MASS MEDIA, FREETHINKING AND CIVIC POSITION: ISLAMIC FEMINISM

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Abstract: Contemporary media technologies and quality access to the Internet in the countries of Middle East and North Africa provide regional **mass media** the possibility to relatively freely express their views, share them with like-minded people, and form groups of followers. The number of so-called **Arab atheists** among active social network users, as shown by recent studies, has increased. Atheism, along with Islamic feminism, sublimated into various forms of **protest media content**, is perceived among traditionally religious Arab society as a challenge to the principles and traditions of the Middle Eastern society. The Muslim religious leaders, scholars and thinkers decry the manifestation of this kind of freethinking and see it as a **threat to national security** in the countries of the Middle East and North Africa. Migration processes taking place in contemporary Europe are making their ambiguous contribution to the further evolution of the moral and ethical codes of the Muslim society.
Keywords: Atheism; Islamic feminism; freethinking; Arab media; Middle East.

INTRODUCTION

With the development of contemporary Islamic philosophical schools, since the end of World War II (Rawa' Mahmud Husein, 2010: 73-74), the unceasing attempts of modernization, reassessment and updates of the Islamic philosophical thought reflected different vectors of the evolution of the Arab society, continuing to be the subject of discussion among both the representatives of the Muslim religious leaders, secular-minded intelligentsia, researchers, thinkers, and a wide audience of ordinary people. Historically, the dichotomy of "power and Sharia", opposed to the dichotomy of "religious text and the human mind", presented before on the pages of manuscripts of the Middle Ages (Rawa' Mahmud Husein, 2010: 67-68) and then in print media at the turn of XIX – XX centuries, finds its new evocation in the media scene of the XXI century.

Given the geography of the contemporary Muslim world, the influence of Western and Asian cultures on the perception of religion outside of the Middle East and North Africa, as well as economic and political factors of activity of certain radical Islamist movements in various countries of the world, it is impossible not to note the increased number of Muslims, regardless of their ethnic and socio-economic affiliation, sharing the idea of the secular political structure of the state and aspiring to a new rethinking of Islamic discourse (Tariq Ramadan, 2009). Not the last role in this area is played by migration processes in the European continent. From the perspective of Islamic criminal law, the rejection of Islam, *i.e.*, "apostasy", is punishable by the death penalty ('Abd al-Qādir al-'Awda, 2015: 591). Radical currents in Islam equate secularism to atheism.

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METHODOLOGY

The research methodology is defined by a system-oriented approach to the role of religion and character, *i.e.* person professing Islam in contemporary media. In the framework of a systemic approach we used structural-functional method, method of comparative analysis, and content analysis. Problem-conceptual analysis was conducted relative to a particular historical period identified by us as a certain migration processes after "the Arab revolutions". The present study uses general scientific methods such as description and explanation. A logical method is used as part of the system analysis method. System-oriented analysis reveals the development laws of social systems such as the Muslim community of both Arab and European societies.

RESULTS

Explicitly, the phenomenon of expanding the ideas of atheism in the Arab virtual space is represented as a derivation, if not a side effect, the concepts of secularism, modernization of Islamic philosophy, "Euro-Islam" and other similar mainstreams, actively exaggerated in social networks, forums, international conferences, etc. From an anthropocentric perspective, according to the conviction of some contemporary philosophers and thinkers, atheism along with skepticism and freethinking have always symbolized protection of personal self-actualization, a protest against spiritual authoritarianism and mental ossification (L.N. Mitrohin, 2000). No less important are the mechanisms of cognitive, motivational and cultural transformations in the course of the atheism emergence in individuals and, by contrast, their needs in the religion and faith (Norenzayan, A., Gervais, W. M., 2013).

Implicit factors in the expansion of atheistic sentiments in the Arab society at the present stage of its development are dictated by social, cultural and value transformations in the Arab world due to the wide access to media technology with the powerful mobilizing potential, which was manifested during the revolutions of the "Arab spring" and followed by the change of governments in some countries of the Middle East and North Africa. They are caused also by the rising terrorist activities of various extremist organizations, which led to a humanitarian catastrophe in the region, as well as the migration crisis in Europe.

