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ISLAMIC THEMES IN THE *EPARCHIAL BULLETIN* OF THE STEPPE REGION (SECOND HALF OF THE 19TH – BEGINNING OF THE 20TH CENTURY): GENERAL AND SPECIFIC

Abstract. The article examines the specific features of Islamic themes on the *Eparchial Bulletin* – the official newspaper of the Orenburg and Omsk dioceses in the Steppe Region during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The author considers these publications as an instrument for implementing imperial religious policy, as well as a component of extensive Orthodox missionary literature aimed at limiting the influence of Islam. The analysis reveals an evolution in the content and tone of the publications. In the 1880s and 1890s, they took the style of ethnographic notes and reports by missionaries who sought to prove the superficial nature of Islamization among the Kazakhs and preserve them for potential Christianization. The primary method focused on criticizing “pagan” remnants among the Muslim nomads. With the beginning of the 20th century, due to the rise of the all-Russian Muslim movement, the tone of the publications changed dramatically. They assumed the style of tendentious articles aimed at the direct discreditation of Islam. The focus of criticism shifted toward the personality of Muhammad, the content of the Quran, and Islamic dogmas and social norms. These publications were designed to foster persistent negative stereotypes and phobias among the Orthodox flock. The author also notes a difference in the approaches of the two dioceses: the harsher and more ideologized character of the *Orenburg Eparchial Bulletin*, conditioned by its proximity to Kazan, and the more liberal and practical orientation of the *Omsk Eparchial Bulletin*, where the emphasis shifted toward combating schisms within Orthodoxy itself.

Keywords: Russian Empire, religious policy, “Eparchial Bulletin”, Steppe Region, Islam, Orthodox Missions, Anti-Islamic Propaganda, Kazakhs, Missionary Work.

The active institutional development of the Russian Orthodox Church in the Steppe Region was associated with peasant migration from European Russia to the Asian part of the country and the resulting increase in the Orthodox population in the region. In the 1880s and 1890s, the diocesan-territorial and church-parish division of the Steppe Region was completed. By this time, a network of monastic, school, religious education, and religious charitable and missionary structures had been established¹. In line with pan-Russian church trends, the publication of the *Eparchial Bulletin*—official journals published two to four times per month—was a mandatory element of

the activities of the Orenburg and Omsk dioceses of the Steppe Region.

The subject matter of the Orenburg and Omsk *Eparchial Bulletin* was quite diverse. In addition to issues of diocesan development, it also covered topics related to the socio-political, cultural, and economic life of the Steppe Region. The editors of the *Eparchial Bulletin* paid considerable attention to Islamic topics, reflecting the specific ethnoreligious situation in the region. The editorial board of the *Eparchial Bulletin* gave considerable attention to Islamic topics, which was due to the peculiarities of the ethnoreligious situation in the region. Despite the mass migration of the Orthodox East Slavic population to the Turgay, Akmola, Semipalatinsk and Semirechye regions, the majority of the population here continued to be Muslim

¹ For more details see: Lysenko Yu.A. *Essays on the History of the Russian Orthodox Church in Kazakhstan (18th – early 20th centuries)*. Barnaul, 2011.

Kazakhs. In line with the objectives of imperial religious policy aimed at reducing the influence of Islam within the borders of the Kazakh steppe and spreading Christianity among its inhabitants, Kyrgyz Orthodox/anti-Islamic missions appeared in the Orenburg and Omsk dioceses².

Publications on Islamic topics in the *Eparchial Bulletin* formed part of the extensive literature on Islamic studies that developed in the Russian Empire throughout the 19th century. This literature included both individual, specialized “missionary anti-Muslim collections”, published by the Kazan Theological Academy, and a vast array of Orthodox Church periodicals: *The Orthodox Interlocutor*, *Works of the Kyiv Theological Academy*, *Soul-Beneficial Reading*, *A Guide for Rural Pastors*, *The Orthodox Evangelist*, *Theological Herald*, *The Church Parish School*, *The Helmsman*, and *Missionary Review*.

