

THE RELIGIOUS IDEAS OF THE EARLY TURKS FROM POINT OF VIEW OF ZİYA GÖKALP

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The year 1996 was the 120th anniversary of the birth of Ziya Gökalp (1876-1924), the Turkish sociologist who stood in the beginning of the new Turkish nationalism. He was the main ideologist and spokesman of Turkism (*Türkçülük*) which replaced the ephemeral idea of Ottomanism with the idea of a united nation of Turks, bound together by a common ethnic origin, language, customs, culture and religion.

Like the majority of the young Turkish intelligentsia of the end of the 19th century, Ziya Gökalp, a native of Diyarbakir, was originally a supporter of the idea of Ottomanism. The Balkan Wars shook his faith in the integrating power of Ottomanism.¹ A member of the secret Committee of Union and Progress (*İttihad ve Terakki Komitesi*), in 1909 Gökalp became one of its leaders and the most important representative of Turkism. In his articles in the periodicals of Turkism (*Genç Kalemler, Türk Yurdu, Tanin, Yeni Mecmua* etc.) and from 1914 also at the University of Istanbul Gökalp propagated the national idea, in which the conception of a modern and secular Turkish state was beginning to be outlined.

Gökalp was not only equipped with enthusiasm for the spreading of the idea of the Turkish nation and its culture. He also had extensive knowledge from the areas of Oriental and European philosophy, and the latest findings of sociological research. Apart from Gustave de Bons, Gabriel Tarde, Friedrich Nietzsche and other European authors, a French sociologist, the positivist Emile Durkheim had most influence on Gökalp. Durkheim's "apotheosis of society" suited him because it enabled him to see the ethnic group with language and culture as its differentiating feature, to understand it as a supra-individual entity possessing integrating forces.²

In agreement with Durkheim, Gökalp regarded religion and religious cults as one of these integrating forces. In his work *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*, Durkheim sees the main social function of religion as cementing or unifying society, and stimulating social development by raising ideals. In his understanding, religion be-

¹ YAVUZ, K.: *Der Islam in Werken moderner türkischer Schriftsteller*. Freiburg im Breisgau, p.56.

² YAVUZ, K.: *Der Islam*, p. 291.

comes synonymous with ideology. Gökalp also looked at the religious ideas and cults which the Turkish ethnic group created or identified with over the centuries of its existence, from a similar point of view. However Gökalp's work was not only an automatic adoption of Durkheim's model. The Turkish sociologist not only attempted to interpret the social behaviour and cultural expressions of the Turkic nations in harmony with the theories of Durkheim and other European authors, he also attempted to reach his own formulations and conclusions.

Gökalp defined Turkism as revival of the nation, raising of its consciousness.³ However in the interest of serving this essentially noble-minded aim, Gökalp gave priority to ideological constructions rather than to objective truth in some of his formulations and conclusions.

This also concerned to a significant extent his interpretations of the religious ideas of the Turkic nations, to which he devoted attention in his works *Türkçülüğün esasları* (1923, Principles of Turkism), *Türk Töresi* (1923 Turkish Customs) and *Türk Medeniyeti Tarihi* (1924 History of Turkish Civilization).

Gökalp's approach to religion from the point of view of the ideology of Turkism already appeared in his collection of verse stories *Kızılelma* (1914, Red Apple).⁴ Religion together with the homeland and nation are the three ideals which every Turk should carry in his heart.⁵ Like Durkheim, Gökalp saw the collective consciousness of society as the mediator of religious, ethnic, legal and political ideals for individuals. But in contrast to the French sociologist, Gökalp did not replace the position of God with this collective consciousness, and he placed religious values on the highest level of his scale of values.⁶

Gökalp regarded religion as the basic factor in the formation of personality and the most important component of spiritual life. In a man, as in a nation, the

³ GÖKALP, Z.: *Türkçülüğün esasları*. Istanbul 1976, p. 12.

