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Islam and the city

Minarets, mosques, zawiyyas, and the call to prayers raised above a city, five times a day,. Crowds - coming into and getting out of the mosques, women in chadors, clergy in loose garments. Islam firmly enters private, the every-day sphere. Cities are and have to be organized religiously. At the same time, on every step, the sphere of sacrum intermingles with the sphere of profane. A Great Mosque – the main place for a prayer may also be where a light, social conversation occurs, and baths – where one performs ablutions – turns into the place of rest and common, sensual pleasure. Full of ecstasy gatherings in sanctuaries have something out of the atmosphere of a picnic.

Likewise, in the space of the city, two distinguished streams of religion can be felt: the official one and the folk one. The first, bound up with the Great Mosque and other important places of cult, the second – “half official” – situated around sanctuaries and graves of the local “saints”. But it is the later, brimming over with the strong psychological need for the closeness of God that gifts the Islamic city with its popular and somewhat Gnostic character which allows catching a glimpse – within the city itself as well as in its particular elements – the other, inner dimension.

Traditional Arabian city – its elements – a little bit of its history

Together with the expansion of Islam and the conquest of territories in North Africa, Iran and Central Asia, the nomadic – in their majority – Arabs, got in contact with civilizations which hearts were placed in large cities. Thanks to that, the situation of Arabs - themselves, changed: from small, independent tribes living in the desert, they organized themselves in the huge national body unified by religion. That enormous land could not be controlled from a tent, nor could it be governed from the two holy cities: Mecca and Medina situated too far to the south. Apart from the

vast territories of Africa and Asia, great cities, like Damascus and Baghdad, became the conquest trophies under the Moslem rule. Their new inhabitants adapted them to their own, especially religious, needs. Also, in the 7th and the 8th centuries, in strategically important points, military camps appeared – the origins of the future cities. Their characteristic feature was, bound up with the ethnic and tribal divisions, their lay-out (clear separation among the nationals of Yemen, Iran, and Arabic groups). Thus the regularity of the Moslem city in the 9th and the 10th centuries is bequested from the former military camp as well as the heritage after the Hellenistic and Byzantine traditions.

Created at the dawn of the 10th century cities like Al-Kairawan, Roccad, Mahdiyya, Cairo, were built on the plan of a chess-board – according to the precise requirements. In the places of tents, houses were built, military quarters became city districts. Mosques surrounded by camps were expanded. Wide alleys leading to them – the main places of trade, gave the beginning to large suks (markets).

The heritage of the Hellenistic Age were two long, perpendicular, wide streets, crossing each other right in the city centre. That provided good supply of water which in the desert terrain was always a very priced commodity.¹ Since the 10th century, the streets and bazaars were lighted up with ornamented with open-work lamps which were attached to the houses.

Around the 11th and the 12th centuries the originally clear plan started to change – due to various kinds of threats. The city was surrounded by a wall, wide alleys turned into the tangle of streets, the entrances to the city were guarded at the gates where the incoming were being checked.² from the gate, and usually a dead-end way would run – the main meeting place of the

¹ The supplying of water was handled by a special Institution that would deliver it to the place where the water was stored. From there, in goatskin waterbags, water-carriers would transport it around the city. To prevent any speculation, the price for a waterbag was set by The Office of Water Administration. Apart from that, in certain districts there were water wells founded by rich citizens as works of charity.

² That type of system protected from thieves, it was also very effective in controlling the citizens. Only in the Colonial times, the gates were turned down under the pretext of the fire threat.

citizens. Sometimes, the creation of the city, especially the capital, had to be accompanied by special procedures. That happened in case of Mahdiyya – the first capital of the Fatimids. For its creation caliph Abd Allah was waiting till astrologers designate the strongest influence of sky under the sign of Leo. That kind of stars formation was supposed to guarantee him success and prosperity to the city. The favourable configuration appeared on the sky the 5th of July, 916 around 4 o'clock in the morning. It was precisely when the creation of Mahdiyya³ started. In spite of different shapes – resembling a rectangle, like: Sfaks and Susa (in Tunisia), oval like Tunis, in the centre would stand dedicated to the common prayer mosque *jami*⁴. It was where the, political and intellectual life converged. The mosque was the spiritual centre, the axis around which the city space was organized.