The first publications on Islamic topics in the *Eparchial News* were directly linked to the beginning of the activities of the Kyrgyz Orthodox missions in the Kazakh steppe. Since the first such mission was established in the Altai Mountain District in the early 1880s and was subordinate to the Tomsk Diocese, it was its *Eparchial Bulletin* that first began publishing articles on anti-Islamic themes. The Orenburg and Omsk Dioceses then picked up the baton. Publications on this issue included official reports on the activities of the Kyrgyz missions, the Diocesan Committees of the Orthodox Missionary Society, as well as *Notes* by individual missionaries with their personal observations of the Islamization of Kazakh society and the role of Islam in the social life of nomads.

The analysis of Islamic publications in the Steppe Region's *Eparchial Bulletin* can identify their characteristics and the range of issues discussed. In the 1880s and 1890s, the primary goal of these publications was to demonstrate the harmful effects of the spread of Islam among the Kazakh population. This criticism was leveled at the religious policies of the Russian Empire at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries, which aimed to spread Islam among Kazakh cattle breeders through administrative means. The authors of these materials emphasized the need to quickly

free the nomads from the influence of Muslim preachers and organize Orthodox missionary work among them. Thus, virtually every “Activity Report” of the missionaries of the Kirghiz Mission of the Tomsk Diocese from 1882 to 1895 emphasized the idea that, at this stage, no profound transformation of the traditional religious consciousness of Kazakh nomads had occurred under the influence of Islam. This idea was often supported by ethnographic descriptions of pagan rituals and cults of the life and calendar cycles, especially funeral feasts and equestrian races (*baiga*) among those Kazakhs who professed Islam.

Stefan Borisov, a missionary from the Bolshenaym camp of the Kirghiz Mission of the Tomsk Diocese, wrote in his *Notes* in 1891: “<...> the Kirghiz have very little knowledge of Islam, and the knowledge that most of them possess is no more than a circle of ritual prescriptions of the Koran. <...> The Kirghiz are devoted to Islam as much as a person can be devoted to his faith, and there is no fanaticism in them at all. By their nature, the Kirghiz cannot be fanatics, and this is our good fortune! <...> they lack the characteristic steadfastness and determination that distinguishes the Tatars, Turks, and other fanatical Muslims. However, Islam is capable of re-educating the Kyrgyz, if only it is allowed into the steppe in full force.”³ In 1891, the *Tomsk Eparchial Bulletin* noted, “the Kirghiz are still Muslims only in name. Nevertheless, Muslim fanaticism, through the influence of Central Asian Muslims, is beginning to engulf this tribe. The Kirghiz Mission must, for the first time, <...> halt the spread of this contagion, which, however, is impossible without the external assistance of government authorities.”⁴

According to clergy, the main task of the state, called upon to assist Kyrgyz missions in the fight against Islam, should have been to encourage pagans and Muslims to convert to the Orthodox Church. However, the missionaries assessed the government's efforts in this direction extremely negatively. Thus, in the *Tomsk Eparchial Bulletin* of 1886, it was stated, for example, that converting to Orthodoxy was “not only unprofitable, but also quite detrimental,” since before baptism a pagan or Muslim “lives freely in his nomadic camp, car-

² For more details, see: Missionary work of the Russian Orthodox Church in Kazakhstan (second half of the 19th – early 20th centuries). Barnaul, 2010.

³ State Archives of Altai Krai (hereinafter referred to as GA AK). F. 164. Op. 1. D. 48. L. 32 ob.

⁴ Tomsk Eparchial Bulletin. 1891. May 1. No. 9. P. 20.

ing only about paying the three-ruble yasak." Having converted to Orthodoxy, he had to pay "in addition to the yasak, 1) for the repair of communication routes, 2) for the hiring of an interpreter for officials, 3) for the construction of a mortuary, 4) he is not exempt from maintaining the parish clergy and church schools, 5) the hiring of watchmen for his parish church."⁵ Therefore, priests insisted on preserving for new converts only those taxes that they paid before adopting Christianity⁶.

A characteristic feature of publications on anti-Islamic themes in the Steppe Region's *Eparchial Bulletin* in the 1880s and 1890s was that many of them were a kind of missionary travelogues, written in the adventure-romantic genre. They described the various difficulties that missionaries encountered during their travels across the Kazakh steppe, their overcoming of these difficulties, their encounters with the locals, and the inevitable successes that awaited the missionaries in their work of preaching the word of God.

