

Islamic „Mission“ (Da’wah)

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Mission – a Matter Only for the Church?

Muslim apologists (defenders of their faith) frequently emphasize – not least of all in events featuring religious dialogue – that Islam, in contrast to the Christian churches, knows no kind of “mission”. In some cases, even a renunciation of Christian mission is demanded since, as is claimed, it is one of the greatest barriers to dialogue. This discussion about the legitimacy of mission is conducted at all only in the West since, in Islamic countries, Christian mission is forbidden everywhere, because it is judged invariably to be a danger to the civil order and the political stability of a country. If Christians in Islamic countries nevertheless speak with Muslims about their faith, then nationals of Western states can be deported to their home countries, while native Christians have to reckon in some cases with heavy punishment (fines, prison terms). In some countries – as, for example, in Saudi Arabia – practicing Christians obtain work permits in most cases only with difficulty, or even not at all. Foreign skilled workers from Western countries lose their rights of residence there when they visit one of the worship services held quietly in private houses. Asians, in most cases, are jailed, sometimes mistreated, or even lose their lives. Frequently, Christian mission is condemned by the press in Arabic countries while, on the other hand, Islamic mission is hardly ever discussed. Thus, at first glance, it might appear that it is only the Christian church that campaigns for the faith and thereby causes displeasure, and that Islam, on the other hand, does not.

This, however, is not the case. Even if the identical concept of “mission” does not exist in Islam, it still quite definitely recognizes the promotion of the faith, propaganda, or the “call”, the “invitation” (Arabic: da’wah) to Islam. For, the call proclaimed already in the Koran to recognize Islam as the only true, divinely-revealed faith (Surah 21:25; 9:33) and to submit oneself to Allah (“Islam” = “submission”, “devotion”) is directed in principle toward all human beings. Indeed, even Muslims take the view that *“From the very beginning, Islam was a missionary religion”*¹, for *“Who would have something better to say than the one who calls people to God, who does what is right, and says: ‘I belong to those who have devoted themselves to God?’”* (Surah 41:33)

This universal claim made by Islam becomes clear in the course of history as well as in the eschatological view present in Islamic texts. In the areas conquered by Islamic forces, Christians were “protected minorities” (Arabic: dhimmis) who, as second-class citizens, were subjected to Islamic rule and were required to pay a head tax, in some cases even a land tax. These taxes, as well as various restrictions (e.g., the prohibition upon the marriage of a non-Muslim man with a Muslim woman) and discrimination (e.g., at that time as today, in regard to university study, military service, or the attainment of influential positions in society), were a constant incentive, indeed frequently a form of pressure, for conversion to Islam. In this connection, of course, the Koran verse *“There is no compulsion in religion”* (Surah 2:256) is cited repeatedly. What is correct is that Jews and Christians in Islamic areas enjoyed a special status as “possessors of the book” and, thereby, also a certain legal recognition. But, since Islam sees itself as absolute and places itself above – in its view, falsified – Judaism and Christianity, indeed holds the Muslim community to be superior to all other religious communities (Surah 3:110), this has more the significance of a toleration than of a fundamental recognition on the basis of equality. For this reason, according to majority conviction, Jews and Christians, too, must be called to accept Islam: *“With a little knowledge ... about the Bible [we can] prepare ourselves for dialogue with Christians. Most Christians do not know their own Bible at all, but only what they hear again and again in church.”*²

Human rights organizations report repeatedly about the kidnapping of Christian children or women in countries with underprivileged Christian minorities such as Pakistan, or even Egypt or the Sudan, and also about the forced conversions of children and/or the forced marriages of women to a Muslim husband. Although such action will be condemned by many Muslims as an act forbidden in Islam, it is still a fact that the family members concerned in such cases only very seldom receive effective support from the Islamic government in their country, which in many cases is not willing or able to put an effective stop to such injustice against the Christian minority.

The “invitation”, or call, to accept Islam should be extended, in the Muslim view, to all non-Muslims, but also to all Muslims who do not observe Islam completely. Calling non-Muslims and “inconsistent” Muslims to Islam is considered by Muslim theologians to be an unconditional duty inherent to Islam that the Muslim community as a whole must fulfil, even if every individual cannot be a “da’iya”, a “propagandist”, for Islam: “*Every Muslim is, on the basis of his faith, a missionary for Islam*”³, and everyone who does not comply with this duty to pursue da’wah will be called to account for this failure on the day of judgment. In addition, the one who fails in this duty makes himself into an outsider in regard to the worldwide “ummah” (community of Muslims)⁴

Muslim theologians take the view that da’wah is “*an important form of jihad*”⁵, that is, of the “effort on the path of God”, and sometimes also that jihad is a form of da’wah. Thus, da’wah work is not a task that belongs to the past, but rather exists wherever Muslims live as a minority among a non-Muslim majority, a concern more urgent than ever, “*an invaluable opportunity*”⁶, for “*da’wa opportunities are everywhere*”⁷.

