

BETWEEN THE EAST AND THE WEST: THE PENETRATION OF CONTEMPORARY ISLAM INTO POLAND

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The internet is one of the fastest developing media of today. It is through the internet that Islamic ideas spread throughout the world on a level that has never been reported before. Internet portals and web-sites containing information about Muslim religion and culture can be accessed from the furthest corners of the world. They popularize Islam which for ages seemed to have been attributed exclusively to the Middle East, Northern Africa and South-East Asia. Poland is located on the Islam's expansion route and takes an extremely important, if not strategic, position. Due to the position of the Catholic religion in our country, the development of Islam in Poland (an increasing number of converts) appears to be a fundamental factor in the growth of the Muslim world. Many believers do not conceal the fact that they dream of the European caliphate, which is an important step in the restoration of the world caliphate. "Religious fundamentalism" of Polish people, according to many Muslim clergymen and political activists, guarantees that Islamic believers obtained in our country as opposed to converts from the "lay West", will be as active and religiously engaged as the believers of the Roman Catholic Church. Thus, in the following paper on the penetration of contemporary Islam into Poland, I will focus on this most dynamic instrument of the expansion of the Islamic world.

Keywords: fundamentalism, Islam, Islam in Poland, Muslim Internet sites in Poland, Polish Muslims, Polish Tatars.

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Introduction

When we enter a search on the "Islam in Poland" in "Google", we receive 359 thousand entries. When we take a closer look at links that are offered by the search engine, we very soon discover that contemporary Islam in Poland differs considerably from what is ingrained in the Polish consciousness. Tatars, Bohoniki and Kruszyniany villages are equally symbolic transmitters as Lajkonik in Market Square in Cracow. What is more, they are the symbols which for the contemporary Muslim believers, especially immigrants and converts, are something artificial, contrary to the principles of Koran. This phenomenon was discussed in "Rzeczpospolita" and "Newsweek" a few years ago, where it was stressed that Muslims more and more often feel like

people of the second category unable to fit into the orthodox, Wahhabic¹ Islam, which is the pre-dominating version of Islam among immigrant Muslims. These people are criticized for moving in their faith and traditions too far away from what is expected from a devout Muslim. Christmas and Easter traditions, cultivated together with the local Christian communities, become problematic. When a local imam forbids wishing happy Easter or mentions the issue of decorating Christmas trees, some people perceive it as a proof of fundamentalization of Islam, whereas others see it as an attempt to purify the religion according to the principles prevailing in the Arab world. The problem concerns not only the older generation of Polish Tatars, who have been isolated from the information about the evolution of the Islamic world for years; but also many Polish people, for whom these changes are demonstrative of the increasing impact of the Muslim world in their country and the intrusion in the lives and faith of “their” Tatars, who have been here for ages; and we have always been and still are really open to and tolerant towards Islam (this particular type of Islam).

The evolution of Polish Muslims

Due to the fact that Muslim community in Poland is constantly changing and evolving, Tatars, as well as the Poles, are faced with the difficult task of accepting, or not accepting, the ongoing changes. The acceptance of these changes is further impeded by the fact, that Polish society is put in a position to accept Islam in the wahhabic version, which is invariably associated with religious fundamentalism in the negative meaning of the word. This state of affairs is a result of the fact that people who teach religion and the Arabic language are foreigners, Arabs, very often from Saudi Arabia or other countries of the Middle East, who, along with their religion, bring their culture and principles unknown in Poland till now. After World War II the first Polish mufti, a Tatar, sheikh Tomasz Miśkiewicz, who studied in Saudi Arabia, is the symbol of these changes. On the one hand, he is obliged to observe and teach Islam, according to the principles prevailing in the Arab world, and on the other hand, he needs to answer the question about the future and the identity of the Tatar minority in the Eastern parts of Poland (Cesari 2004, appendix 1). It is not an easy task taking into consideration the fact, that many young Tatars strive to live according to the principles established by the immigrant Muslim community and the increasingly growing group of Polish converts.

At the same time, it must be remembered that Poland, as well as other countries of the Western and Southern Europe, is subject to the growing expansion of the Middle

¹ Wahhabism – religious doctrine founded in the 18th century by Muhammad ibn Abd-al-Wahhab. Today it is the dominant form of Islam in Saudi Arabia. It preaches the need to return to the Koranic sources and reject all the accretions that have distorted Islam during the ages in which it has developed, including the cult of saint places, saints or Muhammad.

