Intellectual Debates in Relation to the Opening of the Bolgar Islamic Academy (Tatarstan, Russian Federation, 2017)

Leila Ildusovna Almazova[1,*] and Rustem Ilshatovich Shamsutov[2]

[1]*Kazan Federal University, Russian Federation*

[2]*Kazan State University of Architecture and Engineering, Russian Federation*

Abstract: The Bolgar Islamic Academy (BIA) was conceived as the highest level of religious education, where Muslims from all Russian Federation could get MA and PhD degrees in Islamic Studies. Among the main tasks initially set for this educational institution was: a) Integration of all levels of Islamic education into educational consistency throughout the Russian Federation; b) Protection of Muslims from foreign influence c) Development of Russian national traditions in the sphere of Islamic theology; d) Providing opportunities for Russian Muslims to receive high-quality Islamic education (on the Arabic language) in their homeland. On September 4, 2017, the Bolgar Islamic Academy opened its doors for 75 students. Its opening was preceded by a rather interesting discussion, which affected wide audience, including Muslims, Christians, secular-oriented individuals and academic community. On the early organizational stage three concepts of the Bolgar Islamic Academy have developed: 1) the concept of the Muslim Spiritual Council of Republic of Tatarstan, 2) the project of the academic community (by Alfrid Bustanov), and 3) the proposal of Muslim activist Rezeda Safiullina. There were also heated debates between supporters of traditional madrasa education and reformist wing on the pages of the popular electronic newspaper Business Online. The discussion, debates and the final choice of the concept are a wonderful illustration of the Talal Assad's concept of orthodoxy, which is nothing more than a "distinctive relationship - a relationship of power".

Keywords: Islam, Tatarstan, Muslim Education, Bolgar.

INTRODUCTION

Muslim students have to deal inevitably with rather constant contradictions between the principles they believe in and values they cherish by witnessing manifestations of disbelief and counter-values in the society (Almazova and Khayrutdinov 2016). While we teach our students how to dress, what to eat and not to eat, where to go and where not to go, what kind of friends to choose, what manners to learn, and what understanding of religion to grasp, we have to deal with the fact that they live in a society where they see women improperly dressed; people eat and drink religiously forbidden things; the young go wherever their desires take them to; individuals choose friends regardless of religious and moral limits; they get ego-centric and self-serving habits; and many perceive religion as an old-fashion set of rules which has little to do with the realities of their lives(Rezeda 2017; Muhametshin 2017).

Bolgar Islamic Academy (BIA), opened on September 4, 2017, in the city of Bolgar, became the first Islamic educational institution where Muslims could receive MA and Doctoral degrees. Its opening caused a vivid discussion among public officials as well as a heated polemics in media (Rustam 2019). The very existence of such a discussion was an unprecedented

case in present-day realities: in addition to an open debate on the pages of the electronic newspaper Business Online, at least three concepts of the Bulgarian Islamic Academy were prepared: 1) the concept of the Muslim Spiritual Council of Republic of Tatarstan, drafted by teachers and staff of the Russian Islamic University under the leadership of Rustam (2017) and curated by rector – Rafik (2017), 2) the project of Bustanov (2014), who was preparing his concept at the proposal of the first president of the Republic of Tatarstan Mintimer Shaymiev, and 3) the proposal of Muslim activist (Safiullina-Al Ansi and Almazova 2016) who have developed her own initiative as an alternative to other versions.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

How did the polemic take place, and whose point of view won as a result? This is a wonderful illustration of Talal Assad's theory of orthodoxy (Asad, 1986). From the point of view of linguistics, *orthodoxy* is a belief or a right opinion, but according to Talal Assad, *the right thing to do* is not the compliance with the truth, and not even the opinion of the majority, but the coincidence of interests of a certain group of people who are empowered or have the right to determine the truth. At the same time, in order to substantiate the correctness of their choice, elites are *"... instructing practitioners regarding the correct form and purposes of a given practice that, precisely because it has been established, has a history. These discourses relate*

*Address correspondence to this author at the Kazan Federal University, Russian Federation; E-mail: a.researcher40@yahoo.com

conceptually to a past (when the practice was instituted and from which the knowledge of its point and proper performance has been transmitted) and a future (how the point of that practice can best be secured in the short or long term, or why it should be modified or abandoned), through a present (how it is linked to other practices, institutions and social conditions)." (Asad, 1986).