⁴ *Kızıl-Elma* (or *Kızıl-Alma* = "Red Apple") is an expression which refers to a legendary city – the ultimate goal of Turco-Muslim conquests. See: *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*. Vol. V. Leiden 1986, paragraph KIZIL-ELMA, pp. 245-6. Gökalp interpreted it as the *Turan*-Empire in which the Huns' leader Mete united all the Turkish tribes. The ideal of a greater homeland of all the Turks was later achieved by the Avars, Gök Türks, Oguzs, Kirghizes, Chingis Khan and finally Timur. GÖKALP, Z.: *Türkçülüğün esasları*, p. 23-24.

⁵ For analysis of the views of Gökalp on Islamism, patriotism and nationalism see: YAVUZ, K.: *Der Islam*, pp. 296-325.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 301-302.

⁷ GÖKALP, Z.: *Türkçülüğün esasları*, pp. 34-35.

⁸ The description of Tengri in the encyclopedia corresponds to this idea of Gökalp: "Tengri schirmt das türkische Volk, sichert dessen nationales Fortbestehen und verleiht den türkischen Fürsten den Sieg über ihre Feinde: in dieser Eigenschaft, als spezieller Schützer der Türken, wird er mit dem Terminus *Türk Tengrisi* bezeichnet." The paragraph TANRI in: *Enzyklopaedie des Islam*. Vol. IV. Leiden–Leipzig 1934, p. 707; "The active sky god is an imperial creation that concerns only the imperial religion...The Turco-Mongol emperor first wanted to gather all those of his race, then the entire world. His god was national (the Tengri of the Turks and Mongols), then universal and unique." The paragraph TENGRI in *The Encyclopaedia of Religion*. Ed. by M. ELIADE. Vol. 14, p. 402.

spiritual stands above the material. Therefore no nation can accept foreign religious, ethical and aesthetic ideas without reservation.⁷

In accordance with this conception of the nation, determined by spiritual and not by material values, Gökalp in all three named works also developed the idea of the sky god (*Gök Tanrı, Tengri*) as the national god of all Turks.⁸ Since *Gök Tanrı* was a god who rewarded and protected and did not punish, the early Turks felt only love towards him.⁹ In accordance with this Gökalp understood the acceptance of Islamic monotheism by the Turks as a continuation of this tradition of one God of heaven.¹⁰ The strong feelings of the Turks towards the sky god found its fulfilment in Sufism with its idea of divine love.¹¹ The mythical origin of the nation is associated with the lovingness of *Gök Tanrı*. During the blessed night of love the sky god descended to earth in the form of a golden ray (*Altın Işık*) and fertilized a virgin or a tree. This was the origin of the *il*. Gökalp interpreted the term *il* not only in the sense of “country” or “people”, but also as “peace”. The *il* is the shadow of the sky god on earth, just as the ruler of the *il* – the *ilhan* is also his shadow.¹²

The Kül Tegin inscription confirms that the old Turks regarded their sovereigns as heavenly-mandated, “sacred persons who served as intermediaries between the supernatural powers and their people”.¹³ Everything which the monarch did was understood as an act of the divine will, a fulfilment of orders given by God. One of the first acts of an *ilhan* after coming to power was to formulate the traditional customary law (*töre, törü*). According to Gökalp *töre* represented the national culture of the old Turks and they merged it with their idea of the homeland.¹⁴

Gökalp considered that a basic article of the customary law of the Turks was the obligation of the ruler to maintain and extend peace. The aim of the Turkish *ilhans* was not to conquer foreign territory, but only to unite the Turkish nations.¹⁵ Gökalp who regarded the Huns (Hsiung-nu) as predecessors of the

⁹ “In the pre-Islamic period, *Gök Tanrı* was the god of reward for the Turks... Since *Tanrı* manifested himself only in pleasant ways, the old Turks felt only love and not fear towards him... In the religion of the old Turks, *Tanrı* was the god of peace and quiet life.” GÖKALP, Z.: *Türkçülüğün esasları*, p. 35.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 35. Compare: “Turkish shamanism no doubt included a community of *Tengris*, inevitable in polytheism. After the early stages, faith arose in the supreme position of the sky god (*Gök Tengri*), and so the idea of one god was born. The old Turks used the word *Tengri* in two senses: the sky, which could be seen and the highest spirit, that is divinity. After the acceptance of Islam, the word *sema* began to be used instead of *gök* and the word *Allah* in place of *Tengri*.” TURAN, S.: *Türk kültür tarihi*. Ankara 1990, p. 103.