Eastern Islam². Maybe the vision of *Europe caliphate* (Bawer 2006: 13), viewed as a threat by many publicists, is only an unfulfilled dream of some of the orthodox Muslim clergymen; still, the fact that Islam is coming back to “old Europe”, from where it was driven away in the 11th–15th century and after the defeat of the Ottoman Turkey, cannot be denied (al-Azmeh, Fokas 2007). An example of the radicalization of Islamic movements in Poland was a community in Poznań gathered around a Yemeni imam, Ahmed Ammar, who, after 11 September 2001 exhorted to fight against the “infidels”, for which he was expelled from the country on the initiative of the Polish Secret Service on a charge of contacts with terrorist organizations.

On account of its long-term isolation in the socialist camp and a relatively hermetic society of Poland, an active penetration of Islam into our country has begun only recently along with the increasing number of foreigners coming to Poland on business or to stay. It is directly related to closer contacts of Poland with Middle Eastern countries and an increasing interest of Polish people in Islam. Additionally, the moment is approaching when hundreds of Iraqis supporting Polish soldiers in their mission in Iraq will come to Poland. Furthermore, Muslim scholars come to Poland more and more frequently, Koran translations are reissued, religious literature is published, classes in which the Arabic language is taught are created, Departments of Arabic Language at University of Warsaw and Cracow function successfully, a mass of publications concerning the Islamic world appears. However, not many people, except for those interested in the Arabic, Muslim or general Middle Eastern subject-matter, are aware of the activity of numerous internet portals organized and financed by all branches of Islam (Sunni, Shi’a, Wahhabic or Sufi).

Islam in today’s Poland through the Internet

The Muslim portals are organized and managed mostly by diverse organizations and societies. The oldest functioning society in Poland, Muzułmański Związek Religijny (MZR) RP (Muslim Religious Association in Poland) founded in 1925 is composed of Sunnites of the Hadafi school, who are mainly Polish Tatars (although the only formal prerequisite for being a member of the society, apart from religion, is Polish citizenship or permanent resident card). MZR runs an internet portal of the same name

² As *muzulmanie.com* indicates, “as a result of the influx of immigrants from Muslim countries, there are app. 40 million Islam believers living in European countries (including the European part of Russia). In Europe (excluding Russia) they constitute about 3.3 per cent of the whole population, whereby in some countries the percentage is higher, in France 7 per cent, in Germany 4 per cent, in Austria 4.2 per cent, in Bulgaria 12 per cent or lower, in Great Britain 2.7 per cent, in Italy 1.2 per cent, in Spain app. 1 per cent”; see http://www.muzulmanie.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=45&Itemid=71 (link valid on 22 September 2008). The percentage of Muslims in Poland is considerably low; the number of Islam believers (including Polish Tatars) can be estimated at 35 thousand. In 2004 apart from 5 thousand people of Tatar origin living in Poland, there lived about 2 thousand natives, converts to Islam, 7 thousand foreigners with permanent resident cards and about 10 thousand diplomats, businessmen or students from Islamic countries (Grzegorz Górny, “Islam po polsku”, *Przewodnik Katolicki*, vol. 46, 2004, see http://www.opoka.org.pl/biblioteka/1/IR/islam_pl_tr.html, link valid on 06 April 2009). Today, the estimated number of Muslims in Warsaw is 9-10 thousand.

<http://www.mzr.pl/pl/>. It provides basic information concerning Islam, the newest information about the life of Tatar community in Poland and information concerning Muslim religious holidays. A special portal for young Polish Muslims *muzulmanie.pl* (www.muzulmanie.pl) is managed in cooperation with MZR RP and World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY). WAMY Foundation in Poland with its web-site <http://www.fundacja.info/pl/> is an integral element of the Assembly. After a closer examination, it can be observed that these portals tend to duplicate provided information rather than complement each other. From the point of view of the attractiveness of the transmitted message, these portals cannot compare with those maintained and financed with the help of Middle Eastern funding, although in the case of MZR portal attractiveness is presumably not the main objective. If we want to be up-to-date with the problems and accomplishments of Polish Tatars and Muslims being members of the Association³, the portal provides all the essential information.

