



## The Phenomenon of Muslim Modernist Journalism in Russia (80-90 Years of the XIX Century)

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### Abstract

The innovations that steadily penetrated the life of domestic Muslims (Tatars, Bashkirs, Azerbaijanis, Kazakhs, etc.) demanded religious sanctions for compliance with the canons of Islam due to the specifics of their traditional way of life. An important role in the formation of public opinion regarding the ongoing changes was played by Muslim and modernist-oriented Russian-language journalism, which was most clearly manifested in the 80-90s of XIX century. The aim of the research undertaken by us is to determine the main trends in the formation and development of Muslim modernist Russian-language journalism and to identify the range of the main issues raised. As a result of their analysis of the works by Muslim modernists, the authors came to the conclusion that Muslim publicists managed to bring Islamic modernist discourse to the all-Russian level, to convey in a common language to multiethnic co-religionists their call: to go beyond confessional limitations and join the achievements of world civilization. They turned to scientific argumentation in their justification along with the traditional appeal to sacred texts.

**Keywords:** Muslim Modernist Journalism; Russian Empire; Islamic Modernist; Muslim Publicists; Russian Language.

### 1. Introduction

As a result of socio-cultural shifts by the early 1880s, there has been a qualitative change in the mentality of Russian Muslims (Anvar A. Gafarov, 2015). The accumulated potential for innovation contributed to the formation of a universally significant modernist movement. Modernism has escaped from the narrow milieu of ulema (Nasution, Miswari, & Sabaruddin, 2019; Rahman, 2020; Saif, 2019), handwritten books, and oral discussions and beyond purely theological problems acquiring an ever wider public sound every year. The initiative gradually passed into the hands of European-oriented publicists. They launched on the pages of the mass press a broad discussion of the problems of renewing the Islamic world. Announcing the coming era, Murza Alim wrote: "There is no doubt that in the East there is currently a large religious movement in the sense of converting the old concepts of Mohammedans to Islam and harmonizing them with the data of modern science and a more accurate understanding of the meaning of the Koran." (Alim, 1882).

Muslim reformism developed in a lively close relationship with the progressive thought of the Muslim East and Russia, relying on the achievements of outstanding thinkers and contributing to the process of realizing the place of Islam in the modern world. D. al-Afghani, M. Abdo, R. at-Takhtawi, H. at-Tunisi and others linked religious reforms with educational and liberation tasks (Loftus, 2001; Smith, 1991; Velaskar, 2012). Their ideas were in line with the general modernist trends most clearly manifested in the XIX - early XX centuries (in India, Turkey, and Egypt) and had a special influence on the development of the domestic reform movement. Russian modernists have successfully combined traditional theological rhetoric with an appeal to the works of European scholars.



### 1.1. Research Objective

The purpose of our research is to identify the major trends in the creation and growth of modernist Russian-language Muslim journalism and to identify the range of key issues posed.

## 2. Material and Methods

An attempt on the basis of the civilizational approach, the conceptual provisions of the Eurasian school, and the theory of social modernization was made to determine the main trends in the formation and development of Muslim modernist Russian-language journalism, and to identify the range of the main issues raised in it. The source base of the proposed research were the works by Muslim modernists (I. Gasprinsky, Devlet-Kildeev, Murza Alim, A. Bayazitov, etc.) published in the form of separate books and articles in the central and provincial periodicals (S.-Peterburgskiy vedomosti, Vostochniy Telegraf, Kazanskiy Telegraf, etc.), as well as the works of their opponents (Ilminsky N.I., Ostroumov N.P., Miropiev M.A., etc.) which were supporters of the spiritual and cultural assimilation, and imperial acculturation of foreigners. This range of sources presented not only ideological trends but also the nature of the discussion developed in Russian society regarding the modernization of Muslim peoples.

## 3. Results and Discussion

The beginning of the Russian-language Muslim modernist journalism was laid by A. Devlet-Kildeev's brochure "Mahomet as a prophet", which "had a big move between the Kazan Tatars". The author saw one of the reasons for the intellectual stagnation in the nuances of Islamic dogma: Muslims "were reluctant to accept innovations and reforms of modern civilization, if such reforms are not listed in the Koran" (Devlet-Kildeev, 1881). Appealing to the prophet, he wrote: "Fortunately for the progress of Muslims, Muhammad himself gave them the opportunity for any reform and for all changes proclaiming that "God can always, at his will, replace everything given to them with the best", which gave rise to his interpreters... to admit the legitimacy of any civil reforms completely, if only they agree with the basic religious dogmas" (Devlet-Kildeev, 1881). At the same time, Devlet-Kildeev was probably one of the first Tatar thinkers who tried to translate Islamic discourse from the sphere of religious scholasticism into the field of European science.