Religious anthropology methods also include multiple interviews with authors of concepts, with students and professors of the Bolgar Islamic Academy held in 2017-2019. Among materials devoted to this research it is important to mention multiple organizational documentation available to authors in the connection to participation at work of the Resource Center for Development of Islamic Studies and Islamic Education (Almazova, Khayrutdinov, 2016)., (Safiullina-Al Ansi and Almazova 2016).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Among the examined patients, persons with secondary special education prevailed: 50.8% – men and 42.1% – women. A third of the respondents had a higher education (30.4%), and more often among female subjects - 37.3% (χ^2 = 7.486, p = 0.007) than among men - 16.9%. Thus, the level of education of respondents was sufficient for the correct assessment of living conditions and ethical aspects of the relationship with health workers.

The Bulgarian Islamic Academy was conceived as the highest level of religious education, which provides MA and doctoral programs. The main task initially set for this educational institution was reducing the level of tense between Muslim population and State by providing opportunities for Russian Muslims to receive high-quality and thorough Islamic education (which is possible mainly through instruction in Arabic) in their homeland .("Beginning of the Meeting with the Mufti of the Religious Councils of Muslims of Russia" 2013), Based on this goal, the basic concept for the development of BIA was finally created. At the same time alternative concepts have had other tasks in mind, such as combining Academic scholarship in Islamic Studies with religious, educational standards (Bustanov 2014), nourishing diversity in Islamic community through various Islamic Educational programs (Rezeda Safiullina), developing Liberal Islamic traditions through educational means (Rustam Batrov).

To understand the specifics of the BIA, it is necessary to note the geography of the Academy - the building was built two hundred kilometres from Kazan, at some distance from the city of Bolgar, populated mainly by Russians. While the centre of intellectual life is concentrated in Kazan, few professors, and often graduates, are ready to devote themselves to the service of religion so much that they can live practically on a clean field. This remoteness of the BIA from the intellectual and religious life of the Republic also determines the features of the conceptual understanding of its construction.

Concept No. 1. Theoretical Grounds

According to the opinion of the rector of Russian Islamic Institute and Bolgar Islamic Academy (in 2017-2019) R. Mukhametshin, the classical Muslim tradition of education was embodied among the Tatars in the phenomenon of Kadimism (from Arabic *al-Kadim* - old) – the classical tradition of Islamic Madrasa, while Jadidism (from Arabic *al-Jadid* - new) was a secular type of education with elements of teaching religion. It was Kadimism that brought up real theologians such as Abu Nasr Kursavi (1776-1812), Gabdrahim Utyz-Imyani (1754-1834), Schihabutdin Marjani (1812-1889), while the Jadid madrasah prepared secular intelligentsia. Nowadays, the task of forming a corps of secular specialists is successfully implemented by a system of secular education. But the latter is unable to prepare Muslim theologians, and therefore it is necessary to revive Kadimism, which is possible only with the help of teachers from the Arab countries. At the same time, up-to-date research methodologies should be taught to students of the BIA and later implemented in their master's, and doctoral dissertations. (Muhametshin 2017(a))

There was a special statement in the "Educational Standard of Higher Religious Education" created for BIA where the main directions were spelled out: "The main professional educational program of higher religious Muslim education is aimed at creating a Muslim worldview based on the doctrine of Islam in accordance with the provisions of the Hanafi and Shafi'ite religious and legal schools, as well as Maturidi and Ashari theological schools, on the basis of a common Russian identity, taking into account traditional values if Russian Muslims."

Thus, the creators of this concept appeal to two schools of law, and two schools of thought in the field of Muslim Creed (*'akida*), widespread among Muslims in the Russian Federation, while mentioning the common Russian identity, which implies building

education in the Russian legal field, and taking into account traditional values of Russian Muslims, apparently, implies the inclusion in the programs of the domestic Muslim heritage. It is sufficing to mention that the latter is quite diverse, depending on the region.