Since the most important part of the mosque is the wall kibra – where the richly ornamented niche mihrab points out to Mecca and Kaaba, one could expect that all most important buildings

³ It was named: Mahdiyya – after Caliph Abd Allah, who recognized himself to be a Mahdi.

⁴ A mosque (the name comes from Arabic: masjid, which means: “the place where the prostrate before God is being done”; to European languages it has come in Spanish: mezquita), is surrounded with great respect by the believers though it is not like in the catholic faith “the God’s house”, but only a place of a common prayer. According to the Muslim tradition, the first mosque was the house of the Prophet in Medina. The main elements of a mosque are: a yard surrounded with columns, a prayer hall – usually divided into three parallel to the kibra wall naves. The kibra is that wall in a mosque that shows the way to Mecca. Its most visible part: mihrab (in the mosque architecture it appeared in the 8th century), is a very ornamented wall niche that shows exactly the direction to Mecca and al-Kaaba, and what follows that: the prayers. A very significant part of a mosque is also minbar – a pulpit, a platform from which the speaker (khatib) gives his Friday sermon (khutba), and a minaret from which a muezzin calls the believers to the prayer. A mosque cannot be turned down or its character and purpose cannot be changed. The ground it stands on is considered holy till the end of the world. At the beginning, there was only one main Friday mosque (Jami), where everybody would gather for the most important for the believers, Friday prayer. Since the 12th century, it has been allowed to celebrate Friday prayers also in other mosques.

would be turned to it precisely. However, in spite of the fact that astronomy and mathematics were very well developed and the scientists could precisely mark the direction of Mecca, in architecture and in planning of the space, practical considerations prevailed.⁵ Very often, the orientation of the buildings towards Mecca was only approximate.

For the believers, those subtle differences as to the direction of the holy city did not have significance. If the intention were pure, the ritual would be fulfilled. Moreover, Kaaba, especially for Moslem mystics, was a symbolic place, facilitating a believer in the meeting with God. And God was everywhere. “Wherever you turn, you will see His face”, we read in Koran in Sura 2:109.

Because a visit to a mosque was bound up closely with the rule about the ritual wash before a prayer - first, at every street near the mosque, baths were being created. Al-Khatib reports that Baghdad during the time of al-Muqtadir (first half of the 10th century), had 27000 baths. A little bit later the number grew to more than 60000. Built from bricks, stone or marble, they consisted of a steam-room, summer and hot room, as well as a dressing room.

As the time passed, a bath was becoming also the place of entertainment, leisure and luxury. Hairdressers, rubbers and barbers were employed there. For women, going to a bath meant the possibility of getting out from homes, exchanging of gossip and novelties, getting to know the candidates for wife for their brothers and sons.

The heart of the city was throbbing in a bazaar, but its soul was the Great Mosque. That imposed the topographic system of the city, as well as suk's: “precious” stalls belonging to jewelers, sellers of carpets, silk and spices were situated very next to the mosque. Stores, workshops and warehouses which merchandise - or loud work could spoil the prayers, were located far from it. Furthermore, out of the city-walls, stretched the “unclean”, (but not totally forbidden), sphere. Everything what was disturbing the religious order, what was tempting morality, here found its place. Surrounded by luxuriant gardens, bars came into existence there, called by Ibn al-Mu'tazz, the Arabian writer from the 10th century, “impermanent paradises”.

⁵ In planning, the landscape was considered the most. In mountain regions, the relation of the structure to the slope was very important.

Wine was served there, story-tellers were entertaining the gathered with piquant, pornographic anecdotes. The biggest attraction, however, were the singers and dancers who beguiled the travelers with music. To that “unclean” sphere, cemeteries, located always beyond the city limits, belonged also.

