Islam as a Missional Religion

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'Mission' as a comparative term

Let me first thank Professor Mikaelsson for focusing on the issue of 'mission' from the perspective of the discipline comparative religion. The field needs a defined term for classification of a phenomenon that has for too long been ignored. Let me also thank Professor Mikaelsson for challenging the missiologists to also consider 'mission' as a phenomenon that we do not only find within Christianity, but also in other religions. It is helpful for scholars in the field of missiology to reflect upon similar phenomena in other religions.

I agree that it would have been good to have a neutral term, and I have considered the term 'self-expansion' for this purpose. I think, however, that it is difficult to replace 'mission'. First it is widely used already, both in the scholarly community and in the wider community. Secondly it has also been used by several religions in their own self-expansion activities, we have examples of both Islamic and Hindu Missions, making use of the term 'mission' in the English names of their organisations.

In my own work, I have like Professor Mikaelsson found it fruitful to define the term 'mission' in a broad sense, maybe even broader than Professor Mikaelsson has suggested. I take this opportunity to propose a definition of 'mission' as a comparative term as *a religion's ideology and practice of self-expansion*. In my opinion, we need to address the ideology as well as the practice, the intent as well as the result in order to have the most relevant understanding of what mission is in different religions. There will not always be a correspondence between intent and result, and therefore I think we need to address the entire process of self-expansion. In my opinion we need a wider perspective than focusing on individual conversions to a religion. Islam is a good example of a religion expanding also in other ways than through conversions of individuals.

The Islamic perspective

I understand my task as giving a response with respect to Islam. As I am not a Muslim myself, I can of course not give an insider perspective. A Muslim spokesperson would probably emphasize different aspects of Islam compared to what I will do here in response to Professor Mikaelsson. But I have been trying over the years to develop a relevant understanding of Islam and on one occasion I was in fact asked to speak on behalf of a Muslim group to the Norwegian community in which they were living. I have also had the honour of having my books on Islam recommended by Muslim leaders in Norway.

My response will focus on what we could call missional aspects of Islam. I will consider ideologies and practices that can be said to have a missional dimension. I will not limit my observations to ideologies and practices that would be seen as related to Islamic mission in an introduction to Islam written by Muslims. I will rather have a wide approach as I have already indicated above.

The concept of universality
The foundation of the missional dimension of Islam is the concept of universality. This universality is based on the belief that Muhammad is the last prophet. His message, the Qur'an is the final word of Allah to humankind. The quintessence of this belief is formulated in the creed of Islam, the *shahadah*, which is also the first of Islam's five pillars: *There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is his messenger*. This message contains divine instructions for individual life and life in family and community. In order to implement these instructions in the world of Allah, this message needs to be spread.

Islam is seen as the last and final religion in a history that also includes Judaism and Christianity. These religions, at least in their original and authentic forms, are leading towards Islam. Other religions are viewed in a more critical perspective, especially the polytheistic religions. But all religions may contain some truth; Islam estimates that there have been 124.000 prophets during the history of humankind, preaching a monotheistic belief to all peoples of the world.

The Islamic term dawah

One central term in Islam for the self-expansion process is the Arabic term *dawah*. The terms means invitation and it was originally used in the context of Islamic conquests. The conquered ones were then given the choice between accepting Islam, accepting to become a *dhimmi* (protected religious group under Islamic rule) or 'the sword' which would mean continued fighting until death. The invitation to accept Islam and become a *dhimmi* group was called *dawah*.

Dawah is nowadays often carried out as an independent activity, often in the form of information activity, although information about Islam is technically speaking something leading to *dawah* and making the actual *dawah* possible as the invitation requires some knowledge about Islam.

Jihad wars

During the first century of Islam the Muslim armies conquered an area from Indus to the Iberian Peninsula. There is no doubt that these wars had the spread of Islam as one of their objectives. By means of these wars Islam became the dominant religion of this vast area, although Muslims remained in minority for centuries in some of the areas.