Among the subjects that were supposed to be taught in accordance with this concept, the following were indicated:

1. Quran Studies

2. Hadith Terminology

3. Legal Hadith

4. Ritual Practice of Islam

5. Introduction to Sunni Dogmatic

6. Islamic Exegetics

7. Islamic Doxography

8. Biography of the Prophet Muhammad and the Righteous Caliphs

9. Introduction to Islamic Law

10. Islamic Law

11. History of Islamic Law

12. Fundamental Principles of Islamic Law

13. Methodology of Islamic Law

14. Problems of the Methodology of Islamic Law

15. Applied Islamic Law

16. Interpretation of Legislative Verses of the Quran

17. Comparative Islamic law

18. Personal Status

19. Methodology of Theological Research

20. Sociology of Religion

21. Comparative Religious Studies

22. Fundamentals of Law (Secular course)

23. The History of Islam and the Muslim Peoples of Russia

According to Rafik Muhametshin there is a shortage of specialists in Fiqh, that is why ten courses are devoted to different aspects of Islamic Law.

The subject "Fundamentals of Law" was assigned to familiarize Muslim Students with the legal system of the Russian Federation. "Sociology of Religion" and "Comparative Religious Studies" represent two other secular courses. The course "History of Islam and Muslim peoples of Russia" is aimed at learning the traditional values of Russian Muslims. So the program is designed in accordance with the declared aim to revive of Kadimism: out of 22 disciplines, only three are represented by secular courses.

Concept # 2. Author: Alfrid Bustanov

Bustanov (2014) received his doctoral degree under supervision of Michael Kemper at the University of Amsterdam. He certainly saw the development of master's and postgraduate studies differently. In his preamble to 20 pages Concept, he writes:

> "*Today, the situation with Islamic education is such that leading Islamic universities in Arab countries do not provide strong secular training, and in Western Universities Islamic studies are usually secular in nature. Against this background, the Bulgarian Islamic Academy needs to bridge this gap, which is possible only with close cooperation with Academic and Islamic educational centers of the East and West.*"

Professor Bustanov proposes to divide training into two Departments – Department of Islamic Studies and Department of Islamic Theology. In the framework of the first, training should be conducted in two areas: a) History of Islam in Russia and b) Social Anthropology of Islam.

In the framework of Islamic Theology there should be three areas of studies: a) Quran Studies; b) Muslim Law (*fiqh*); c) Muslim Creed (*'akida*). He divided study time into general courses and daily individual meetings with professors. The main attention in structuring the program was devoted to the study of languages: English, Arabic and Tatar.

The number of hospitalizations in a psychiatric hospital is presented in Table **1**.

The peculiarity of A. Bustanov's concept was that he gave a detailed description of Islamic Studies Department curricula and research component of the BIA's activities, while the theological content was somewhat blurred due to a lack of appropriate religious

Table 1:   The Number of Hospitalizations in a Psychiatric Hospital

	MA Program in "Islamic Studies" – 2 years	MA Program in "Islamic Theology" – 3 years	Doctoral Program in "Islamic Studies" and "Islamic Theology"– 4 years
General obligatory courses	1) English (with native speaker) 2) Arabic (with native speaker) 3) Tatar language 4) Islamic law 5) Sociology and anthropology of Islam 6) Islam in Russia	1) English (with native speaker) 2) Arabic (with native speaker) 3) Tatar language 4) Islamic law 5) Quran, tafsir 6) Sociology and anthropology of Islam	1) Academic English 2) Academic Arabic 3) Academic Tatar 4) Islam in Russia
Daily sessions with supervisor/professor	1) Sociology of religion 2) Tatar theological thought.	1) Hanafi fiqh 2) Doksografiya	Meetings with two professors, major in: 1) Academic Islamic Studies; 2) Classical Islamic Theology

training of the author. A significant contingent of professors was supposed to be placed in the Kazan branch of BIA. Also, a detailed description of the structure of the Kazan branch contrasted somewhat with the smaller scale of work that the author painted for the parent organization in Bolgar. Thus, while reading the document, the impression was created that the Kazan branch was the main campus, and the Academy in the Bolgar was its branch.

However, the very idea of combining Academic Islamic Studies and Classical Islamic Theology, their mutual enrichment, would undoubtedly be innovative in the existing realities not only in the context of Russian Islam but also in the international arena.