¹¹ GÖKALP, Z.: *Türkçülüğün esasları*, p. 35.

¹² Ibid., pp. 145-7.

¹³ GOLDEN P.: *An Introduction to the History of the Turkic Peoples*. Wiesbaden 1992, p. 147. Compare: “In den Inschriften kommt *Tengri* fast immer als eine göttliche Macht vor: nach seinem Willen gelangt der König zur Regierung: dieser König selbst ist *Tengri*-gleich und *Tengri*-geboren (*tänritäg tänridä bolmish*) und von *Tänri* eingesetzt (*tänri yaratmish*).” *Enzyklopaedie des Islam*, p. 707.

¹⁴ GÖKALP, Z.: *Türkçülüğün esasları*, p. 146.

¹⁵ GÖKALP, Z.: *Türkçülüğün esasları*, p. 147; GÖKALP, Z.: *Türk medeniyeti tarihi*. Istanbul 1976, pp. 180-1.

Turks, also saw their leaders Mete (Mao-tun who ruled 209-174 B.C.) and Attila (434-453) as representatives of the Turkish love of peace.¹⁶ However the historical truth is the precise opposite of this claim. In the words of P. B. Golden, author of the unique monograph devoted to the Turkish nations, “like all the Eurasian nomads, the Huns were fierce warriors... The raids were often conducted with deliberate terror to break resistance and make the opponent more malleable”.¹⁷

The same Mete or Mao-tun, who Ziya Gökalp regarded as a “representative of Turkish love of peace” (*Türk sulhperestliğin müessiri*),¹⁸ usurped power by killing his father, then waged extensive campaigns to the west and east. However Gökalp’s claim about the unifying efforts of the Huns is confirmed by the Chinese sources, according to which Mao-tun united the nomads into “one family”.¹⁹ Gökalp regarded Mete as the founder of the first Turkish state²⁰ and tried to prove that Mete and the mythical Oguz Han were one and the same person.²¹

As was already said, Gökalp regarded the Huns as a Turkish ethnic group, but he did not regard the Turkish or Turkic nations as members of an Altaic or Ural-Altaic family. In this he followed the Swiss anthropologist Eugène Pittard. According to Gökalp, the features which led scholars to place the Turks among the Altaic nations derived only from long term coexistence in the framework of a state formation or civilization.²²

Gökalp supported his thesis that the Turks were a separate race with an original culture with their religious ideas. He did not agree with the French historian Léon Cahun, according to whom the Turks had the most natural inclination to Buddhism. He argues using the words of Bilge Kagan’s father in law,²³ that Buddhism is unacceptable to the Turks, firstly because in contrast to the vegetarian Buddhists, Turks eat meat, and secondly because the warlike nature of the Turks is a contrast to the pacifism of Buddhists.²⁴

The first argument agrees with the view of M. Eliade, expressed in his *History of Religious Ideas*, that the Turks like the Indo-Europeans and Mongols were hunters and therefore meat eaters.²⁵ In addition the mythological animal ancestor of the Turks was the grey she-wolf (*bozkurt*). However the argument of Bilge

¹⁶ GÖKALP, Z.: *Türkçülüğün esasları*, pp. 35-6, 147.

¹⁷ GOLDEN, P.: *An Introduction*, p. 66.

¹⁸ GÖKALP, Z.: *Türkçülüğün esasları*, p. 36.

¹⁹ GOLDEN, P.: *An Introduction*, pp. 60-61.

²⁰ GÖKALP, Z.: *Türk medeniyeti tarihi*, pp. 53, 247-256.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 53, 58-9.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 35-36.

²³ This especially concerns Tongukuk, the chief minister of Bilge Kagan, who was the father of Kagan’s wife Po-fu. GOLDEN, P.: *An Introduction*, pp. 137-8, 150.

²⁴ GÖKALP, Z.: *Türk medeniyeti tarihi*, p. 24.

²⁵ ELIADE, M.: *Dejiny náboženských předstáv a ideí*. Vol. I. Bratislava 1995, p. 51.