The dominant factors in the expansion of atheism and apostasy in the Muslim society include the following:

1. Violence practiced by some extremist organizations is pushing some faithful Muslims to certain doubt concerning the correctness of Islamic principles. In particular, the office of the mufti in Egypt reports that the actions of the terrorist "takfiri" organizations conniving at the expansion of violence, the distortion of Islamic norms and bloodshed in the name of Islam, lead to a perverted understanding of theology that in turn strengthens the negative image of religion, scaring away the youth from Islam and leading to atheism.

2. "Political Islam", penetrating both into private and public life and creating thereby a negative attitude toward religion.

3. Understanding that strict observance of the rules and dogmas of Islam for a person professing a different religion, for example, is not mandatory, and the choice whether or not to practice any religion must be developed over time and within the meaning.

4. Strengthening gender issues and the need for educational reforms.

5. Immigration crisis in European countries.

According to the portal of the Egyptian edition of the Daily News (Alaa Mazlum, 2014), the office of the mufti of Egypt divides "atheists" into three groups: *a*) those who do not reject Islam as a religion, however, do not support the politicization of Islam and call for a secular state; *b*) those who reject Islam as a religion in general; and *c*) those who turn from Islam to another religion.

Due to strict censorship by the state and religious institutions, it is rather difficult to determine the exact number of atheists in the Arab countries.

Nevertheless, a number of mass media in Saudi Arabia have published the result of investigation of the WIN/Gallup International research institute, which states that 5% of the population in Saudi Arabia are atheists (the total population of the Kingdom is 29 million people) (Global Index of Religiosity and Atheism. WIN/Gallop International, 2012). In turn, the BBC Department on mass media monitoring conducted independent content-study of the Arab social networks, searching for the term "atheism" in Arabic and English languages (Aḥmād Nūr, 2015). Thus, it was revealed that hundreds of Facebook sites and Twitter accounts, belonging to the atheists from the Arab world, attract thousands of followers. These are the following sites: "Tunisian atheists" having more than 10,000 subscribers, "Sudanese atheists" with over 3,000 subscribers, "Syrian atheists' network" with more than 4,000 followers, and the Twitter account "Arab Atheist" with more than 8,000 subscribers. The study also indicates that there are hundreds of thousands of accounts of Arab atheists in the various social networks, calling for "the eradication of religious superstitious beliefs by means of reason". Some of them contain anti-Islamic comments and images of torn pages of the Koran, while others criticize the Islamic dogma, which "encourages violence against other religions". YouTube portal contains TV channels of Arab atheists, attracting an audience of many thousands of subscribers and publishing videos, which criticize Islam (for example, "The Prejudices of Religion," (Aḥmad Nūr, 2015)). In the Internet, among Arab young people is very popular "al-ʾaqal al-ḥur" ("open mind") TV channel. Channel creators call their project one of the "atheistic mass media in the Internet, which aims at providing news free from state and religious censorship for the peoples of the Middle East and the rest of the world" (Satellite TV-channel Free Mind TV, 2015).

Obviously Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube sites, blogs and groups in social networks are the main discussion platforms for Arab atheists, providing users the ability to anonymously access and use their accounts (Aḥmad Nūr, 2015).

Satellite and information technologies provide an opportunity to Arab atheists to generate and model media content relatively freely. For example, note the online resources of two famous personalities - vivid supporters of the Islamic freethinking, such as Islam Beheri (Islam Beheri, 2015) and Sayed Al-Qemany (Sayed Al-Qemany, 2015).

The question arises whether freethinking person or an atheist citizen can feel safe in the Arab world? In all parts of the Arab world, citizens can be sentenced to death or imprisonment because of their religious dissent or rejection of faith. The Human Right Watch international organization regularly commits violations of human rights in Saudi Arabia and describes the acts of state as part of the government's campaign aimed "to combat atheism and any form of opposition" (Alaa Mazlum, 2014).

The problem of atheism has caused a wide debate on Arabic TV. For the first time, some Arab TV broadcastings started to invite atheists to take part in the face-to-face discussions with Muslims. While the TV presenters ask invitees the reason for their rejection of religion, Muslim theologians attribute the causes of atheism with personal problems or the awkward age.

The expected reaction on the part of national authorities to such challenges, by analogy with the mechanisms of repressions after the events of the "Arab spring" (Mark Lynch, 2011), is expressed in greater control over the functioning of mass media in the region, the introduction of destructive elements into online communities, enhancement of public activities of authoritative religious institutions on various media platforms. Egyptian mass media periodically describe such efforts of the state and religious organizations in their struggle against the trends of freethinking as "a war against atheism".