The chief competing organization is Liga Muzułmańska RP (Muslim League in Poland) founded in 2001 (officially registered in 2004), which is almost exclusively composed of foreigners and converts, and whose main objective is to promote in Poland the Middle Eastern model of Sunni Islam according to the standards mostly from Saudi Arabia, the leaders of which have long relished the idea of creating in the future, preferably under their leadership, the previously mentioned European caliphate. From the standpoint of the sizeable group of Polish Muslims of the Tatar origin, it indicates a change of the prevailing, specific for these areas age-old Tatar Islamic tradition, for which Ismael Gasprinski, a Crimean Tatar, has become a symbol. He is said to have exerted enormous influence on the greatest reformer of the Islamic Turkey, Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the idea of secular nation-state of Turkey. Atatürk separated the sphere of religion from the sphere of politics and modernized the country following the western model, for which he is still perceived as a traitor of the Islamic cause and the idea of Islamic Umma by many Middle Eastern Muslims (Cox, Marks 2003; Cesari 2004). One of the informal league leaders is Imam Abdelwahab Bouali, the manager of the Islamic Centre in Białystok, who questions the spiritual leadership of Miskiewicz as mufti and criticizes him for not representing all Muslims in Poland but only those belonging to MZR RP. The internet address of the league's portal is <http://www.islam.info.pl/> and its leader is Samir Ismail. Previously, League was lead by, among others, a convert, Iwona Alkhalayla. The League has its units in Łódź, Warsaw, Katowice, Lublin, Wrocław, Białystok and Poznań. The League is composed of: members of Stowarzyszenie Studentów Muzułmańskich w RP (Muslim Students Society) (<http://www.islam.org.pl/>) and Muzułmańskie Stowarzyszenie Kształtowania Kulturalnego w RP (Qualification Muslim Cultural Society in Poland) (<http://mskk-islam.8m.com/main.htm>), both operating in Białystok. Muslim Students Society in Poland maintains many internet portals, such as www.muzulmanka.pl addressed to Polish women, who have converted to Islam or are going to do so in the near future. The portal informs

³ There are eight communities within the structure of Muslim Religious Association in Poland: in Białystok, Bohoniki, Kruszyniany, Bydgoszcz, Gdańsk, Gorzów Wielkopolski, Poznań and Warsaw.

about the rights and duties of Muslim women, the place and the role of family in Islam, principles of religious children upbringing⁴. It also helps women to find Muslim husbands as, according to Islamic law, religiously mixed marriages are not allowed.

Another competing Islamic structure operating in Poland is Związek Muzułmanów Polskich (Polish Muslim Association), registered in 1999, “integrating Polish speaking Islam believers”. It was founded by Farhat Khan, who studied in Gazi Husrev Bega in Sarajevo, in Great Britain and then in Kuwait. He is also the manager of the European Institute for Non-Interest Economy⁵. Polish Muslim Association is the first in Europe to enable an on-line shahadah declaration, which is intended to make the conversion to Islam easier for the Polish⁶. It can be done on the web-site of the Association, <http://www.ipdirect.home.pl/kmp/>, on server IP Direct Group the Central Europe’s Leading OIC & China Business Link, which leads directly to Organization of the Islamic Conference. It is enough (according to portal creators) to provide your personal details and click “accept” under the Muslim confession of faith to become a Muslim. In one of the links there is advice for those who “take their first steps in Islam”. However, there is no information about the fact that it is a “one way journey”, since Islam does not allow for departure from faith and apostasy may even be punished with death. In the opinion of Muslims of MZR it is at conflict with Islam principles as, according to sharia, the confession of faith should be made orally in the house of prayer in the presence of witnesses.

Among the active groups operating in Poland is Stowarzyszenie Jedności Muzułmańskiej, SJM (Muslim Unity Society) registered in 1990. It was founded by a convert Zbigniew Mahmud Żuk, who was excluded from MZR and later decided to work on his own. SJM is financed by Iran and integrates Polish Shiites. The official web-site of the Society <http://rberger.republika.pl/> is more than modest. A little more information is provided by <http://szia.webpark.pl/glowna.htm>, where many materials on Shiism can be found. A lot more information about Shiism, along with a developed system of links, is given by portal <http://www.al-islam.org.pl>.

Other Shiite structures are: Ahl ul-Bayt Islamic Assembly composed of converts and Ahmadiyya Muslim Society which is a unit of British Shiite organisation Ahmadiyya, which many orthodox Muslims deem to be heretic (there is one registered community in Warsaw with several dozen of believers). What seems particularly

⁴ On a special sub-page there is a complete set of didactic materials, including curricula, for teaching Muslim religion in schools.

⁵ “Occupation – Imam? Object – Islamic Europe, 50 Years...” in *Życie* from 31 March 2004 http://www.ip-direct.home.pl/kmp/kiosk/Polscy_muzulmanie/Zycie_%20Wywiad%20z%20Farhatem%20Khan.htm (link valid on 5 October 2008).