The goal of the dissemination of Islam is ultimately the creation of a uniform society in which, first of all, Islamic law (Sharia) is established over all people. Such a homogenous community, in which everyone is a Muslim, then will be a society, in this view, in which peace and justice rule. The Muslim community should work toward the reshaping of society already today; in any case, though, this society of justice will be established at the end of times, after the appearance of the Antichrist, after all non-Muslims once again have had the opportunity to turn to Islam.

How Does Islamic Mission Occur?

In the past decades, Saudi-Arabia especially has devoted itself increasingly to the expansion of Islam and, above all in Subsaharan Africa, conducts “missionary work” that is linked with conversion-dependent aid. The initiators of this work are, in some cases, Islamic propaganda organizations and, in some cases, wealthy individuals – from the Gulf States, for example – who sometimes contribute considerable sums of donated funds to the spread of Islam. Where the only accessible school in a village instructs every child in Islam or only in this case waives the school fees; where access to water and medical assistance is available only to the “newly converted”, it is not seldom the case that extended families or even entire villages convert from animism or Christianity to Islam. An instruction for the Muslim “missionary” thus runs so: “*Visit the sick ... help the needy... exchange gifts*”⁸, for “*it is exactly other deeds [doing good], too, that win especially the hearts of the poor and of the unliberated for Islam*”⁹.

The expansion of Islam also occurs through influence upon public life (e.g., the media, churches, and politics), through the assertion of special rights for the Muslim community in courts of law, through the sending of teachers of the Koran, the training of African or Asian imams and legal scholars in Arabia, through the printing and dissemination of copies of the Koran and of Islamic literature, through prison visits, correspondence courses, lectures, open house at mosques, radio and television broadcasts, through CDs and videos that are produced in many languages of the world, subsidized and then given away free in mosques and bookstores.

Especially in Saudi-Arabia, various organizations have been founded that, with the support of the Saudi government, conduct da'wah at home and abroad on a high organizational and financial level. Thus, the "World Assembly of Muslim Youth" (WAMY), founded in 1972, has the goal "to introduce Islam to non-Muslims in its purest form as a comprehensive system and a way of life", and "to assist Muslim organizations all over the world through training, communication, and cooperation."¹⁰ The building of mosques, especially in poorer Islamic countries, as well as the subsequent sending of prayer leaders (imams) to them, who then export the rigid Saudi-Arabian interpretation of Islam, also serves the pervasion with Islam of a district only partially or not at all Islamicized. In the course of construction of the mosque, a Koran school also is erected in most cases, in which the children very early on are made acquainted with the fundamentals of the religion. Along with the erection of the Koran school, pressure is frequently applied to adopt an Islamic dress code, especially for the women, so that in this society the consciousness for "appropriate" clothing and conduct gradually aligns itself on Islamic norms. Non-Muslim women who do not observe this dress code are molested in some cases, are harassed in public, or are denied the right of school attendance. Such cases and those of a similar nature are reported, for example, from some of the federal states in northern Nigeria that, beginning in 2000, have proclaimed the complete introduction of Sharia. Here it is clear that, in the process of the Islamization of a society, Muslim activists first of all emphasize that the demanded changes in law apply only to Muslims, but that in a second step non-Muslims, too, are to be forced under the dictates of Sharia – the divine law with eternal, universal validity.

Practical Tips for Da'wah

In Islamic periodicals and especially on the Internet, there are numerous practical tips for da'wah work; some recall principles important for the public relations practiced by Christian churches.¹¹ The personal conversation as a means of promoting Islam is especially favored: "*Personal conversation in private is the method of choice*"¹².