In the early 20th century, with the increased activity and integration of Kazakh Muslims into the all-Russian Muslim movement, particularly during the First Russian Revolution of 1905–1907, the content and focus of Islamic topics in the Steppe Region's *Eparchial News*. There was also a quantitative increase in the number of publications on this topic, particularly in the *Orenburg Eparchial News*. This was explained, in our opinion, by the proximity to this diocese of the largest Islamic centers of the Russian Empire – Orenburg, Kazan, Ufa, and Samara.

The content of these publications has undergone a significant transformation. They were no longer fictional, but rather scholarly and analytical articles, addressing a wide range of controversial issues in Islamic studies. Most of the authors presented their information inaccurately and vaguely, using an associative form of presentation, a one-sided presentation of substantive-factual and substantive-conceptual information, and used an ironic attitude towards certain Muslim phenomena, negatively evaluative, and sometimes derogatory epithets. Essentially, articles on Islamic topics intended to have a profound impact on the public consciousness and to form negative stereo-

types about Russian Islam and an aggressive attitude toward it among the readers.

The main discourse centered on proving the "falsity and emptiness of the Muhammadan religion". The history of the origin and development of Islam was examined within this framework. Emphasis was placed on comparing individual facts presented in the Quran with biblical stories, leading to the conclusion that the Quran borrowed many biblical stories and, accordingly, the superiority of the Bible and Christianity over the Quran and Islam⁷.

The Quran was described as a «chaotic mixture of the most diverse decrees, instructions and sayings» instilling «only hatred and contempt for all peoples who do not recognize Muhammad as the messenger of God»⁸. In this regard, a good illustration is the article by the anti-Muslim missionary of the Orenburg diocese K. Merkuriev *The Quran is not a divine revelation*⁹, presenting a comparative analysis of the Bible and the Quran. According to the author, any Divine revelation must have certain characteristics, which he included: «1) truth – the absence of lies and deception in it; 2) immutability – the absence of contradictions; 3) clarity and certainty – the absence of doubts and hesitations in the presentation of the truth of faith and practice; 4) loftiness and salvation – the absence of petty rules and regulations, absurdities and inconsistencies contrary to the true concept of God, common sense and moral sense of man»¹⁰.

Merkuriev's further reasoning was aimed at finding all four features that characterize Divine Scripture, as applied to the Quran. During the analysis, the Quran was not recognized as truthful on the grounds that it «reports events that are irreconcilable with biblical events» and ascribed «to the ranks of prophets not only persons whose prophetic dignity is not attested in the Holy Scripture <...> but even idolaters <...> while there is no mention of the most important of the Old Testament prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel), their teachings and prophecies»¹¹.

According to K. Merkuriev, the Quran is full of contradictions, «whose number reaches 225».

⁷ Batunsky M.A. Russia and Islam. T. 2. M., 2003. P. 209.

⁸ Orenburg Eparchial News. 1913. June 15. No. 12. P. 165.

⁹ Ibid. January 1. No. 1. Pp. 6–11.

¹⁰ Ibid. P. 6.

¹¹ Ibid.

⁵ Tomsk Eparchial Bulletin. 1886. May 15. No. 10. P. 9.

⁶ Ibid. P. 10.

Furthermore, the missionary pointed out that «in its exposition of dogmatic and moral truths, the Quran allows for doubt and indecision <...> For example, when speaking of the future life, Muhammad hesitates to acknowledge the eternity and immutability of Fate's decisions regarding the final fate of the righteous and sinners». According to the missionary, expressions such as «perhaps you will be pardoned», «perhaps you will be happy», «perhaps you will be pious», and so on, are unacceptable for true Divine revelation.

Finally, K. Merkuriev noted numerous stories from Muhammad's personal life that, in his opinion, are inappropriate in any divine message. In conclusion, the author states that «the Quran does not satisfy any of the above-mentioned criteria of divine revelation: as we see, it contains many untruths, contradictions, petty prescriptions, absurdities, and inconsistencies—and therefore it is not the word of God, not divine revelation»¹².