In the absence of newspapers in the Turkic languages, the use of the Russian periodicals acquired great importance in the propaganda of modernist ideas. A series of articles by Murza Alim "Islam and Mohammedanism" had a great resonance (Gibb, 1970; Margoliouth, 1914; Zwemer, 1907). Many of the fundamental provisions of those articles are closely related to the book by Devlet-Kildeev. Murza Alim defends the position that "correctly understood Islam is capable of leading its followers along the path of enlightenment and civilization"; the origins of ignorance are in the deviation from the spirit of religion and obscuring it with "material rituals" (Alim, 1882). Like Devlet-Kildeev, Akhundov, and others, he sees one of the reasons for the stagnation in the negative role of the "ignorant clergy" (Alim, 1882). Murza Alim urged to imbue "more with the spirit of Islam and the meaning of the Koran", and not to neglect "the knowledge of modern science, no matter in what dialect this knowledge is taught" (Alim, 1882).

In his reasoning, Murza Alim proceeds from the fact that the truths of Islam "do not need by themselves any reforms and amendments." They "refer only to the development of a correct understanding of these truths due to the imperceptible, but constant forward movement of human thought" (Alim, 1882). Referring to the times when the Arabs "eagerly rushed to the study of arts and sciences... without any religious prejudice," he urged fellow believers to follow their example: to attend gymnasiums and universities without fear of falling away from the faith (Alim, 1882). Last articles of the cycle are devoted to the analysis of the program aimed at the reform of Muslim education outlined by I. Gasprinsky in "Russian Mohammedanism". Propagating his ideas, the author acts as a resolute champion of the general Muslim school (Alim, 1882).

Reform shifts in the Muslim world caused an ambiguous reaction in the intellectual community (A. A. Gafarov, Nabiev, Fazliev, & Nafikov, 2017). Reflecting a negative view on attempts to reconcile modernist ideas with a religious tradition, orientalist I.N. Berezin defended the idea that "Islam does not allow progress", the actions of the reformers are directed "against the meaning of Islam". N.P. Ostroumov also criticized the views of Muslim modernists. In his extensive article "What is the Koran?" (1983) reprinted in the form of a separate brochure, he tried to "bring Russian society to reason" (in its "indulgence" of Muslim culture) and foreshadowed the impending "Muslim issue" (Ostroumov, 1883).



According to critics of Muslim modernism, the attempts of some educated Muslims to portray Islam as a pure religion alien to fanaticism were "gross deception." (Benussi, 2020; Khan & Shabbir, 2020; Wood, 2019). They were especially irritated by the European "defenders of Islam". A.E. Krymskiy registered in this list such progressive people as Voltaire, Gibbon, Zedillo, B. Saint-Hilaire, A. de Castries, Dreper, Vambery, and others. From their point of view, "progressive reformed Islam ready to accept the achievements of Western civilization... represented a greater danger to Orthodoxy than conservative Islam".

Additional "fuel to the fire" of the controversy was "added" by the brochure of J.E. Renan "Islam and Science". The French scientist stated that Islam and science contradict each other and that its teachings are an obstacle to freedom, science and economic development. From his point of view, Islam is organically inherent in fanaticism, intellectual narrow-mindedness, and intolerance, which led to an inevitable crisis of the Muslim world (Renan & Ragep, 1883). This provoked a violent reaction in the social and intellectual life of Muslims. D. al-Afghani criticized Renan in the *Journal des debates in Paris*; later, he visited Russia with success. In Russia, an appeal was made in the note "The Fates of Mohammedanism" of the newspaper "Vostochnoye obozrenie" to the intellectual forces of the Muslim community to respond to the campaign "against Mohammedanism".

A month later, the article "Islam and Rationalism" appeared under the signature "Muslim" (Aghazadeh, 1994; Haider, 2016; Mikhail, 2004). Refuting Renan, the author emphasizes that before Islam, the Arabic world would have experienced a "time of ignorance", but as a result of the reform mission of the prophet, a great state was created in which sciences began to flourish. Subsequently, "Arab philosophy introduced the medieval European scholastics to Greek philosophy, and the scholastics introduced this latter to the whole of Europe." According to him, rationalism "as a life-giving element of all mental progress is also inherent in Islam."

At the end of 1883, "Vostochnoye obozrenie" informed its readers about the publication of A. Bayazitov's book "Objection to the Speech of Ernest Renan. Islam and Science". It had a resounding success. Like his predecessors, Bayazitov turns to a purely rational perception of theological problems, for a reason "is the light from the light of God". Since Islam "does not contradict the logic of sound thinking and is not afraid of science", "the final ideal to which mankind aspires, and the final goal of its development on earth, is the unification of religions and science, these higher areas of the spiritual world of man" (Bayazitov, 1883).

