Muslim da'wah and its influence on Islamic Studies of the USA

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Abstract: The purpose of this topic is to examine the phenomenon of Islamic call, its entering in American scientific community and Islamic studies. It includes interpretation and correlation of the Islamic terms like da'wah, ijtihad, and jihad; investigation the roots of spreading Muslim da'wah in the USA; defining the conditions of the Islamic call spreading in the USA scientific community; showing main periods of da'wah dissemination in the USA society and the American Islamic Studies. A special consideration is given to the work of the Centre for Muslim-Christian understanding headed by J. Esposito. This paper deals with the problem of forming ties between Muslim and secular scientific community structures too.

I. Introduction

The expansion of Western influence in the periods of modern and contemporary times led to the great transformation of Eastern traditional societies, including the world of Islam. During the 20th century Islamic intellectuals tried to reveal the causes of its weakness and find the way of Muslim ummah revival. Though Muslims recognized the achievements of Western civilization, which had been done thanks to rejection of religious basis of European or, wider, Western society, they refused to put Islam into the same social niche as the Christianity occupies in the West. Muslims try to find new vision of Islam and its role in contemporary society and, moreover, regenerated Islam is seen by them as a key for Muslim World revival. They ideas are gradually becoming a part of Islamic Studies of the West, including the USA.

II. Reopening the ijtihad

As a type of worldview, Islam has a big potential for adaptation. In theory Islam, at least Sunni Islam, is more flexible religion than Christianity because of two factors. Firstly, there is no any special institute in Islam for confirming articles of faith, as the Ecumenical Councils in Christianity, for example. [13, c.11] Religious, social, and juridical regulations have been elaborated in Islam by independent theologians. Secondly, this religious tradition has a special “mechanism” for faith renewal – ijtihad, the usage of which makes it possible to accommodate Islam to the spirit of the times. Though in the course of time “the gates” of ijtihad almost closed and the supremacy of taklid, that means following the established tradition, had predominated for a long time, since the 18th century the request for their reopening was proclaimed by Muslims reformers like Sufi sheikh Wali Allah of India (1703 – 1762), salafi scholar and the founder of Wahhabi movement Muhammad ibn Abd al Wahhab of Saudi Arabia (1703 – 1792), or the Yemeni scholar Muhammad ibn Ali ash Shawkani (1739 – 1854). The extension of applying ijtihad in conditions of intensified Muslim migration to the West in the 20th century became more needed because Western society raised new questions to migrants, the answers on which can not be found in taklid tradition, and Muslim immigrants are forced to seek solution to their problems. So there is no surprise that the United States became one of the main centers of ummah new strategy development. Two traditional Muslim concepts, worked out by means of ijtihad, were declared to be the main instruments for maintaining ummah, such as da’wah and jihad.

III. Da’wah and jihad: meanings and theoretical interpretation

As a Koranic terms, these concepts have several meanings. In some sense they can be viewed as a description of the same action. Thus, jihad literary means “an effort” but usually is understood, especially in the condition of a threat, as a physical struggle against non-Muslims. But this term can also signify a peaceful struggle, for instance by means of the word.

The term da’wah or "Islamic call" means "the call of Allah" to everyone to believe. Thus this meaning implies the equality between da’wah and iman (belief). Moreover da’wah can be perceived as the call of every Muslim to unbelievers and it means a peaceful missionary work. [12, p.344] So long as there have not been any demarcations in Islam, as both religious and social and political system, between religion, on the one hand, and
society, state, policy, and economy, on the other hand, so Islamic call covers all fields of society too. In such a way a dai, missionary, can be viewed as not only a religious person but as a type of political oriented agent.

So ijthah, jihad, and da'wah, in fact, can be considered the main mechanisms of Muslim socialization in non-Muslim surroundings: ijthah as the mechanism of generating ideas and concepts for ummah adaptation to changing conditions; jihad and da'wah as the instruments for implementation of the new concepts. These instruments are very similar at the present time. But jihad operates in terms of peaceful and militant actions and is used by different groups of Muslims differently. Thus moderate Muslims insist on the peaceful meaning, whereas radical Islamists consider militant jihad to be the same actual interpretation as it had been in the past. As to da'wah, this term has no negative connotation as jihad, and thanks to it is concentrated on changing consciousness of both Muslims and Westerners without any risk to be considered a direct threat to the West. So in theory, Muslim da'wah has more chances to be legitimized in democratic Western society.