The *Eparchial News* of the Steppe Region paid considerable attention to the figure of the founder of Islam himself, Muhammad. He was called nothing less than «a false prophet who distorted the Christian truth about the incarnation of God the Word to the point of outrageous absurdity».

In a 1913 issue of the *Orenburg Eparchial News*, the following was written about him: «Mohammed, imbued with egoism, his whole being and every thought tied to the earthly and sensual, could leave nothing sublime for his followers, nothing founded on moral principles. <...> The fiery nature of the power-hungry and egotistical Mohammed so ignited in him a thirst to become a famous, fame-sounding man in the world that, for this purpose, he did not hesitate to call all his grave misdeeds on the prophetic path, the unbridled will of passion, a law from heaven»¹³. From this, the conclusion was drawn about the total perniciousness of Islam for Muslims themselves and for the Kazakhs who fell under its influence.

A separate focus of the *Eparchial News* of the Steppe Region in the early 20th century should be considered the analysis of the Russian Empire's religious policy toward Islam. This policy was harshly criticized, and the authors considered it extremely liberal, even to a certain extent permis-

sive, since it failed to counter the spread of Islam in the steppe, «the extremely hostile Christianity of the Quran and other harmful Muslim books».

Missionaries from the Kyrgyz religious missions of the Orenburg and Omsk dioceses, working among Kazakhs, constantly emphasized that Islamization had brought no positive benefits to the Kazakh nomads. In their annual «Activity Reports», they frequently cited lengthy conversations with elderly Kazakhs, who claimed that Islam had contributed to the decline of morals among Kazakh youth, fostering vices such as drunkenness, debauchery, disrespect for elders, and so on. The missionaries emphasized that the Tatar mullahs working in schools were unable to provide a proper education for Kazakh youth, as they taught in Arabic, a language unfamiliar to Kazakhs, and reduced the learning process to rote memorization of the Quran¹⁴.

Such arguments served as the basis for another trend in publications on Islam in the *Eparchial News*: its stagnation and lack of progress. It was emphasized that «Muslim science» was mired in scholastic subtleties and contrivances and not only failed to enlighten but, on the contrary, obscured the spiritual faculties of its adherents. All Islamic theological literature in the Tatar language, for example, «kills the curiosity of the Muslim, answering all questions according to a once-and-for-all formula; distorts his common sense, accustoming him to indulge in the most bizarre inventions of fantasy instead of the actual facts of historical life; paralyzes any desire for development and progress, suggesting that he can consider himself perfect if he fulfills the external prescriptions of Sharia»¹⁵.

Evidence of the crisis in Islam was, according to some authors of the *Eparchial New*, not only the formation of the reformist movement of the «new Methodists» in Islam, who attempted to revive Muslim education, but also the emergence of various sectarian movements in Islam, which actively arose among the Muslims of the Russian Empire at the beginning of the 20th century. The *Orenburg Eparchial News* reported on one such sect. It arose among young Tatar mullahs in the Tobolsk province, who believed it is necessary to reform the

¹² Ibid. P. 11.

¹³ Ibid. №. 12. June 15. P. 164–165.

¹⁴ GA AK. F.164. Op. 2. D. 8. L. 4–5.

¹⁵ Orenburg Eparchial News. 1913. № 4. February 15. P. 60

ritual aspects of Islam. Specifically, they proposed replacing the thirty-day fast of Ramadan with a nine-day one, abolishing the «irrational and unnatural institution of polygamy, inconsistent with the purely logical laws of nature»⁶ and Islam's patronage of polygamy¹⁶.

In the mainstream of Islamic discourse, individual publications appeared in the *Eparchial News* of the Steppe Region at the beginning of the 20th century about the lack of progress not only of Islam, but also of the emerging national languages of the peoples who professed it. In this regard, it is interesting to analyze an analytical article published in several issues of the *Orenburg Eparchial News* that explored the literature published in the Tatar language in 1912. The article noted, «The literary Tatar language, in which these publications are written, is an unsettled language both in its vocabulary and grammatical structure. Given the slavish worship of Arabic, Turkish, and Persian languages that is observed among the Mohammedan Tatars in general, the use of Arabic, Turkish, and Persian words and phrases equally and to the detriment of Tatar ones is recognized as a completely legitimate phenomenon»¹⁷.