The office of the mufti of Egypt reports that the web sites of social networking give to misguided youth a great space that serves a safe platform to express their views and opinions about the rejection of religion (Aḥmad Nūr, 2015).

In January 2015, the Egyptian Ministry of Youth Affairs with the assistance of the largest Islamic theological Al-Azhar University announced the launch of an initiative to combat "extremism and atheism." Sheikh Ahmed Turki, one of the initiators of the project, reported in a press statement that the initiative was aimed at "the correction of youth through scientific arguments in response to the atheist threat." Turki also added: "Atheism is a matter of national security... If atheists abnegate faith they will abnegate the rest (Passant Darwish, 2015)".

The problem of studying the origin of atheism is important primarily for the countries of today's Europe, where in recent years there has been "inflow" of residents professing Islam. According to mass media reports, men are the first, who arrive to European continent. We make the assumption that one of the reasons of moving to Europe is to achieve the social well-being of their families, who must arrive following the men. Indeed, woman, who lives in the region, where there is a war, is motivated primarily on saving the lives of her children, and this is a strong argument which is not denied by the European community.

At the same time, the Europeans show the rise of their interest in Islam, though not as to the religion which should be confessed, but as a socio-political phenomenon. Muslim women, having arrived in Europe, are in a completely different position than European women, since they still give priority to Islamic religious worldview. Men, certainly not all, though a significant proportion, when arriving in European countries, face the problem consisting in fact that the "enlightened" European society does not perceive the need to observe some Islamic rules, which are incorporated in the minds of the Muslim men since their childhood. This raises questions in believing Muslims concerning the strict observance of Islamic traditions in the countries, where such traditions are considered to be a private matter. As known, any questions give rise to answers. The answers are seen in the behavior of Europeans, not professing Islam, or professing Islam, but not ministering the duties of strict observance of Muslim rituals with due respect and reverence. Unlike the Arab mass media, which were noted above, mass media of secular states face a dilemma, whether to continue their work in usual manner, or take into account the religious factor. Not taking into account the religious factor may lead to the consequences like those that happened in Paris, where a caricature of the Prophet Mohammad was published on the cover of a magazine. And to the extent that the religious factor should be considered, the question arises which one should be taken into consideration. Before the Islamic world has not entered into the contact with "Christian" world, predominantly due to the actions of the latter, the Oriental woman seemed to the Europeans as shut-in and oppressed woman, entirely dependent on her husband. But since the emergence in Europe of women professing Islam, it turned out that among them there are completely independent personalities, having their independent point of view and certain goals. And these goals are not necessarily the goals of being subservient to somebody and especially to their husbands.

The question of the woman's status in Islam is neither new nor conclusively resolved. We can say that the image of Muslim woman in mass media is more like stereotypical rather than objective. And this stereotypical view is rooted in the consciousness of Europeans. In this regard, we believe that concluding that freethinking will develop at a rapid pace owing to the contact of cultures, is premature. However, the mass media expand on issues, which are undesirable from

the viewpoint of traditional Islam, as they can cast discredit on existing dogmas and moral values of the Islamic world. According to some Islamic scholars, growing feminism is one of the manifestations of freethinking, which threats to traditional Islam. Suffice it to recall a historical fact, when mass protests of women in Iraq in 2003 prevented the enactment of Sharia law by the Government Council. In 2011, the Egyptian Institute for Islamic Studies held in Madrid a conference on the future of Islamic feminism in Europe. The meeting discussed the ideological foundations of Muslim feminism, the problems associated with its expansion in Europe, the organization of women's movements and the role of men in feminism. Islamic feminists believe that the low social status of women in Islamic countries results from misogynistic distortions of the Koran teachings. They strive for closer cooperation with Western feminists, but at the same time specify that non-Muslim feminist women should rethink their anti-Islamic stereotypes.