IV. **Da’wah and jihad as the equal instruments for spreading Muslim influence in the West**

During several centuries both these tools for spreading Muslim influence, that might be interpreted also as peaceful and militant ummah expansion, went together. The 20th century has not been exclusion. Nevertheless the place of action and the accents in tactics of Muslim activists have been changed. Prior to the 1960 – 1970s we can talk about the predominance of militant jihad, the vivid example of which is the activity of the Muslim Brotherhood in the first half of the 20th century. During that period militant jihad spread widely predominantly in Muslim countries. Since the second half of the 20th century the intensification of Islamic call has been observed globally and in the West too. It can be explained by the fact that the huge flow of immigrant Muslims began to settle in the Western countries, including the United States. It is no mere chance that the dissemination of da’wah in the West coincided with the period of stressing another interpretation of jihad, understood as self-improvement. This interpretation gave Muslims awareness of the jihad as the integral part of the call of Allah to non-Muslims to believe as well as to Muslims to show special diligence in response to this call.

V. **The roots of spreading Muslim da’wah in the USA**

To speak about the Islamic call in the USA it must be taken into account that the conditions of implementing da’wah have been dramatically changed since the Middle Ages. In the past it meant the conversion to Islam those who had religious conciseness. Contemporary da’wah has two main directions: the conversion to Islam of other Americans who usually have secular conciseness, and the activity to restore Islamic world-view among American Muslims. The last direction predominates in Muslim da’wah in America today.

The foundation of contemporary Muslim propaganda in the USA is based on the Islamist (and even fundamentalist) ideology that watches Islam as religious, social, political and economical order and moreover as a lifestyle. [3, p.263] It was brought to the United States in the 1960s by Muslim immigrants and students, who sympathized to such Islamist groups as the Muslim Brotherhood and the Jamat-e-Islami. Student activists, especially from Egypt and Pakistan, had a strong passion to this ideology because their countries at that time had been at the process of the Islamic revival and resistance to Western assimilation.

Muslim activists got into quite different conditions in the United States where freedom of worship and lack of Islamic religious leadership had been observed. Such conditions made it possible to create a wide range of Islamic groups and variety of interpretations of Islam.

Following Sayyid Qutb, the ideologist of the Muslim Brotherhood, American Muslims at first objected to the political and civil participation of Muslims in the United States and considered any political action in American society as illegitimate for themselves. However, their position has been changed in the course of time. Isolationist ideology, similar to religious movement the Tablighi Jamaat, has lost most of its followers. The American Muslims have adopted the so-called "soft" da’wah. [8, p.81-90] This tactic started spreading among American Muslims since the 1990s, when a number of Islamic and Islamist organizations have been formed on purposes to activate Muslim participation in social and political life of the country, as well as to create a positive image of Islam and Muslims. For example, after the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001 the Council of American-Islamic Relations, the famous Muslim organization on civil rights, called for "a public meeting" with representatives of other faiths for the reason of better understanding Muslims and their traditions. "After the tragic events of September 11 and subsequent anti-Islamic reaction, it became clear that followers of other religions need to correct information about Islam," said Executive Director of the Council. [7]

VI. **On the way to form propaganda foundation in the USA scientific community**

The Islamic call, that can be interpreted not only as the dissemination of Islamist ideas but as the creation of positive image of Islam too, has started spreading through the American media, political lobbying, Internet, as well as through educational structure and academy.
There are several factors that have made it possible to broadcast da’wah through academic research and social activities of some American scientists:

1) Changing accents in research field of American Islamic Studies.
2) Scientific activity of American Muslim scholars who translate a positive view on Islam and Muslims into social sciences.
3) Financial capacity of a number of Muslim organizations and foundations, which provide financial support for certain types of research.
4) Favorable political request initiated by the United States Department of State policy in respect of moderate Islamism.
5) Religious requirement of several American scholars that creates a common ground between Christian and Islamic values, as opposed to predominated Western secular perception of the world.