The term *jihad* itself is not limited to military warfare for the purpose of spreading Islam. The term means something like 'effort' and is used by Muslims to describe all kinds of religiously motivated efforts. The effort may be a spiritual effort against evil in the world or against evil within oneself. The latter effort is called the greater jihad (*al-jihad al-akbar*) by the Sufis. The effort may also be a military effort to spread Islam, but nowadays the most common understanding of Jihad is that a military Jihad is only legitimate if it is necessary to defend Islam against a military attack. This is because Jihad is illegitimate if there is not a reasonable chance of winning the war. After the second failed Muslim siege of Vienna in 1683 the conclusion was that it would no longer be possible to conquer the world for Islam by means of military war.

This means that there is no longer representative support within Islam for Jihad as a method of mission, because it cannot possibly lead to an expansion of *dar al-islam*. In the language of modern Jihad groups the concept that Islam is under attack is dominating, and thus they see their actions as a war of defence.

Muslim empires

During the history of Islam a number of Muslim empires have played a significant role in the expansion of Islam. There have been numerous Arab, African, Turkish, Indian and Indonesian Muslim empires. The political roles of Islam in these empires have been different, but under different circumstances these empires have promoted the expansion of Islam.

By establishing Islamic political dominance the *dar al-islam*, the House of Islam, has been expanded. This means that Islam in one form or another has come to shape people's lives, including the lives of those who have not converted to Islam.

In some cases the Muslim empires also have sent out missionaries, like the Ottoman Sultan who sent a number of Bektashi Sufi missionaries to the Balkans before sending his armies into the area. One more recent example is the Call of Islam Society, the mission organisation of Muhammar Ghadaffi's Libya.

Muslim professionals

A very significant aspect of the early expansion of Islam in the early centuries has been the influence of Muslim professionals travelling outside the world of Islam. These professionals have especially worked in the fields of trade, finance, law or education.

The traders brought Islam with them as they travelled along the trade routes immediately outside the Muslim world. Their prayers were often performed in public in the marketplaces. People observing these prayers automatically received a piece of information about the religious practice of these traders. This could lead to conversations on religious matters. It was no coincidence that Islam was introduced to the trade communities, as trade was a very important aspect of the first context of Islam in Mecca and Medina. Several aspects of Islam have a special relevance for traders, like the lunar calendar or the legal guidelines for trade contracts.

The traders also touched the area of finance. Islam regulated financial issues like interest and the welfare contribution. It was also significant that people being identified with Islam often were rich. Therefore Islam was often seen as a religion providing economic progress and success.

Legal experts could influence for example legal contracts concerning trade and other kinds of cooperation. This was especially significant in a context with city-states or with traditional ethnic laws. Such local law systems often hindered trade or cooperation. The Muslim lawyers brought a legal system that was not biased when it came to tensions between neighbouring cities or peoples. Therefore it was often seen as neutral, and the Islamic legal experts often emphasized the universality of Islamic law.

Islamic scholars also travelled outside the Muslim empires. They were often much sought after as the level of knowledge in the Muslim world was much higher than in most surrounding areas. This was true in the fields of medicine, mathematics, astronomy, navigation and philosophy. The Islamic scholars saw these disciplines in the light of their belief in Allah as creator, and therefore their teachings were not religiously neutral.

Islamization of institutions of society

The professionals often introduced one further level of islamization, which would be the islamization of key institutions in the society. This happened when Islamic principles of law were accepted in local settings. It happened when Muslim teachers started schools based on principles and content brought from the Muslim world. It also happened when the Arabic alphabet was used for writing the local language.

This type of islamization establishes an Islamic influence on different aspects of daily life. The focus is not on conversion, but as Islam influences and defines aspects of daily life, the threshold for individual conversions may be lowered.