DISCUSSION

The desire to protect the equality and/or superiority of Muslim women, using the power of Islam, gave rise to the phenomenon called Islamic feminism. Islamic feminism is one of the challenges of freethinking. This term came into use in the 1990-ies. According to research of Iranian scientists and writers Afsaneh Najmabadi and Ziba Mir-Hosseini, this term was used for the first time in the women's magazine "Zanan", established by Tehran society "Shahla" in 1992, as well as in 1996 in the book "Feminism and Islam" edited by Mai Yamani from Saudi Arabia. Turkish scholars and writers Yesim Arat and Feride Adjar recorded first use of the term "feminism" in the book "Modern Mahram" (published in 1991 in Turkish and in 1996 in English) (Aivazova, 2001). According to Polenina S.V., this line of thinking comprising of all the speeches and practices, which are feminist in nature, within the paradigm of Islamic thought, becomes an object of discussion in Russia. These disputes, initiated by the contemporary educated and fairly wealthy young Muslim women, who began to appear in the public arena in connection with the practice of wearing a headscarf, eventually became widespread (Polenina, 2000).

Any kind of freethinking in Islam may become the reason for the statements that are communicated to the society which is yet not ready for such statements. Scientists such as an American scholar of Islam at Virginia State University Amina Wadood, form a different category, known under the name of Muslim feminism. Stating that they seek to establish equality between men and women, they adhere to the idea that Islam should be interpreted all over again. Feminists of this category claim that Islam was generated by a social formation of dominated patriarchal structure, in which there was exploitation of women. While some feminists of the West are directly in conflict with religion and consider it the source and bearer of a patriarchal order in terms of its essence and role in the historical process,

others tend to avoid criticizing religion itself, though criticize its interpretation and individual institutions emerged over time. Getting inspiration from them the Muslim feminists, carefully avoiding criticism of Islam in its essence and the fact that the Prophet was a man, yet cannot refrain from criticism of historical interpretations. They criticize and even can reject the reliability of religion not from viewpoint of traditional authority but in accordance with the criteria of reason of the words of Prophet Muhammad, *i.e*. Hadith (Sillaste, 2000).

The danger of freethinking formation in Islam, such as atheism or Islamic feminism, lies in the fact that if the adherents of traditional Islam will perceive such freethinking as a threat, this may cause in return the emergence of radical Islam, focused to fight such freedom.

As noted by Savelieva E.A., "the phenomenon of Islamic radicalism can be considered from two points of view. On the one hand, the struggle for the purity in Islam and the creation of the state after the image and likeness of the Caliphate can be perceived as a struggle for the revival of Islam, which involves the revival and assertion of Islamic values in the context of globalization. On the other hand, defending political and economic interests transforms religion into a fighting tool" (Savelieva, 2015). Thus, radical Islam gives rise to "political Islam" that in fact is also a kind of freethinking.

Gender inequality is feeding the flame to the ideas of freethinking among women in the countries of both North Africa and the Middle East, and the immigrant population in European states. The prospect of strengthening the civil rights of women causes much controversy within the conservative Muslim society, which is also influenced by traditional cultural and religious values as well as historical and socio-political features of the development of Islamic civilization.

The researchers note that strategies of educational models are the engine of social and ethical transformations in a Muslim environment (Holger Daun, Geoffrey Walford, 2004). We can confidently say that it is unfinished education reforms in the Middle East and North Africa regions, as well as the lack of the coordinated policy of EU countries in education of immigrants, that are indirect factors in the emergence of dissent and freethinking among the adherents of the Muslim culture.

Explicitly and implicitly, the rights of women in getting education and employment are enshrined in the constitutions of almost all Arab countries (Sameena Nazir, 2006). Also noteworthy is the fact that during the last two decades of the XX century, the countries of the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Persian Gulf, among which the most conservative is the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, ratified, despite some reservations, the international conventions on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women (Sobh M. A., 2012). Meanwhile, in the region there are numerous instances of violations of constitutional rights and international agreements, manifested in domestic violence against women and

children, as well as early marriages, discrimination in education and employment, and inability to participate effectively in political and economic life of society (Sameena Nazer, 2006). A few examples of women's appointments to executive positions in various political, diplomatic, humanitarian and other spheres, as well as permission for women to participate in elections (particularly in Kuwait) cannot testify a fundamental change in identity politics of the concerned region. The problem of unification of the judicial system based on Sharia law, allowing judges to interpret ambiguously religious canonical texts as a universal source of legal norms, still remains acute for the conservative Arab states (Syukiyaynen L. R., 2000).