⁶ According to observations made by Farhat Khan, in the interview in *Życie* from 31 March 2004 “every third day one person converts to Islam in Poland”. The data is supposed to be taken from the statistics, provided by internet web-sites devoted to this religion. Most of the converts are women between 16 and 40 years of age. Assuming that in 2005 MZR RP estimated the number of converts at 800, the estimates provided by Khan may somewhat hold true, see “Muzułmanie. Dossier”, in *Nowe Państwo* from 14 July 2005. See <http://media.wp.pl/kat,38210,wid,7616854,wiadomosc.html> (link valid on 5 October 2008).

interesting is that the statute of the Ahl ul-Bayt Society maintains that it integrates and provides religious protection for Islamic believers in Poland, regardless of their citizenship. The official Polish web-site of the Society, http://www.abia.pl/islamskie_zgromadzenie_ahlulba.htm is remarkably ascetic in comparison to the official Iranian web-site of the same Society <http://www.ahl-ul-bayt.org/>.

Sufis also have a web-site in Polish (<http://www.sufi.org.pl>) where they attempt to persuade readers to choose this particular spiritual path. The whole web-site is rather modest and seems to be functioning as an information portal aiming at attracting adepts to the School of Sufi Science, existing since 1996, which is a branch of Institute of Search for Truth in New Delhi, India. The school provides, as we are informed, “a spiritual training in the tradition of five Sufi paths” which consists of “a series of transformational experiences under the supervision of a sheikh”. The school is free of charge and provides spiritual protection and the possibility of visiting places connected to Sufi tradition.

Beside web-sites directly or indirectly related to specific Muslim organizations in Poland, there are a few large portals addressed mostly to people “seeking for their path”. The biggest portal propagating Sunni Islam in Poland is <http://www.planetaislam.com/>, financed by Saudi Arabia. It is an immense source of information about the Islamic world and different aspects of faith. Its characteristic feature is a considerable amount of essays devoted to confronting the most important aspects of Christian faith with Islam, which at the same time are aimed at demonstrating that Islam is “the ultimate means for gaining knowledge of God”. In this portal, in the section devoted to “people of the book” essays such as “Jesus and Islam”, “Why Allah and not God?”, “Islam is the only way to salvation” or “Jesus and Muhammad according to the Bible and Koran” can be found. There are also many fatwas translated to Polish that are intended to facilitate Polish converts’ lives. There is a special forum devoted to the place and role of women in Islam, another devoted to the issue of terrorism and jihad, and a number of blogs maintained by Polish Muslims and converts. The section of the portal devoted to the Polish Muslim Society is particularly interesting. The links enable us to start learning the Arabic language, order Islamic literature or even take the opportunity of signing up for a correspondence Arabic learning course. As an addition, the web-site provides Koran in Polish and English translation on-line.

The portal “Islam w Polsce” (Islam in Poland) <http://www.islam-in-poland.org/> has been created in a similar fashion. It is considerably less extensive but it is more deeply grounded in the contemporary world. There are sections devoted to Israeli politics in the occupied territories and the Iraqi issue. There are also sub-pages devoted to Islamic law, politics and social problems. Similarly to the previous portal, this one also offers on-line translations of Koran. Until recently, it has been possible to use a special, perfectly designed web-site for children through the portal.

One of the exceptionally absorbing portals with a rather strong fundamental undertone, is the web-site of “Ruch na rzecz odnowy kalifatu” (Movement for caliphate restoration) <http://wirtualnykalifat.de.tl> maintained on one of the German servers. The main objective of this portal is to propagate the idea of the restoration of the world

caliphate, which is the ultimate dream of many Islamic fundamentalists, the mythical “planet Islam” where it is only one, united Islamic umma following exclusively the principles of sharia. What is specific about this web-site is that it exposes the idea of Ottoman Caliphate (Turam 2007) and that it very often makes use of studies of Turkish scholars⁷; but also publications of one of the extreme Islamic movements, Hizb ut Tahrir party, which strongly supports the creation of caliphate and overthrowing pro-western governments in Arabic countries and regimes in post-soviet Republics of Central Asia (Cox, Marks 2003). There is another Islamic web-site, addressed to the Polish people on German servers, <http://www.way-to-allah.com/pol/>, which is a part of an extensive portal of the same name. Its characteristic feature is that it includes a vast collection of literature, devoted to Islamic issues, translated into many languages, including Polish.