Former Kokand qadi S. Abdugafarov did not confine himself to stating the consistency of science with Islam. He argued that scientific knowledge makes Islam "clearer to our minds and enables us to better fulfil the pre-destination of religion in life". In another article, he said that "with the acquisition of this knowledge, people will, as far as possible, comprehend the work of their Creator and his perfect power." And "then we will fulfil all the definitions of our almighty Lord (God) and know ourselves only" using the knowledge gained for the benefit of the people themselves.

The conclusions expressed by A. Bayazitov in his "Objection..." were completely repeated by him on a broader basis of reasoning in his book "The Attitude of Islam to the Science and to adherents of a different faith". In many ways, it was inspired by a stormy polemic with M.A. Miropiev and A.V. Eliseev, who, like some other missionary-oriented authors, accused Islam of fanaticism and intolerance. All Muslim problems stem from religion, which supposedly lacks moral ideals; it focuses exclusively on rituals and is incompatible with development. As a result, they spoke in favour of strengthening the censorship of Muslim literature.

Bayazitov's response articles were "The question of the education of foreigners", "Concerning fanaticism", "Deceiving ghosts", "Islam and culture" (1891), "Letter to the editorship" and others. Citing legal norms in them, he emphasized the original tolerant traditions of Islam. Noteworthy is his remark that opponents cite arbitrarily taken verses of the Koran, and they should be considered in a historical context: the laws of wartime cannot characterize religious doctrine as a whole. The Prophet "never and nowhere preached not only a merciless war but even an offensive one," A. Agayev argued after him (Agayev, 1991).

A. Bayazitov's works were recognized not only in Russia but also abroad. His works "Objection to Renan's speech...", "The attitude of Islam to science..." were translated and published in Istanbul. Oddly enough, his new book received a positive review in *Moskovskiye Vedomosti*. A newspaper's author with a pseudonym N, having his wide background in Islamic studies, also spoke out against preconceived notions about Islam. The review sparked with a new outbreak of xenophobia. Answering to N, a certain author with a pseudonym of Russian Christian, tried to refute his

statements. However, the argumentation again boiled down to quotes from the Koran pulled out of the historical context. The theme of intolerance and militancy of Islam was continued by N.P. Ostroumov's "Historical outline of mutual relations between Christianity and Islam", which the last interprets as purely antagonistic and irreconcilable (Ostroumov, 1887).

Moreover, support for a number of publications (even episodic) speaks to a certain extent of the closeness of the socio-political views inherent in a number of democratic-minded Russian intellectuals and Muslim modernists. There is reason to talk about their mutual influence. Back in 1857, N.A. Dobrolyubov, in his review of V. Irving's book "The Life of Mohammed", criticized Russian scientific literature along with noting the positive approach of the American author. Opposing the demonization of the image of Muhammad, the critic called for greater objectivity in covering the origin of Islam.

This line was continued by the religious philosopher V.S. Soloviev, a close friend of A. Bayazitov. The biographical sketch "Mohammed, His Life and Religious Teachings" was largely written with the participation and under the influence of Bayazitov. Soloviev, not without reason, wrote to the publisher that his book was intended "also for the multitude of Russian Muslims, whom I have reason to resort to as readers". Upon its release, Bayazitov published a review "What Islam Preaches" in the newspaper "Nedelya". The Tatar modernist notes that, unlike the "censors of Islam," Soloviev considers the activities of the prophet and his teachings in a historical context. This applies to accusations of Islam of fanaticism, the cultivation of the ideas of holy war, polygamy, etc. (Bayazitov, 1885). Also, a positive review of Soloviev's work was given by Sultanov (1901a).

In his work "Islam and Progress", as well as in work "Relation of Islam to Science...", A. Bayazitov turned to the era of the golden age of Arab-Islamic culture, when "all the science of Greece passed to Arabia." Unfortunately, the followers "retained the only imitation of the Arabians in one external ritual, in the teaching of one alphabetical cramming, and the very spirit of Islam escaped their gaze" (Bayazitov, 1898; Agayev, 1901; Bayazitov, 1885). This book made a strong impression on contemporaries. It is not by chance that appealing to scientific authorities, Sultanov most often refers to it (Sultanov, 1901a; Sultanov, 1901b). Using the excerpts from the Koran and hadiths cited there, he claims that "our religion not only does not deny the progress and benefits of the sciences but, on the contrary, encourages them, promising the learned people heavenly rewards." In his opinion, "Islam preaches love for science, for knowledge" and the power of the Caliphates "rested on the knowledge of the true teachings of Islam" (Sultanov, 1901b).