Noted issues and disagreements in the identity politics of the concerned region affect the mode of operation and dynamics of the discourse of mass communications. Using actively the advances in information technology, Arab mass media are probing new possibilities to form an objective and equitable dialogue between the authorities and society that is in rhyme to liberal policy towards media activities, initiated by the "Arab spring". In this process not the last role is played by the activity of regional and international humanitarian and non-governmental organizations (Rasha Allam. 2008). Intelligent thinker and activist women get an additional opportunity to mainstream gender-sensitive issues in the Arab media discourse (Amel Al-Ariqi, 2008-2009).

The whole history of the formation of the women's press and journalism since the days of the first Arab women's magazine "Al-Fatat" (1892) is awashed with women's striving for self-development, self-esteem, status and desire to be a worthy companion of man in terms of the culture, traditions and beliefs that are dominant in certain ethnic and religious societies of divers Arabic-speaking world (Nabila Ramdani 2013). In our days, in the age of powerful media technology, this trend is reflected in other scales and other realities, namely the social networking, where there are many sites of public organizations protecting the women's and children's rights, and various feminist online communities. On satellite pan-Arab and regional TV there are regular broadcast programs and reports highlighting the outrageous facts of discrimination and violence in relation to women. Leading talk-shows presenters, in turn, conduct open discussions with experts and clergymen, victims and their relatives with the aim to draw public attention to the need of improving identity politics of certain countries in the region. Various videos featuring Muslim women regularly appear on YouTube. These women openly declare their rights, demonstrating high-quality possession of the legal and economic aspects of the constitutional guarantees, as well as emphasizing their equal partnership in marriage, objectively and fairly appealing to the Holy Scriptures - the Quran and Hadith.

Among the main challenges facing the mass media in the implementation of the women's rights in the studied region, we highlight the following:

1. Rejection from negative use of the woman's image (as a portrait of sexual harassment, low intelligence, and subordinate social status)
2. Increasing self-actualization of women, improving the image of educated and employed woman through media technology and social advertising along with the cultural and religious identity.
3. Educational activity aimed at consistent separation of religious and ethical principles from the secular components of education.
4. Enhancing the training potential of the Arabic-language mass media through quality update of media content.
5. Structural changes in recruitment policy of mass media, creation of up-to-date personnel with a large presence of creative and talented women in the field of mass media in general.
6. Mobilization in the mass media scene of Arab women's community without regard to religious, ethnic, and social criteria in the fight against discrimination of women in both education and employment.
7. Tracking and publication by mass media of the progress in implementation of government initiatives and international agreements of the Arab countries in the field of protection of the women's and children's rights.

Of course, above listed tasks cannot be implemented without coordination with the state structures and governmental institutions on the one hand, and the cooperation and constructive transformation towards an inclusive approach to women's education and employment on the initiative of religious and theological institutions, on the other hand.

This, in turn, may mean that the state is implementing an information strategy, called Noopolitics. Scientists S. Nikonov (Nikonov S., 2013), N. Labush (N Labush et all., 2015), and A. Baychik (Baichik et all., 2015) note that many reports of journalists are aimed at protecting the national interests of their countries, while these tasks will allow, in case of their successful implementation, to reap political dividends.

For example, within the Muslim Diasporas and immigrant communities in Europe, where according to E. Georgieva (E. Georgieva, 2015), multiculturalism is evolving, we may witness the transition from "Islamic feminism", atheism, and freethinking to mainstreaming of the "civil liberties of Muslim women".

CONCLUSION

The opposition of the traditional concept of Islam to atheism along with the trend to a new interpretation of Islamic principles, highlighted by the contemporary mass media, has a potentially unpredictable consequences in terms of several significant aspects: from the viewpoint of national security in both the region and the European

continent, from the viewpoint of retardation the democratic mechanisms initiated and declared by the "Arab spring", and from the viewpoint of preserving ethnic and cultural self-definition.

Surely, the traditional Muslim society is experiencing evolutionary processes. The global media market and accepted conventional attitudes actively penetrate into all spheres of both Muslim society in general and every individual. Democratic values, the expression of freethinking, and secularization of social institutions are attractive and understandable for a large part of the today's generation of Muslims. In these processes mass media fulfill two important functions: function of a mediator and function of initiator for further change. Migration crisis in Europe may inspire both the processes of atheistic remission and new extremist trends among the immigrants. A crucial role in relieving the latter plays the education policy in the countries of the Middle East and the integration and education policies for migrants newly arrived on the continent. Otherwise, the opposition between religion and atheism can be heated artificially and used by external and/or internal forces to further ideological disunity in the whole Muslim space.

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