The last internet form of propagating Islam among the Poles is discussion forums. Some of them are closed for outside readers (they are addressed mainly to converts); some of them require prior registration and gaining access right. The most interesting forum is inevitably the web-site “Islam w Praktyce” (Islam in practice), <http://www.islam.fora.pl/>, described by its founders as “Muslim Forum for Muslims and Our Friends”. Moderators on this forum are related to other Islamic portals⁸. The avatars of frequent visitors, admins and moderators and ways of discussing uncomfortable issues are extremely interesting from the sociological point of view. Here is a fragment of one of the posts of the moderator: “<...> it is your kinsmen and their Zionist and American masters who at that very moment exterminate, in front of the tacit world, Ummas in Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine, Pakistan, and many other places. You ask such twisted, impertinent questions when our brothers are murdered, our women raped and our children killed. Show me one country in which Muslims are the aggressors! Show me just one country where Muslims force anybody to acknowledge them as their, as you claim, masters! It is exactly the opposite but nobody on this forum tells you to justify it. Since the beginning of the 20th century Millions of Muslims have died from your hands in Algeria, Libya, Kashmir, Chechen, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Abkhazia, India, Lebanon, Iraq, Iran, Palestine, Syria... and many other countries <...> I haven't mentioned the so called crusades, murdering of the Muslim population in Andalusia, Napoleon's expedition... it is there that MILLIONS of Muslims were killed from the hands of the christian oppressors! And if you would like to hear about the achievements of your fellow countrymen then look at the murder of the insurgent population of San Domingo (today's Dominicana) by Polish oppressors by order of their French masters!”⁹.

⁷ Interestingly, the Turkish community in Poland has its own portal propagating Islam within the frames of the Melvana Foundation established in 1995. See <http://www.fundacjamevlana.pl>.

⁸ One of them maintains previously mentioned web-site “Ruch na rzecz odnowy kalifatu” (Movement for caliphate restoration).

⁹ See <http://www.islam.fora.pl/kalifat.79/polityka-polska-do-kalifatu-osmanskiego-i-jej-konsekwencje.1589.html>(web-site valid on 10 October 2008).

Conclusions

As it can be observed from the given examples, the presence of the contemporary and very often pugnacious Islam in Poland is a fact. It is not yet related, as in the Western Europe, to the massive economic migration of the Muslim population and the problems resulting from it. However, we must keep in mind that the number of Muslims, immigrants (refugees from Caucasus, emigrants, imams and religious activists), as well as local converts in Poland is successively increasing and will increase each year. Poland is the place of Islam expansion. It is true that it cannot yet be observed from the number of emerging mosques; however, this trend is slowly changing. In the not so distant future we may be witnesses to the rising of a few or even more such edifices, which, in the country where mostly catholic churches are built (in the eastern parts of Poland also orthodox churches), will undoubtedly cause a great stir. Will Poland really become a new front in the fight for the Muslim Europe? No one can tell today.

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TARP RYTŲ IR VAKARŲ: ŠIUOLAIKINIO ISLAMO SKVARBA Į LENKIJĄ

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Santrauka

Mūsų dienomis internetas yra viena sparčiausiai plėtojamų medijų. Dėl interneto įtakos islamo idėjos po pasaulį pasklido taip plačiai, kaip dar niekada anksčiau. Informacija apie musulmonų religiją ir kultūrą pateikiama interneto portaluose ir svetainėse, gali būti pasiekama atokiausiuose pasaulio kampeliuose. Interneto portalai ir svetainės populiarina islamą, kuris per amžius atrodė gyvuojąs tik Vidurio Rytuose, Šiaurės Afrikoje ir Pietryčių Azijoje. Lenkija yra viename iš svarbiausių ar net strateginių islamo plėtros kelių. Dėl katalikybės pozicijų šalyje islamo plėtra Lenkijoje (daugėjant konvertitų), atrodo, yra pamatinis musulmonų gausėjimo veiksnys. Daug tikinčiųjų neslepia svajojantys apie europietiškaį kalifatą, kuris būtų svarbus žingsnis atkuriant pasaulio kalifatą. Anot daugelio musulmonų dvasininkų ir politinių aktyvistų, lenkų „religinis fundamentalizmas“ užtikrina islamo išpažinėjams kitokių vaidmenį nei atsivertėliams Vakaruose: jie bus tokie pat aktyvūs ir religingi kaip ir Romos katalikai. Taigi straipsnyje, skirtame apmąstyti šiuolaikinio islamo plėtrą į Lenkiją, nagrinėjama dinamiškiausia islamo ekspansijos priemonė.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: fundamentalizmas, islamas, musulmonų interneto svetainės Lenkijoje, Lenkijos musulmonai, totoriai.

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