The evolution of Islam brought about other religious buildings to the urban scenery – first and foremost madrasa⁶ (a kind of Moslem university, the main centre of Sunni orthodoxy, law and theology), but also related to the development of Sufism: zawiyyes⁷. and mausoleums. The role of

⁶ Madresa was the main centers of the Sunnite orthodoxy, Muslim law and theology. The pattern of a madrasa was created in the 11th century Iran and in its form, it resembled a mosque, a little. Its characteristics feature was livan (Persian: eyan), a kind of a huge hall covered with a roof, closed on its three sides and open to its central inner yard. Around the yard, there were lecture halls and cells for students.

⁷ Zawiyya, khanaka, tekke, dargah – each one of these words, depending on the country it comes from (zawiyya – arabic countries, khanaka – Iran, tekke – Turkey, dargah – India), means a structure where the people who devoted their lives to religious practices would live. The beginnings of zawiyya were modest: an isolated fragment of a mosque was called: zawiyya (zawiyya in Arabic means: “a corner”). It was where the Muslim mystics would gather. Along with the development of Sufism, its masters were looking for some secluded spots suitable for their spiritual practices and teaching. To their simple houses, cells for students, a kitchen and a mosque (where the prayers and zikr were taking place), would be attached. Following the master’s death who was getting more and more surrounded with the aura of sainthood), zawiyya would become a mausoleum (maqbara), which would acquire the characteristics of a sanctuary. At the same time, the grave of the “saint” (usually exhibited in some special manner, for example; adorned with a marble canopy), was becoming the aim of pilgrimages – and it would draw the crowds of believers till the present.

the last two is particular. Built initially in wilderness, covered with domes, they became the origins of suburbs and, since the 12th century, were inherent in city landscape⁸.

It is precisely these institutions that changed and loosen the orthodox character of Islam, and they opened the way for mystical and folk tendencies. Friday Mosques and huge centers of religious cult, like: Mecca, Jerusalem, (Najef, Karbala, Meshed, or Ajmer in India), assembled all – and they still do- what is official in religion. By acting as important symbols, they are tied up with politics and often in that way used. As to the mausoleums and local sanctuaries, closer to every-day needs of the believers, they play the therapeutic role by letting to experience spiritual catharsis, they give the feeling of God's closeness, the hope for healing and fulfillment of prayers deposited at the grave of the deceased master. Popularity of such sanctuaries and the cult of saints, mark cities with the net of "hot" places, where exists especially intensive religious life, often alternative to the official current. Those institutions, by having accepted Sufism by the orthodoxy, came closer to the city and eventually they became its part, but they always troubled Moslem theologians. The ulema believed that only they have the authority and the right of judgment in religious issues. With aversion they looked at *zawiyyas*, *dargahs* and *khanakas* where charismatically gifted mystics, interpreting the Koran in the entirely different way, attracted the crowds of faithful. The death of the master would only increase the fame of the place. They were becoming saints and their graves were the aims of pilgrimages.

In principle, Islam does not have "saints". In the relationship with His creation, God does not need any intermediaries and the practices of devotion to anybody else than God Himself are treated as *sh'irk* – idolatry. However, the practice is different, in spite of the reluctance of Moslem

⁸ The complexes would often grow by acquiring new elements, like: a kitchen would be added to them – for the pilgrims, and a hospital. The places of that type would also play an important role in the development and the strengthening of Islam – among other places in India. There, Islam would show its best angles – reacting to the spiritual and material needs of the believers.

orthodoxy, saints⁹ are placed in high regard¹⁰. Jalaluddin Rumi – a great Persian mystic living in the 13th century, wrote in “Masnawi” that saints “with their earthy lips they speak with people but