Kagan's father in law is in conflict with Gökalp's thesis about the Turks (and Huns) as peace makers, as proclaimed in the Principles of Turkism.

"European scholars think that the religion of the early Turks consisted of 'shamanism'," wrote Gökalp in his History of Turkish Civilization, and he continues: "Nevertheless shamanism was not the religious system of the early Turks, it was their magic system."²⁶ The arguments by which Gökalp justified his claim can be summarized in two key theses: that in contrast to religion, which is connected with the nation or race, shamanism is "cosmopolitan", and that while religion rests on the masculine principle, the feminine principle is dominant in shamanism.²⁷ According to Gökalp, shamanism developed from the "primordial" (*ilkel*) totemism, which all the Turkish tribes passed through in their matriarchal and "democratic" stage. Totems and guardian spirits are mostly female in gender, the shaman gains their spiritual power by dressing as a woman or by changing sex.²⁸

From shamanism based on the feminine principle, and also from the democratic structure of nomadic society, Gökalp derived the feminism of the early Turks. In principle he designates them "the most democratic people in the world" (*dünyanın en demokrat kavmi*) and "the most feminist race" (*en feminist nesli*).²⁹

Gökalp compares the Taoist dialectic *yang-yin* with the Turkish principles *ak/yahşı – kara/yaman* (white/good – black/bad), which the Turks in contrast to the Chinese did not divide into masculine and feminine.³⁰ He explained this with the idea that while the Chinese as members of a settled culture practiced the division of labour, among the Turkish nomads only the joint effort of men and women could bring success. While the rights of women in settled Chinese society were limited, among the Turkish nomads women were equal to men.³¹

By emphasizing the equal position of men and women in the society of the old Turks, Gökalp indirectly supported the emancipation tendencies, which culminated after the origin of the Turkish Republic, when they found support in the person of the first president Kemal Atatürk, as a phenomenon accompanying westernization.

When looking at the works of Ziya Gökalp, we have to bear in mind the period in which these works originated. It was a strained period when the existence or non-existence of the Turkish nation was being decided. It was a nation which had only recently begun to emancipate itself after whole centuries when the majority of its members were aware of themselves only as part of the Islamic world, with its culture and civilization.

²⁶ GÖKALP, Z.: *Türk medeniyeti tarihi*, pp. 116-7.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 123; GÖKALP, Z.: *Türk töresi*. Istanbul 1976, pp. 76, 82.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 77.

²⁹ GÖKALP, Z.: *Türkçülüğün esasları*, p. 148.

³⁰ GÖKALP, Z.: *Türk medeniyeti tarihi*, p. 153.

³¹ Ibid., pp. 384-386.

Gökalp strictly distinguished between culture (*hars*) and civilization (*medeniyet*).³² In the framework of the civilization of the Islamic world, the Ottoman Empire held an important place. While Ottoman representatives appropriated and cultivated a culture which was cosmopolitan in origin and character, the Turks of Anatolia developed an original culture built on ethnic foundations.

Gökalp's definition of the nation as a community with its own culture placed before the Turkish intelligentsia, the demanding role of raising this culture, teaching the nation to be aware of its value and leading its development.³³ While his Principles of Turkism was essentially conceived as the manifesto of this movement, widely conceived work History of Turkish Civilization set the aim of documenting the culture of the Turkish nation in the course of its development through the ages. Unfortunately Gökalp was only able to finish its first volume, covering the pre-Islamic period, which was published posthumously.

Turkification, Islamization, modernization were the three basic principles by which Gökalp thought the emancipated and prospering modern Turkish nation should be directed.³⁴ By Turkification, the greatest of these, he understood especially a return to the roots, to the ethnic culture of the Turks. For Gökalp, modernization meant the incorporation of Turkey into Western civilization. In between stood Islam with its spiritual and moral values, which the spiritual outlook and way of life of many generations of Turks had formed. However he did not demand an uncritical acceptance of Islam with all its anachronisms, but its consistent modernization.

³² GÖKALP, Z.: *Türkçülüğün esasları*, pp. 25-41, 96-102.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 41-46.

³⁴ DAVISON, R. H.: *Turkey. A Short History*. Walkington, Beverley 1981, p. 113.