Sufi preachers

Members of the Sufi brotherhoods often travelled outside the Muslim world. They would often be seen as "holy men" and approached for counselling or healing. Their preaching and teaching took place in homes and marketplaces. This kind of introduction to Islam was open to everyone as a conversion to Islam was not required.

Those who felt that they were helped through the ministry of the Sufis easily came to see Islam as a real and effective spiritual movement. It is not surprising that they were more inclined to become Muslims at a later stage.

Marriage

In some cases Islam has spread by means of marriage. Two aspects of Islamic law are relevant for such a process. First the option for a Muslim man to marry four wives and then the principle that a Muslim man may marry a Jewish or a Christian wife, whereas a Muslim woman is not allowed to marry a non-Muslim man. Then it is presupposed that the children will follow the father in terms of religion.

This implies that when a Muslim man marries a non-Muslim woman, the children of that couple will be Muslims, and the Islamic community will grow at the cost of the other community. I am aware that this principle is not always followed, but my general impression is that this contributes to the growth of Islam.

One may object here that marriage to non-Muslims is hardly a deliberate mission strategy, even when the result is a growing number of Muslims. It is true that in this area we are seeing more result than intent, but we also find examples that Muslims are recommending these kinds of marriages in order to expand Islam. One of the four Sunni law schools actually recommended that Muslim men marry Jewish and Christians women in order to expand Islam.

Migration

Nowadays millions of Muslims are living outside the traditional borders of the Muslim world. More than twenty million Muslims are living in Europe and North America, according to recent estimates. Their presence is in itself an introduction of Islam to Western audiences. Among those Westerners who convert to Islam we find people who were disappointed with Christianity as the traditional religion of the West, and the mere presence of Muslims in the West have drawn their attention to Islam.

Mission is hardly the individual motivation for the migrants. They rather came to the West to seek work, education or refuge. But as they came, many of them also shared their faith with others in schools, workplaces or neighbourhoods. We also find Muslim leaders who see the millions of Muslims in the *diaspora* as a part of a divine plan, telling their fellow Muslims that *dawah* is the divine purpose of their presence in the West, and that they should take every opportunity to invite Westerners to accept Islam.

Mission agencies

In more recent times we have seen a number of Muslim mission agencies organized after the model of Christian missions. This was the strategy of the Ahmadiyya movement after it originated in India a century ago. Ahmadiyya put an emphasis on the use of media in order to spread the message of Islam, including translating the Qur'an into other languages. During the twentieth century this movement was declared heretic and after 1979 Ahmadiyyas are denied pilgrimage visas for the *hajj*.

But there are other Muslim mission agencies. One of the most widespread agencies has been the Call of Islam Society (call = *dawah*), the state mission agency of Muhammar al-Ghadaffi in Libya. This society has worked in more than 130 countries and have supported mosque building, radio programs, schools and hospitals, and has given scholarships to young people to study in Libya or in another Muslim world.

Other agencies operate out of the Asian Middle East, and the Muslim World League is one of the most significant ones. We may also consider the Wahhabiya movement as a mission movement, working hard to influence African Muslims to become more Saudi style Muslims. Information is a key activity of these mission agencies. We have noted that information is sometimes seen as an equivalent of *dawah*. In this context we note that Muslims in the West have also set up information agencies with the purpose of providing information in their own Western contexts.

It is also interesting to notice that some groups use the 'mission' term in a way that resembles the way it is used in the Christian "Inner Mission" tradition. This is the case when we consider World Islamic Mission as a mission movement. This is the Pakistani dominated group which built the first purpose-build mosque in Norway in the 1990s, having a clear emphasis on work among those who are already Muslims.

Conclusion

Examining self-expansion in Islam as a missional dimension of the religion can open for interesting comparative perspectives. It seems to be fruitful to have a wide definition of the term 'mission', maybe even wider than suggested by Professor Mikaelsson. Our review has demonstrated that a

number of dynamics have contributed to the expansion of Islam, which is a consequence of the universalism derived from the creed of Islam.