Concept 3. Author: Reseda Safiullina

Rezeda (2017) proceeds from the fact that among modern Russian Muslims, four main ideological trends can be distinguished: traditionalism (which corresponds to the two widespread madhhabs in the Russian Federation - the Hanafi and Shafiite and the two schools of the religious thought/*Kalam* - Maturidiya and Asharia), Salafism, Sufism and Modernism. In addition, she notes that "[state] policy of unwillingness to accept the existing diversity in Islam and the attempt to make it homogeneous cannot be effective", respectively, "when building a meaningful concept of BIA ... it should be, if not mirror, then at least concentrated intellectual reflection of the picture existing in the Ummah". (Rezeda, 2017). According to her, BIA should have four departments, each of which builds a program in accordance with its ideological principles.

The main idea underlying the Concept of Reseda Safiullina draws our attention to the extremely

important problem of modern society - the perniciousness of planting one "correct" point of view. However, the actual implementation of this concept in the newly created Islamic Academy is difficult due to the complexity of administering such a project, not to mention the lack of support from those who could lobby the concept at the level of power structures. Meanwhile, it is worth noting that the very existence of the document "Conceptual vision of the development directions of the Bulgarian Islamic Academy" is of intellectual and historical value.

In addition to the existence of three concepts of creating the Bolgar Islamic Academy, the discussion that began in 2016, but was especially aggravated just before the opening of the BIA on September 4, 2017, was much more resonant for the general public. In total, at least 10 articles were published – 4 interviews with Rafik Mukhametshin (Rafik, 2016)., Rafik, 2017). (b)., Rafik, 2017). (c) and 6 articles by Rustam Batrov (Rustam, 2017). (a)., Rustam, 2017). (b)., Rustam, 2017). (c)., Batrov, Rustam. 2017 (d)., Rustam, (2018)., Rustam, 2019).) They were entirely devoted to this topic. Rustam Batrov, being a student of the famous Islamic reformer of Syrian origin, Taufik Ibrahim, went an interesting life: he was the imam of the Yaroslavl Cathedral Mosque, editor-in-chief of the Minaret magazine (the magazine was financed by Damir Muhetdinov), vice-rector of the Russian Islamic Institute, (at that time he worked under the guidance of his current opponent Rafik Muhametshin). Since 2015, he worked as a deputy chairman of the Muslim Spiritual Council of Republic of Tatarstan, but later, in 2017, he completely broke off relations with official Islamic institutions, and is currently a columnist for Business

Online newspaper, publishing weekly articles on Islamic topics. It should be noted the style of Rustam Batrov: bright and sometimes scandalous; his publications cause a flurry of comments, which undoubtedly means that the articles of this author do not leave readers indifferent. Without going into details of the confrontation between R. Muhametshin and R. Batrov, since this is not the purpose of this publication, it should be noted that regarding the conceptual development strategy of the BIA, Rustam (2019) proposed two options:

"The first has the aim to prepare personnel who can reformat the religious field of Islam in accordance with the social needs of modern society. The second proposes to train intellectuals who can cut the Gordian knot of the obscurantist past in Islam and show the world a model of true Islam, which it should be in our days "(Rustam, 2017). (c). In the first case, Rustam Batrov meant preparing students for activities such as charity (for example The Yardam mosque in Kazan, which provides large-scale assistance to the blind, deaf, people with disabilities or various diseases) or mentoring (landmark - Shamil Alyautdinov, who successfully conducts training for Muslims on personal growth). In the second case, it is about studying the heritage of original thinkers of the past and the present (Musa Bigiyev (1875-1949), Taufik Ibrahim (1947) and others), who can teach future religious figures to think outside the framework of narrow medieval paradigms.

SUMMARY

The palette of opinions that accompanied the founding of the Bolgar Islamic Academy, as well as the discussion in media, is a phenomenon that fits into the concept of the post-secular era, (Jurgen, Joseph, 2006). When religion, returning to public space, sets its own discourse, which is discussed not only by Muslims themselves but also by society as a whole. At the same time, each participant is trying to find an argument for his point of view in a universal language that is understood by their opponents which could have a different cultural background. It is interesting, however, that the authors of the concepts practically do not refer to the Qur'an and the Sunnah in constructing their ideas: everyone appeals to concepts that are understandable to the authorities and society - "traditions of Russian Islamic theology", "common civil Russian identity", "traditional values of Russian Muslims". The efforts of the Russian authorities in 2007 to launch the "Program for training specialists with in-depth knowledge of the history and culture of Islam", to

a certain extent, achieved at least one of their goals - the integration of Muslims: Muslim educational elites in the process of building an Islamic education, at least in the Volga region, switched from a purely theological discourse to social, cultural and political discourse of the society.