In order to be successful in da'wah work, it is important first of all for the person to acquire knowledge about Islam and to know the Koran, the tradition, and the stories about Mohammed's life. Only then will it be possible to provide answers in conversation with those of a different faith. On the other hand, words are not everything: *Da'wa can occur through writing, speaking, through proper conduct, one's own attitude, through behavior, through sympathy and aid*¹³. It is also important that one presents himself as a positive example: "*The best Da'wa is being a good example*"¹⁴. Politeness and respect are seen as the preconditions for da'wah: "*To invite someone also means being polite, friendly, and inviting, taking care of that person, and showing him understanding*"¹⁵, or: "*Be friendly and try to be humorous*"¹⁶. A pleasant outward appearance is also important ("*be clean and neat*"), "*never eat raw onions or garlic when you go to the mosque or meet with people*"¹⁷, and "*chew gum or something for good breath*"¹⁸.

Those proclaiming Islam are advised against judging other religions negatively or conducting debates, for: "*Debates may be a pleasure for Muslims, but for others they can be an agony, and if one torments another, one will not win him to his cause*"¹⁹. An appeal is also made for modesty and for appropriate manners: "*No one should boast about what he does, also not about the effect he may have, or what he has achieved. No one should claim that he applies the best of all methods*"²⁰. Or: "*The task of bringing someone closer to Allah ... should not be connected with arrogance, thinking you're the teacher and everyone else should be lucky you've embarked on a crusade to save them*"²¹. Some instructions for da'wah forbid the propagandist to become angry in response to criticism from his partner in conversation: "*Do not become annoyed or vow revenge if one has attacked you*"²².

In a country with religious freedom, there is nothing to be said against a respectful, peaceful promotion of Islam that does not exert pressure or disdains those who believe differently, and

does not apply pressure through the awarding of privileges. More clarity, though, could be created if representatives of Islam would profess this goal openly, also in regard to German society. Christians, for their part, should not let themselves be deterred from speaking of their faith to Muslims, too, but also should not become weary of continuing to point out the imbalance that arises from the fact that Muslims in the West enjoy a great deal of religious freedom, while this human right is denied to Christians everywhere in the Islamic world.

Übersetzt von Dr. Dennis L. Slabaugh.

Endnotes

¹ *Meaning and Significance of Dawah ila-Allah. A Guide to the Propagation of Islam* (Markazi Maktaba Islami: Dehli, 1983), p. 43.

² Sadiya Plath, „,Sie entstellen die Schrift an ihren richtigen Stellen...‘ (Sure 5:13). Bibeltextstellen für Muslime im Dialog mit Christen“. In: *al-Islam*, 4/2000, pp. 11-14, here p. 11.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁴ Dr. Ahmad H. Sakr, „Dialogue with Non-Muslims“. In: *The Muslim World League Journal*, vol. 25/11, March 1998, pp. 18-20, here p. 18.

⁵ Ahmad al-Khalifa, „Da’wa in Deutschland – Probleme und Perspektiven“. In: *al-Islam. Zeitschrift von Muslimen in Deutschland*, 3/2001, pp. 11-13, here p. 11.

⁶ Sakr, „Dialogue“, p. 18.

⁷ www.netmuslims.com/resources/dawah-intro.html (5.(.2003)

⁸ www.muslima-aktiv.de/5dawah.htm (5.8.2003)

⁹ Ahmad von Denffer, *Da’wa in der Zeit des Propheten*, Schriftenreihe des Islamischen Zentrums München, 12 (Munich, 2001), p. 12.

¹⁰ www.wamy.co.uk/bd_about.htm

¹¹ Thus, for example, it is reported that Christians have developed a method of going from house to house and inviting people to engage in conversations about God. Islamic Dawah: Presenting Islam, In: *The Muslim World League Journal*, vol. 25/8, Dec 1997, S. 17-20, here p. 18.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Dr. Ahmad H. Sakr, „The Islamic Concept of Dawah.“ In: *The Muslim World League Journal*, vol. 25/8, December 1997, pp. 12-16, here p. 15.

¹⁴ www.netmuslims.com/resources/dawah-intro.html (5.8.2003)

¹⁵ Islamic Dawah: Presenting Islam, In: *The Muslim World League Journal*, vol. 25/8, Dec 1997, p. 17-20, here p. 17.

¹⁶ Sakr, „Dialogue“, p. 20.

¹⁷ www.muslima-aktiv.de/5dawah.htm (5.8.2003)

¹⁸ www.netmuslims.com/resources/dawah-intro.html (5.8.2003)

¹⁹ Islamic Dawah: Presenting Islam, In: *The Muslim World League Journal*, vol. 25/8, Dec 1997, pp. 17-20, here p. 19.

²⁰ Sakr, „Concept“, p. 15.

²¹ www.themodernreligion.com/dawah/dawah-12tips.html (5.8.2003)

²² www.muslima-aktiv.de/5dawah.htm (5.8.2003)