⁹ Saints are described in Islam by two words: pir and wali. Pir comes from the Persian word for “old”, meaning “master”; “spiritual guide” – appears together with the birth of Sufism and in popular phraseology means: “sufi”. Wali has its origins in the Koran, it comes from walayat – “the force, the power to rule” and it is very closely related to Arabic: wala, means: “to be close”. Waliya means: “to rule, to protect somebody”. In the Koran wali is used in the meaning: “God’s friend” (the Koran, 10:62). Even Allah calls Himself: wali when He says that He is “a Friend” of the believers (the Koran, 3:63). At the beginning, however, it was the name for lawful, noble people observing the God’s Law (shari’ah). As the time passed by and together with the development of Sufism and more popular version of Islam, it started to be used to describe saints gifted with charisma, intermediaries between God and people. It happened for practical reasons: the believers thought that awiliya Allah: “God’s friends” – can come to Him more easily and intercede in human matters. “With their earthly lips they talk with people, with their spiritual ones – with God, their physical body remains on the Earth till their death, but their spiritual part extends beyond time. (M. 3601 – 7). And it is precisely that unrestricted, spiritual form that encloses in itself the whole universe. The world is alike to a vase (gar) and the spirit of this world is river. “There is nothing in the vase that would not be in the river”. Jalaluddin Rumi thinks that the saints play a very important part in Sufism. That is why he refers to Hujwiry, who said: “Sainthood – wilaya cannot be acquired by godly actions and self-discipline, it depends only on the intensively of faith and God’s decision. Because it is ultimately God, who chooses the saints.

¹⁰ It is believed that awliyas contain the whole universe also, they play the major role in keeping the world’s order. Usually, 365 saints are being mentioned. And, although themselves, they are unseen to the world – it is on them that its existence and functioning depends. Ruzbihanb Baqli Shriazi, the 16th century Persian mystic, describes saints through whom God rules over different regions of the world. He talks about 12 000 saints in India, Turkiestan, Zanzibar, Ethiopia, 400 belonging to the elite in Anatolia, Chorosan, Iran, 400 on the coast, 300 on the coast of Egypt and Magreb, 70 in various parts of Arabia, 40

with the spiritual ones - with God, their physical body is left on earth, but the spiritual one is eternal” (M.V 3601-7). Submerged in the Mind of God, the spirits of saints know the form of the things yet to come. This is why they “ They feel the cold of December in June and can see the wine in grapes”.

Some of *awliya* are known in the whole Islam, others are popular in their countries, some only locally. They perform important social and religious roles and, in countries where Islam is not a dominant religion, they have the function of religious and cultural integration.¹¹

in Irak and Syria, 10 in Mecca, Medina and Kaab, about 7 travelling around the world, 3 active in Persia, 1 in Anatolia, 1 among the Arabs.

¹¹ For example, in Bengal, among the hindu population a cult:panc pir also called: panc devata – “the five pirs”, which was originally related to Shiite tradition, is very popular. “The five’s” composition would change depending on the place, the needs and the time. Sometimes, only Hindu deities would create it or even Buddhist pantheon. The belief in pir deities got especially receptive ground in Bengal, where the local Buddhists would worship their chaitya and decorated stupas with flowers. The Hindu would worship different incarnations of deities; the pirs became to them Tantric gurus and śakti teachers. Very often the graves had been before important sites of Buddhist and Hindu cults. “The five pirs” consisted first of: Mahomet, Fatima, Ali, Hasan and Huseyn. However in Punjab, “The Five” consisted of: Khodja Qutbuddin, Moinuddin Chishti, Nizamuddin Awliya, Sultan Nasiruddin Muhammad and Nasiruddin Abu Khair. In other places, the latter two are replaced by: Khoja Khezr and Farid Shakarganj. In Bihara, Salar Masud, a popular local saint, enters into the composition of “The five pirs”. His grave is situated close to the Nepalese border in Bahraich. Some saints are bound up with certain social groups: Hazrat-e-Da’ud is a favourite of blacksmiths, Lal Beg of cleaners and scourers. There are also saints helping in particular illnesses, like: Sakhi Sarwar – in eyes’ sicknesses, Makhdum Saheb – in melancholy, and Shaikh Sadhu, Gunga Pir and Shah Madar cure snake bites. A mysterious and a very popular Khodja Khezr (a folk tradition ascribes his origin to Elijah or Aaron, in Turkey he is identified with Saint George), is involved with water and he is the saint of fishers, washers and water carriers. During the celebration dedicated to

The visitation of the graves of imams¹², spiritual masters and distinguished poets, is a characteristic of religious life in many Arab countries, Central Asia, India and Shiite Iran. The holy Shiite city of Meshed¹³ in Iran, owes its creation to the grave of the 5th Shiite imam: Ali Reza. Situated in desolation grave attracted such crowds that soon it was surrounded by a village, That soon became a city. It was named after the deceased martyr Meshed – “the grave of that, who died for his faith”. Every day, thousands of pilgrims visit the Imam Reza’s sanctuary, they cry over his martyr’s death, pray for prosperity and happiness in their families and success in the settlement of urgent life matters.