Meanwhile, an interesting sequence is built up among the concepts: from returning to Kadimism (Muslim Spiritual Council of Republic of Tatarstan), passion for modernism and the legacy of Jadidism (Rustam Batrov), to the polyphony of the four ideological trends of modern Russian Muslims (Resed Safiullin) and, finally, the synthesis of classical theology and academic Islamic Studies (Alfrid Bustanov);

CONCLUSION

Since 1998, this religious institution has been successfully operating in the system of public relations built by the state, which corresponds to one of the three systems of relations between religion and the state when the latter controls the field of religious life (Zweerde, 2012). Is it possible to consider an official concept of BIA development as the opinion of the majority of Muslims in the Russian Federation? Was it enough to discuss the concept of an all-Russian centre only by Tatarstan participants? What are the results of BIA education built according to medieval standards?

All these questions, as well as many others, will undoubtedly have to look for answers in the future.

REFERENCES

Almazova, L., & Khayrutdinov, R. (2016). Caught in the crossfire: monitoring of teaching materials for Islamic Educational Institutions of the Republic of Tatarstan. Islam in Contemporary World, 4, 229-238. (In Russian). https://doi.org/10.22311/2074-1529-2016-12-4-229-238

Asad, T. (1986). The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam. Washington D.C.: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University. – 16 p.

"Beginning of the Meeting with the Mufti of the Religious Councils of Muslims of Russia" (2013), Accessed October 22. http://special.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/19474

Bustanov, A. K. (2014). Soviet Orientalism and the creation of Central Asian nations. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315779072

Jurgen, H., & Joseph, R. (2006). Dialectics of Secularization. About Reason and Religion. Series "Contemporary Theology". Moscow: Biblical and Theological Institute of St.. Apostle Andrew.

Muhametshin, R. (2017). (a). "From our Students we Want to Mold Progressive Conservatives" Accessed July 29. Business online. https://www.business-gazeta.ru/article/352957

Rafik, M. (2016). About the Bolgar Academy: "If there is no School, then the Rector is not Needed". Accessed September 3. Business Online. https://www.business-gazeta.ru/article/321657

Rafik, M. (2017). (b). "I Hope that we Will Work with Iskhakov as a Good Tandem." Accessed August 3. Business online. https://www.business-gazeta.ru/article/353407

Rafik, M. (2017). (c). "We Need to Learn from Arabs, but we Will Not Be Limited to Them!" Accessed September 4. Business online. https: //www.business-gazeta.ru/article/356322

Rezeda, S. (2017). "Will the Rector of the Bolgar Islamic Academy be Able to Maintain Neutrality in this Situation?" Accessed August 20. Real time.

Rustam B. 2017 (d). "The Bolgar Academy - Between the Hammer and the Anvil." Accessed September 2. Business Online. https://www.business-gazeta.ru/article/356210

Rustam, B. (2017). (a). "Who are a MA Holders and who are PhDs? "They are Great Scholars" Accessed May 19. Business online. https://www.business-gazeta.ru/article/346276

Rustam, B. (2017). (b). "Is the Bolgar Islamic Academy not a Place for Discussion?" Accessed July 3. Business online. https://www.business-gazeta.ru/article/347726

Rustam, B. (2017). (c). "What is Behind the Long-awaited Appearance of the Rector at the Bolgar Islamic Academy?". Accessed May 4. Business Online. https://www.business-gazeta.ru/article/353623

Rustam, B. (2018). "Theological Readings in the Bolgar: the Hour of Vengeance." Accessed February 17. Business Online. https://www.business-gazeta.ru/article/373048

Rustam, B. (2019). "Of 140 Employees of the Bolgar Academy there are only 11 Lecturers." Accessed March 30. Business Online. https://www.business-gazeta.ru/article/418914

Safiullina-Al Ansi, R., & Almazova, L. (2016). Kazan Federal University is greeting Mufti Ravil Gaynutdin. Islam in Contemporary World, 1, 241-250.

Zweerde, E. (2012). "Comprehending "Secularity". Journal of State, Religion, and Church, 2(30), 69-113.