active reason, as Farabi suggests, is an inductor of grace from heaven down to earth and it is called "Rooh-ol-Amin" or "Gabriel". Farabi indicates that the practical and theoretical reasons are as two wings that help human beings in the path towards perfection. He, as a philosopher, tries to adapt his philosophical principles with religious beliefs and to supply rational and philosophical fundamentals for his religious beliefs.

The relationship between reason and religion
As it was mentioned earlier, Farabi believes that religion and reason are united. There are evidences in his sayings that prove this idea. For example, the issue of Utopia and the rational interpretation of "Pen and Tablet" can be cited.

The utopia
One of the most fundamental principles of the political philosophy of Farabi is the issue of utopia and the religious society. He means an exemplary society in which jobs and positions are based on meritocracy. Concerning the relationship between religious leaders and formation of utopia he says that: "people who are managed and tutored by a prophet, will be the best and the most prosperous people in the world. If they form a nation, such nations will be the accomplished nation, and if they come together in a place, that place would be the utopia" (Sajjadi, 1982).
The first part of Farabi`s saying is derived from the Holy Quran which says: "you are the best nation that are emerged and ruled over people, you command them to do good deeds and forbid them to do bad things (Surah: Al-Imran, verse: 110).
The second part of his saying can be compared with the behavior and conduct of the Prophet (pbuh) in Mecca and Medina. Due to not being prepared for establishing the Islamic Ummah in Mecca, they established the first and second homage. However, in Medina they could establish the Islamic Ummah. Therefore, the Prophet has legislated a set of do's and don'ts and values to govern social life (Farabi, 1987).
According to Farabi, one of the samples of the unity of reason and religion is the similarity of the administrator of the utopia to God; he says: "The administrator of the utopia is similar to the First Cause (i.e. God), whom the existence of creatures depends on Him" (Farabi, 1987). This quote is indicative of the complete human who is the full symbol of the manifestation of divine names and attributes and hence, it has the most similarity with God. Prophets are complete people, and after them wise rulers that govern the utopia have such dignity.

The rational interpretation of Pen and Tablet

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Another sample which proves the unity of religion and reason in Farabi`s viewpoint is his rational interpretation of Pen, Tablet, book and divine fate and decree which is among Farabi`s philosophical inventions and innovations. He suggests that his intent about these concepts and terms is not their physical and external meanings; "do not think that a Pen is a solid tool and Tablet is a written book, but here, Pen is the spiritual angel and Tablet is the images of these facts; Pen receives the meanings in the world and surrender them to the Tablet by the spiritual book. Consequently, the decree flows from the Pen and the fate flows from the Tablet (Farabi, 1984).

Farabi thinks that reason and religion are united, so that in the discussion of the utopia, he assimilates the administrator of this city –the complete human- to God, and this means that in his philosophy, such relationship exists both in the higher levels –the active reason- and the lower levels –at the society level and the daily human life.

The utopia is a sample of a society which is on the basis of the divine principles, the society which is inspired by the society which existed at the time of the Prophet, the society in which management and administration is similar to the management of God, the society which is efficiently based on religion as well as rationalism, the society in which the ruling of religion without reason and the ruling of reason without religion is not complete, but both of them should administer that society like two wings.

Another sample is the rational interpretation of Farabi about the Tablet and Pen and Book. Here, the philosophy is the spiritual angel and the book is regarded as the images of the world`s fact.

This viewpoint suggests that the original facts transfer from the divine source to the earth by the revelation angel. This means that the original reason and science is transmitted to the Tablet by the revelation angel and according to that, the fate and decree will flow in the Universe. Such interpretation in Farabi`s sayings is indicative of the full unity between reason and religion. The source of sciences and facts are the divine revelation and the fate and destiny of the servants in the created world is based on the divine science which has been transferred to the earth.

Achieving to bliss and prosperity based on Farabi`s philosophy

Bliss means the absolute blessing. Everything which is useful in the path towards happiness and felicity is considered as being blessed, of course not by its nature and pleasures, but by its usefulness in the path of bliss. Conversely, anything that in any case prevents people in reaching to bliss is considered as being evil. Something that is useful on the road to human happiness and bliss can be whether natural affairs or it is created by divine will; and in the same way evils that are obstacles in the path of bliss, can be whether originated from natural affairs or it is may be dependent on a will (Farabi, 2006).