VII. Conditions of Islamic Studies in the USA

The end of the Second World War had been the main point of Islamic studies stimulation when the US started actively interfering in international policy, including the Middle East direction. Many American universities opened centers for Muslim World investigation, mainly to ensure the needs of governmental institutions. It is no mere chance that the American Academy of Religion, the biggest professional association for scholars in the field of religion, extended its borders and since 1960s, besides biblical studies, initiated projects on Eastern religions. [5, p.897]

The radical transformation of Islamic studies came in the 1970s when the idea of “post-secular revolution” earned more popularity among American scholars. It meant the return to religion as a direct object of study. [10, p.17] It was connected with the changing attitudes to religion and particularly to Islam in Western society. After Kaddafi revolution in Libya (1969) and Islamic revolution in Iran (1978 – 1979) Islamic studies researchers realized “the return of Islam” as an accomplished fact. The needs for changes in this field, including the revision of main concepts, were obvious. And this new concept was proposed, but not by American secular scholars but by American Muslim researchers. At that moment scientific request coincided with Muslim da’wah.

VIII. Edward Said new approach to Muslim studies

The possibility of introducing Islamic call to American scientific community appeared at a time when American Muslim scholars declared their aim to rewrite contemporary scientific paradigm. Signal for intensification of this process appeared in 1978 when the book “Orientalism”, written by Edward W. Said, was published. [9] The author was an American Muslim of Palestinian origin who received his PhD degree in Indiana University (in philosophy, 1952), worked more then 20 years in the USA and knew well Western mentality and way of life. The new approach, declared in his paper, became a starting point in revision of paradigm adopted in the field of social sciences, and Islamic studies too. Orientalism versus Oxidentalism completed the formation of the dichotomy on the level of paradigm that Edward Said described through definition of the term “Orientalism” as “a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between “the Orient” and (most of the time) “the Oxident”. [9, p.2] His approach completed the opposition and opened a new way of thinking for his followers, many of whom have been the American scholars of Muslim cultural space. By the time the prominent book was published some American scholars of Muslim roots in the US scientific community had already been working to change the approach to Muslim studies. This work had a strong connection with the activity of Muslim youth.

IX. Muslim Student Association and North American Association of Islamic and Muslim Studies

The starting point of Muslim activity in the USA dates back to 1960s when the first generation of Muslim students from abroad started organizing their own structures at various North American universities in order to maintain their knowledge and commitment to Islam. The main student organization was established in 1963 at the University of Illinois in Champaign, Urbana. It was the Muslim Student Association (MSA). Its major task was to unify and manage Muslim student activity in America. But the functions of the organization were expanded and till the beginning of 1980th it had been the main organization that introduced Islam to the North American society. Moreover, this organization initiated the creation of specialized Muslim institutions, some of which in the subsequent years played a prominent role in spreading the ideas of Muslim cultural revival, as it was with the Association of Muslim Social Scientists, or, North American Association of Islamic and Muslim Studies (NAAIMS) as it changed its name.

The association was established in 1972 by two Muslim scholars who had close ties with MSA. The first person was Dr. Ismail Raji al-Faruqui (1921 – 1986), an American of Palestinian origin, a specialist on Islam, comparative religion and classical philosophy, and the second one was Abdul Hamid Abu Sulaiman (b.1936) of Saudi Arabia origins, who received his PhD in international relations at the University of Pennsylvania, USA in 1973.

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AMSS initiated annual conferences, first of which was held in 1972 at Indiana Central University (now the University of Indianapolis). The Executive Bureau of the Organization was composed of scholars from the United States, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Sudan and India. AMSS was established as an academic forum to facilitate the annual gatherings of Muslim and non-Muslim scholars to debate social issues from an Islamic perspective. Members of the Association criticized Western scientific paradigm and appealed to Islamic intellectual tradition. They proclaimed the goal “to provide a forum through which Islamic positions on various academic disciplines can be promoted, with an emphasis on the social sciences and humanities.” They stressed that “AMSS has based its activities on the belief that the development of Islamic thought is vital for the prosperity of the Muslim world and for the continuity of the Islamic intellectual heritage.”[6] AMSS pretends to be “the leading international academic organization for excellence in the study of Islam, Muslims and Muslim perspectives.”[11]

X. International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) and Islamization of knowledge project
By the year 1981 their work had culminated in creation the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) which became a foundation for Islamization of knowledge project that initiated debates on restructuring of the social studies on the basis of Islamic epistemology.

The IIIT established a Council of scholars "to provide advice to IIIT on academic matters."[1] The Council of Scholars is comprised of eight senior scholars from American and Canadian Universities who are professors of religion, Islamic studies or social sciences.

In addition to the educational matters the Council is also obliged to "review academic cooperation between IIIT and universities and research institutions in the US and internationally, and recommend ways and means of enhancing cooperation."[1] This aspect of its activity means to monitor constantly IIIT status in American scientific community for the purpose to be officially recognized.