Rejecting the accusations, Sultanov notes the negative attitude of Islam to slavery, and he also notes its desire for social harmony, "the absence in Islam of the spirit of alienation and enmity towards adherents of a different faith" (Sultanov, 1901b). Condemning the seclusion of Muslim women, he emphasizes that "polygamy now seems to be rather an exception," especially "among intelligent Muslims in our country" (Sultanov, 1901a). According to A. Agayev, the seclusion of Muslim women is completely wrongfully attributed to Muhammad (Agayev, 1901). The principal advocate of women's equality was M.F. Akhundov, who did not confine himself to resolving the "women's issue" to the sphere of family relations. "Islamism needs a reformation," he wrote, "establishing freedom and equality of both sexes in humanity, moderating Eastern despotism with wise political institutions, and prescribing universal and obligatory literacy of all Muslims and Muslim women" (Akhundov, 1982).

A. Bayazitov, who defended the legal dignity of a Muslim marriage, was criticized by Ya.D. Koblov. However, the last admits that "polygamy is completely withdrawn from use" among the "local Muslims". The latest Muslim literature also did not convince N.P. Ostroumov. In 1903 he published a new book "The Koran and Progress. Concerning the mental awakening of modern Russian Muslims" aimed at exposing Muslim modernism (Ostroumov, 1903).

Like the previous reformers, Bayazitov in his book "Islam and Progress" advocates the restoration of the original principles of free thought inherent in early Islam, which included *ijtihad*. According to the thinker, "the history of Islamic legislation provides an excellent key to opening the most complex and cunning locks. Unfortunately, this key managed to get covered with mould and rust in careless hands." The urgent task is "to cleanse the teachings of Islam from the chaff mixed with it by the later ignoramuses" (Bayazitov, 1898). At the same time, he understands: "We cannot return to the former simplicity" (Bayazitov, 1898) of early times.

Through all their works, Muslim modernists carry the idea of the absence of antagonism between Islam and Christianity. Devlet-Kildeev calls Judaism, Christianity and Islam three natural daughters of the Old Testament truths.

“Islamism is based on the teachings of the Bible and the Gospel,” he says (Devlet-Kildeev, 1881). In principle, Murza Alim views Islam as the general name for the Abrahamic religions. In his opinion, Muhammad “did not come to destroy the truths of the Bible and the Gospel, but came in order to strengthen them and give them greater development” (Alim, 1882). “Muhammad is the same messenger or apostle of God, like Moses, Jesus and other prophets,” adds the Muslim (Ostroumov, 1890). According to “his teaching,” A. Agayev wrote, “all the prophets, from Jacob and Moses, ending with Jesus, spoke one truth, one truth.” In his opinion, ayats of the Koran “do not leave a shadow of doubt about the fraternal unity between Christians, Jews and Mohammedans” (Agayev, 1991). Not religious values, but “only different human concepts, judgments and opinions separate people from each other” (Devlet-Kildeev, 1881). A. Bayazitov wrote in this regard: “So, we see from the teachings of Islam that for the correct life of earthly and heavenly bliss there is no difference either in the nation or in religion. The Almighty has endowed everyone with his blessings; and the Lord's mercy will be enough for everyone” (Bayazitov, 1898).

#### 4. Summary

Advocating the modernization of the way of life by Muslims, Russian Muslim publicists proceeded from the ideas of a religious-reformist, pro-luminous sense: the “discovery” of *ijtihad*, the historical relativity of religious forms, the admissibility of progressive changes in the legal and socio-cultural sphere, etc. The recognition of the unity and universality of spiritual and cultural values became the basis of their call for fellow believers to overcome cultural alienation from other peoples. While affirming the confessional neutrality of scientific knowledge, they substantiated the possibility and necessity of getting involved in European sciences and reforming the confessional school.

At the same time, they advocated modernization on a traditional cultural and spiritual basis for the preservation of the identity of Muslims. Arguing against assimilationists addressing a wide Russian-speaking audience, Muslim modernists sought to protect Islam from attacks and prevailing stereotypes. They managed to draw attention to the problems of development of Muslim peoples and win the sympathy of the democratic strata of Russian society.

#### 5. Conclusions

Muslim modernist journalism prepared a broad social, spiritual and intellectual ground for the activation of the modernization processes at Muslims in Russia at the beginning of the 20th century. Their ideas found their development in the works of Muslim educators (Chumarova, Vinnikova, Fakhrutdinova, & Yudintseva, 2019) and were reflected in the state-confessional policy (Khabutdinov et al., 2019), and are also in demand now (Nabiyev & Gafarov, 2015).

##### 5.1. Contribution

The authors came to the conclusion that Muslim publicists were able to bring Islamic modernist discourse to the all-Russian stage as a result of their study of the works of Muslim modernists, to express their call in a popular language to multiethnic co-religionists: to go beyond confessional constraints and enter the achievements of world civilization.

#### Acknowledgements

The work is performed according to the Russian Government Program of Competitive Growth of Kazan Federal University.

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