In the discussion about bliss, Farabi suggests that 4 elements are necessary for reaching to bliss: theoretical, intellectual and emotional virtues and practical figures (1992). He considers theoretical virtues as a kind of rational and unquestionable perception of creatures, i.e. the states by which souls can distinguish facts. Farabi has called the perceptional force of axioms as the theoretical reason, which is considered as the first level of theoretical virtues. He defines it as: 'it is the mentality that human possess naturally, without any discussion and reasoning, because it is a certain science and hermeneutics that is the introduction and subsets of sciences" (Farabi, 1987).

Farabi thinks that bliss can be identified through theoretical reason and specifies that: "the identification of bliss is something general and rational and reason is responsible for it" (Farabi, 1987). He believes that: "whenever science reached to bliss due to the theoretical mentality and the theoretical mentality considered it as his ultimate result and aim, and it was illustrated abstractly, and then the power of thought should be taken into account in order to reach to bliss by using the five senses and the imagination. Then, the abstract reason conducts those affairs. It is the time when all human affairs seem blessed and beautiful. However, if human do not identify the path of bliss and do not aim to reach to it and think of reaching to other things, and spend time on it by his abstract reason. Then, he uses his all five senses as well as his imagination in order to reach to his goal and do that affairs by his abstract reason, all his deeds will be evil and ugly" (Farabi, 2006).

Farabi suggests that the overall and rational identification of bliss will be done by theoretical reason. It is something general and has no obvious complications and it can never be created by human beings. Human can only distinguish between things, such as what generosity or chastity is. Such things should be accompanied by time, place, etc. in order come into existence. Such generosity and chastity that will be achieved by human is a part of a whole (Farabi, 1992).

Consequently, here Farabi has made great emphasis on the theoretical reason in the discussion of bliss and the path towards it. The identification of bliss is through the theoretical reason and the path to achieve it is through rational and divine knowledge. Farabi says that this path is from down to top, i.e. reaching to those desirable perfections is by becoming familiar with theoretical and practical knowledge and cognition. Such knowledge is given to human by the active reason.

The role of active reason in knowing God

In Farabi`s cosmology, God is distinct from the world and such distinction is like the distinction between existence and nature. He thinks that the existence is the attribute of God and the possibility is regarded as property "nothing but

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Him". Accordingly, God is "self-existent" (i.e. He exists independent from other beings). Thus, the existence of God is necessary and obligational and His inexistence is impossible. But the world "may exist or not" and the proportion of its existence or nonexistence is the same. It needs an authority to grant him existence and this authority is the First Cause that is "God" (Farabi, 1987).

In explaining the relationship between reason and God, Farabi indicates that reason is aware of God and it is eager to know Him better, then it can find Him. Yet, it is also aware of itself because it has found all its power from its cause which is regarded as the "cause of causes". Yet, the reason will find out that it is one of the gifts and blessings of this cause and all these blessings are divine bounty. This is because reason is a science and its nature and power is something unique. So, if we accept that reason can think of God and understand Him, then reason can gain power and perfection. And if the reason could gain its power ad perfection, it can find knowledge as well. It is because its essence is considered as one of its perfections.

Farabi thinks that such abilities of reason are from a power that it has obtained from God and that reason cannot perceive the depth of the existence of God because here "science" and "what science is related to it" are unique (Farabi, 1984).

As a consequence, it can be said that reason and God are of one gender. Reason has two aspects: one aspect is upward and towards God and the other is towards itself. On the one hand it will be aware of God and ask help from Him, and on the other hand it will be aware of itself. In its relationship with God, reason will be unified with God and this is the proof that why reason cannot identify the depth of God existence. So, it can be concluded that the God of Farabi is a rational God.

Conclusion

In analyzing the Farabi`s viewpoint about the relationship between reason and religion, we can point out to the following:

1. Farabi thinks that the active reason in human is a tool which is the source of rational and divine knowledge. He believes that reason and religion are unified in nature because they are derived from one source. The active reason, as Farabi suggest, is the revelation angel i.e. Gabriel who induces grace from heaven to the earth. This means that Farabi regards reason and religion as being united.
2. Concerning the relationship between reason and God, Farabi believes to rational God. He believes that reason will become aware of God and will be eager to know Him better. Then it can find Him and yet it can find itself as well. This means that reason and God are united.
3. Farabi suggests that bliss can be achieved through the theoretical reason and believes that generosity or chastity are general concepts that are understood by reason and they can be obtained by human when they are being put in time, place, etc. Farabi also says that reaching to the First Cause is reaching to bliss and perfection and the rational and divine knowledge are the ways towards bliss and immortality. However, such way of reaching to bliss is different from a person to another. He thinks that such kind of difference is methodological. Philosophers reach to bliss through rational reasoning but ordinary people can reach to it by using imagination or images and symbols.

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