Each religion has its graves and its “saints”. Mausoleums vary in their greatness and their sites. Sometimes, big and extraordinary architectonic complexes full of colorful mosaics, other times - tiny, squeezed between houses, shrines, or hardly whiten with paint small domes - lost among the desert wilderness. Their picnic atmosphere mingles with their aura of religious concentration and ecstasy. It is especially noticeable in Chishtiyya sanctuaries of Moslem mystics in Pakistan, India and Bangladesh during the celebration of qawwali.

him which takes place in last two rain months between 9 and 13 of August and between 9 and 13 of September, little boats decorated with flowers are set on water.

¹² Many Muslims visiting sanctuaries and praying at the grave, explain their behavior not so much as “worshiping the saints”, but rather: “showing them their reverence” – sijdah-e-ibada and giving them their respect – sijdah-e-ta’zim.

¹³ Meshed, together with Karbala, Nejef and Qum, has been considered as a holy Shiite city. In this kind of hierarchy it takes the second place (right after Karbala). In the vicinity of Sanabad village, in the 10th century, died Imam Ali Reza. He was buried near the grave of Harun Ar-Rashid. The son of caliph Harun ordered a mausoleum to be built comprising both graves. Within a year, a village grew around it which, in remembrance of imam’s death, was named: Mashad.

Qawwali (Arabic: qwl – “tell”, “say”) – it’s a common listening to the mystic texts sung with passion and fervor by a group of singers¹⁴ and faithful (in Persian, Hindi and Urdu). These meetings take place every Thursday (the day of mourning in Islam), after the last prayer and they finish late at night or at dawn. Some pilgrims come from afar. They bring food and bivouac on the cemetery (the mausoleum of the saint is usually surrounded by other graves). Tired with the journey, they lean against the catafalques and drink tea, or they sleep with their heads on the stony slabs of the graves. The reappearing theme of the melody draws the listeners in like a narcotic. Together with the musicians singing the fragments of songs, they shout out the verses from the Koran or poems of famous poets, they throw their arms upwards.

During my research in India, I visited over twenty places where qawwali was performed. To the most famous, belong: the Nizamuddin Awliya mausoleum in Delhi and the Muin’uddin Chshti dargah in Ajmar. However, it is in the smaller sanctuaries like the Jusuf Sharif’s dargah in Indian Hyderabad, in Bahriach, Poon, Gaur, Malda or Pandul in Western Bengal, that qawwali has more spontaneous character¹⁵ and a stronger influence on the gathered. The religious corset is loosen for a few hours. Asked about the aim of participating in such a meeting, people answered that they had hoped for the answer of their prayers directed to the saint. They added, however, that qawwali simply improves their mood; it gives the feeling of bliss and contentment.

Sanctuary organizes the space of a district. In its neighborhood there are mosques and baths. In nearby back-streets, cheap, small hotels are being created and night’s lodging for pilgrims - as

¹⁴ This kind of music was popularized on the West by a Pakistani musician: Nursat Fateh Ali Khan. To see his concerts in London, England, the crowds were arriving. However, the real qawwali – it’s not a concert on a stage; it is the meeting of musicians and believers in a mausoleum, a sanctuary or by a grave of a respected person.

¹⁵ In large dargah a larger discipline is required, needed also because of larger numbers of people (also taking part in this kind of meeting for the first time). At the same time, in the country, qawwali gathers people from surrounding villages, they know one another well and create something in the way of family. Dargah is a place where they feel at home. Their reactions are spontaneous, they are convinced that qawwali will bring them closer to God, they do not even ponder its legality.

well as inexpensive restaurants and eating-houses. Barbers open their shops, street-dentists offer their services, stalls and little bookstores sell religious literature, richly decorated verses from the Koran and CDs with qawwali music. In booths glued to the sanctuary walls you can buy rose petals to later put them on the grave of the saint.