Clearly, the ultimate goal of publications on Islamic topics in the Steppe Region's *Eparchial News* was to foster phobias against the Islamic faith among its readers. Therefore, it was entirely logical and natural that these publications would feature materials on the history of Islam, with authors emphasizing Muslim fanaticism, their «inhumane warriors», and their total expansion, «both in Africa, India, China, and Russia».

In this regard, a short note published in the Omsk Diocesan Gazette in 1913 by the missionary I. Petrov is indicative. The author emphasized, «It is no secret that Mohammedanism alone has the ability to incite fanaticism and boundless, blind attachment to itself in its followers. Every Mohammedan, due to his upbringing, tries at all costs to convert the infidels, who do not know Mohammed and Allah, to his faith»¹⁸. In another issue from the same year, I. Petrov recounted the words of the Prophet Muhammad: «O believing Muslims, when you encounter infidels (non-Muslims), kill them everywhere until they become Muslims, and God

will shower you with blessings, and you will be happy. It is not you who kill them, but God <...> O believers! Do not show cowardice, do not call the infidels to peace, and do not choose Jews and Christians as your friends»¹⁹. Some authors convinced readers that Russian Muslims, both past and present, were characterized by a «fanatical hatred» of everything Russian, which manifested itself in many historical events—the Time of Troubles, the uprisings of Stepan Razin and Emelian Pugachev. They emphasized the loyalty of Russian Muslims to the Ottoman Porte and their reverence for it, and concluded that Islam posed a threat to the Orthodox state that was the Russian Empire.

Overall, it can be noted that Islamic topics were the most popular in the *Orenburg Eparchial News*. These publications were largely anti-Islamic in nature and aimed to shape public opinion toward curtailing Islam's influence in the Russian Empire. The anti-Islamic stance of the *Orenburg Eparchial News* can be explained, in our opinion, by the diocese's proximity to Kazan, the ideological center of the all-Russian Muslim movement of the early 20th century. Publications on anti-Islamic topics in the *Orenburg Eparchial News* were also distinguished by a higher level of analysis and a more scholarly approach. This was largely due to the higher level of professional training of the clergy of the Orenburg Diocese, many of whom were graduates of the Kazan Theological Academy. As is well known, students from the Academy's Eastern Studies department took a course in Islamic studies and, upon completion, presented an analytical paper on one of its topics.

The situation in the Omsk Diocese was quite different. In the pages of the *Eparchial News*, published by the diocese, Islamic topics took on a more liberal tone. An analysis of the publication's contents suggests that this issue was only partially addressed, through the publication of «Activity Reports» by various anti-Islamic missionary organizations and missionary priests who headed the Kyrgyz Mission camps of the Omsk Diocese. The reason is seen in the peculiarities of Islam's development within the boundaries of the Kazakh population of the Omsk Diocese. The territorial remoteness from the Islamic centers of the Volga region, the absence of a regional

¹⁶ Ibid. №. 10. May 15. P. 117.

¹⁷ Ibid. №. 3. February 1. P. 39.

¹⁸ Ibid. №. 11. June 1. P. 143.

¹⁹ Ibid. №. 12. June 15. P. 165.

Muslim governing body (Muslim Spiritual Assembly), the less effective work of Tatar Muslim preachers among the Kazakhs, and the more syncretic forms of Islam among the Kazakhs, combining Islam with pagan cults – all of this undoubtedly diminished the relevance of Islamophobic sentiments in the region. An equally important reason for the more liberal assessment of Islam and its potential in the *Omsk Eparchial*

News was, in our opinion, the presence of major centers of Old Believers and Protestantism in the region. Consequently, the missionary work of the Russian Orthodox Church there developed not so much among the Kazakh population as among the Orthodox population. As a result, the emphasis in the content of the Omsk Diocesan News shifted toward the fight against Old Believers and sectarianism.

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