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المؤتمر الاسلامي العالمي للسيرة النبوية • كنگرس عالمي سيرتِ نبوي

International Congress on Seerat

Under the auspices of :

Ministry of Religious Affairs, Government of Pakistan
and

Hamdard National Foundation, Pakistan

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THE IMPACT OF THE IDEAL OF
MADINAT UN-NABI ON THE TURKS

By

Dr. E. Esin

ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF PAKISTAN

March 3, 1976 Thru' March 15, 1976

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The impact of the ideal of Madinat un-Nabi, the City of the Prophet, on Turkish minds, may be followed as far back as the Third century A. H. (IXth century). Such an ideal has been expressed in a work of the early Islamic philosopher of Turkish origin, Muhammad, son of Muhammad, son of Tarkhan, son of Uzlugh (n. 257-339/870-950) from Western Turkistan, born in Farab, in the oasis called Kengu-tarban¹ in Turkish inscriptions of that age. The work in question is the opusculum entitled Ara u-ahl ul-Madinat ul-fadila (The opinions of the dwellers of the Virtuous City). Farabi's Madina has sometimes been viewed as an indirect imitation of Plato's Republic. It has however been simultaneously pointed out that the influence was formal and not essential. The essential distinction between Plato and Farabi lay in the definition of virtue. The ruler of Plato's Republic must be a philosopher and the citizens should be trained into an intelligent concept of happiness. The initial ruler of Farabi's Madina, on the other hand, can only be a prophet, the possessor of that highest order of human soul (al-nafs ul-insaniyya),² capable, through the perceptions of the heart (al-qalb), of the vision of Ultimate Perfection (Nihayat ul-kamal)³ and of the ineffable divine majesty (al-azamat ul-djalila).⁴ Therein Farabi is an imitator of none other than the Prophet of Islam and his Seerat. The very name Madinat ul-Fadila paraphrases the "Madinat un-Nabi".

Farabi's insistence on the priority of the heart (al-qalb) to the brain (ad-dimagh)⁵ as organ of perception, reflects some Prophetic hadith which declare the conscience of the simple believer as superior in rectitude to the judgement of the learned mufti.⁶ Islam abolished monachism, each human becoming thereby a direct interlocutor of the divine call.

Farabi echoes again the context of some hadith which expound the virtues of life in society, such as this.⁷

"Verily, God doth not unite my community (umma) on the basis of error and the hand of God is upon the congregation (ad-jama'a). Whoever swerves away, swerves into fire".

Farabi's comment⁸ follows suit:

"Each man is so created that in order to subsist and to attain the highest degree of perfection of which he is potentially capable, he has many needs. Indeed, he needs a multitude, who one by one, will grant him his requirements. " "Therefore, said Farabi, the pursuit of the utmost beneficence and of Ultimate Per-

fection can only be a grant of the Virtuous City".

In H. 460/1067, Yusuf Khass Hadjib touched upon the same theme in his versified/allegory called Qutadghu-bilig (The Science of Felicity).⁹ The theme is here introduced in the form of a dialogue between two brothers. The poet seems to point to the lingering influences of Buddhism, they still prevalent amongst Turks of Eastern Turkistan, when he describes one of the brothers, Odghurmish, as a hermit who lives in solitude in the mountains, whose sole possessions are a bowl and staff (comparable to the patra and khakhara of the Buddhist mendicant monk). In his utter solitude, Odghurmish allows only the presence of Qamar, his young disciple with the Indian name. The hermit is intent in prayer for his own salvation, in a way comparable to the liberating meditation of the pratyeka-buddha. The name Odghurmish may mean "the Transient". Odghurmish dies before the end of the allegory.

In the dialogue, the advocates of the Islamic views on merit are the Ilig (the king), head of the Turkish-Islamic community and his minister Ogdulmish, who is brother to the hermit Odghurmish. The name Ogdulmish of the Minister signifies "the Praised". The "Transient" hermit is invited by the monarch and by his brother the "Praised" Minister, to abandon his hermitage and serve the community. A letter, written by the monarch, is sent to the hermit:

"He (the Ilig) began his missive in the name of God,
Originator, Sustainer and Conveyer (unto death).

He said: I have inscribed the name of my Lord,

The name which heals all sorrow".

"I have heard of thy good disposition and conduct.

It is said that in our time none equals thy dignity.

The Lord hath favoured thee,

Granted upon thee sapience, virtue, comprehension, intelligence,

And hath blessed thee".

(But) thou hast withdrawn thyself from neighbours and brethren.

Thou hast turned thy face from cities, villages and mankind.

Thou standst deep in the mountains, alone,

to worship. A worship which lasted a long time.

What have thy brethren done unto thee?

Disclose to me, why thou turnst thy face away".

"If thou must remain plunged in prayer,

Pray in the City. Such is the way of religion.

There are holy means of merit in the city and the village".

"In truth, when plainly compared,

There is less accomplishment in that place (of seclusion).

"Thou hast achieved the reputation of one who prays constantly.

This reputation has congealed thy devotion".

"Come to the city and worship!

All gates of benediction will lay open to thee.

Be useful to mankind, help the stricken!

Open thy bosom to thine brother.

See the hosts of orphans and widows,

The blind, the crippled, the lame.

Pray together with the congregation.

Accomplish the pilgrimage of the destitute, the Friday prayer!

"Earn honestly and bestow to the needy.

Hold the hand of man and offer support.

All this is worship and devotion.

Those who fulfil this devotion may rest in peace.

"The Master (the Prophet) chosen amongst mankind,

He who was merciful to man, said appropriately,

"The best of mankind is he who serves mankind".

Yusuf Khass Hadjib thus quoted a well-known hadith.

The concept of the Islamic madina found also its expression in Turkish Islamic architecture, since about the Third century of the Hegira (IXth century). Initially, the Turkish city, called balig or ordu-balig¹⁰ had consisted in a fortified enclosure in which the only edifices in brickwork were the inner castle of the beg, khan or khagan, called ordu, and the temples of the religion of the prince. The army, the monks and some craftsmen and merchants dwelt in the ordu-balig, which was primarily a winter residence. The rest of the population lived, in their trellised and domed tents, called qubbat ut-turkiyya in Arabic and used by the Prophet of Islam, during the seclusion which he sought during the month of Ramadan.¹¹ The Turkish tent-dwellers took shelter in the ordu-balig, only in the case of armed attack, from enemies. The composition of Turkish society, before Islam, was such that the monarch who received charisma from heaven, surrounded by an aristocracy¹² comprising twenty-six hereditary grades was thus considered remote from the gara, the obscure multitudes.¹³ Under the influence of cosmopolitan merchant cities, along the Central Asian trade routes, a tendency towards settled life became apparent, also among Turkish populations, sometime in the Second century of the Hegira (VIIIth century). The tendency may be observed in the capital city of the Uyghur Turks, on the banks of the Orkhon river,