In the topography of a city very important role play gardens. Its classical form – Chahar bagh – had its roots in the Zarathustrian Persia, but it was Islam that popularized it as a paradise garden¹⁶.

Chahar bagh means: a closed, surrounded by walls space in the shape of a rectangle or a square, divided into four parts (Persian name: chahar bagh - means “four gardens”). In every part different fruit trees or flowers are growing. The characteristics of this kind of lay-out are its regularity and the usage of water – not only for decoration, but also for the division of space.¹⁷ From the beginning of its existence, chahar bagh performed different functions: – as a place for relaxation, recreation, and play. But enclosed by the walls space meant also the spiritual world, love – in opposition to the material world symbolized by a barren desert.

In Isfahan, the whole area of the city (divided into four parts), as well as its elements (palaces, mosques, sanctuaries), were planned as an image of the paradise. Walking down a contemporary street Chahar Bagh, you pass by the Hasht Behesht complex – “Eight Paradises” and, located nearby the royal palace Chehel Sotun – “Forty Columns”. Its main verandah is supported by twenty columns which, reflected in the pool, double this number. Thus reality penetrates the unreal and the palace is created extending beyond the earthly three dimensions – where the pool, placed in the middle of the courtyard, symbolizes the passage from one universe to the other, it is the point where the transfiguration takes place, the transcendental entry to the paradise.

For the Moslem mystics, all elements of the garden: its division into four, water, fountain, and flowers – acquired a new meaning which was to illustrate their spiritual transformation. Like for

¹⁶ Greek - paradeisos - “garden”, “paradise” and Hebrew pardes - “garden”, “orchard,” both originate from Ancient Persian: pairidaeza, meaning exactly: “enclosed, surrounded space”.

¹⁷ Elżbieta Lisowska “Ogrody ziemi i raju, umysłu i duszy”. w “Ogrody – zwierciadła kultury”, Universitas, 2004; p.19-35

the Zarathustrian mags before, for Sufis, garden became the instrument for meditation, the tool enabling acquisition of knowledge. All the elements of garden were concrete, but also symbolic – at the same time. Flowers were cultivated for their beauty, herbs for their healing properties, but each of them was crossing its real existence. The garden was becoming the magical space – a thicket of symbols which, like the plants themselves, interlaced with one another creating a new entity, perfectly – thanks to the magic of the garden – perceptible. It was as if above the material garden there were its archetype and the material garden below, was only its copy.

Four gardens – the Soul, the Heart, the Spirit and the Essence – symbolized the mystic’s way of slow transformation and particular stages of the mystical journey. Entering the first of them: the Garden of Soul – sufi was preparing for the different look at reality. The fountain was no longer the element of space decoration, but a symbol of the spiritual knowledge. Coming into the Garden of Heart meant realization of the fact that everything what can be seen is only a reflection of the higher Reality.

The first stage of the mystic’s journey (crossing the two stores’ Garden of Spirit), was showing subtle ties between the micro and macro cosmoses. The forth stage was the most difficult. Entering the Garden of Essence meant the destruction of “ego” and the exchange of consciousness into the polished mirror - so that God could reflect in it.

For mystics, the garden was a place equipped in powerful symbols, but their strength was so enormous that even an ordinary person could sense that somewhere there, there was a gate into the higher world. This is why; I would like to leave you with the following picture. The Moslem family has just visited, surrounded by a garden, sanctuary of the great Persian Hafiz. The time for rest has come. They spread a colorful carpet, set a samovar, and take out bags with victuals. Measured with the glasses of tea, the time is passing by. Flowers have a fragrant smell, birds sing. Nobody ponders the complicated symbolic representation of a nightingale and a rose, or a garden – as a paradise. Everyone sinks into the blissful timelessness. Is it not as paradise looks like?