Thus, this initiative predetermined the further development of Islamic studies. American non-Muslim scholars, being under pressure, were forced to defend their vision of Islamic studies. It resulted in division the American Islamic studies scholars on two parts, the opponents and proponents of new Islamic studies paradigm.

XI. The Centre for Muslim-Christian understanding (Georgetown University)
The most striking example of Muslim da’wah penetration in American scientific community is the Centre for Muslim-Christian understanding at Georgetown University, Washington, DC. It is headed by well-known American scholar in Muslim studies Prof. John Esposito. The Center was founded in 1993 for purpose to establish cooperation between the Islamic world and the West as well as between Islam and Christianity. In 2005, after the donation of 20 million dollars by well-known international investor, Saudi Prince Alwaleed bin Talal, the Center was renamed in his honour. There have been many well-known specialists in Islamic studies (like John Wall, Yvonne Haddad etc.) who work in or cooperate with this Center. Till the present days the Center has been a leader in the study of Muslim-Christian relations.

The Centre has close contacts with Muslim activists including scholars from the IIIT and AMSS. For example, John Esposito has been a member of the Advisory Board of the AMSS periodical, "American Journal of Islamic social sciences", issued since 1984. In March 2010 he visited the second annual meeting of six research centers sponsored by Prince Talal (Georgetown University, Harvard University, Cambridge, Edinburgh University, the American University of Beirut and the American University in Cairo), held at the American University (Beirut) in cooperation with IIIT. The future of Islamic and American studies, as well as the ability to create the conditions for better understanding of the world of Islam and the West had been at the focal point of the meeting debates.

The Center focuses on the problem of bias against Islam and Muslims in the Western media. Actually, the Center followed the lead of American Muslim organizations to create more positive image of Islam and Muslims, which has become the main problem for American Muslims since the September 11, 2001.

In 2010 John Esposito published the book "the Future of Islam", which he called the culminating point of his study. The author pays a special attention to the phenomenon of fundamentalism and discusses whether Islamic fundamentalism is a threat to the modern Islamic society and the West. He shows the equality of terms “fundamentalism”, “Wahhabi Islam” and “Salafi Islam.” [2, p.74] He also stresses that Wahhabi Islam has both mainstream and extremist forms and, thereby, he legitimizes the part of Wahhabi Islam which seems to be peaceful and moderate. He agrees that Wahhabi theology can be used by extremist groups but underlines that "exclusivist Wahhabi theology is not necessarily violent" and that "their exclusivist, isolationist and often intolerant theologies are no more dangerous than fundamentalisms in other faith." [2, p.76–77]

XII. Conclusion
As it has been said previously, Muslims in the USA have more opportunities for reforms in Islam in conditions of greater freedom. But many of them have connection with Saudi Arabia, one of the most powerful centers of spreading Islam of Wahhabi persuasion that tends to be considered in the West as part of mainstream Islam.
However, Wahhabi religious ideology seeks for new models of ummah existence in the past; Wahhabis are notorious for their struggle against bid’ah (innovation), so the fundamental question is raised: what kind of reforms in Islam and ummah are they encouraged? J. Esposito writes: “Muslims in the West… have been a resource in the development and dissemination of models for reform, from fresh religious interpretations of the Quran and Islamic tradition to their applications on issue of democratization, gender equality, human rights, and religious pluralism”. [2, p. 140] Can religious pluralism be found in Wahhabi teaching?

Some of American scholars of the United States describe the situation in American Islamic studies extremely critical. Thus an American scholar of the Middle East Martin Kremer (the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and the Shalem Center) concludes that American studies, in particular on the Middle East, have been in the process of stagnation since the 1970's. Among the causes he mentions radicalization of US scientific elite and pruning subsidies for Middle Eastern studies. [4, p.2] It seems likely that both the causes are interconnected: the lack of subsidies on Islamic Studies favours their sponsoring from other sources, including Saudi Arabia.

In whole, the conceptual bases of those institutions like North American Association of Islamic and Muslim Studies, International Institute of Islamic Thought, or The Centre for Muslim-Christian understanding, in spite of their differences, correspond to criteria of da’wah adopting by contemporary Muslims, both moderates and fundamentalists. Some part of Islamic Studies in the USA, providing the needs of Muslim ummah, does not always agree with the interests of Western Science.

References