

## Muslim Unity: The Inception of a New ‘Salafism’?

Fitrat’s position on Muslim unity, as far as it comes clear from his writings mentioned above, is close to a Salafist one in that he seeks and accepts guidance only from the Qur’an and Hadith.<sup>193</sup> However, unlike actual Salafists, he does not advocate returning to the early days of Islam. He postulates that true Islam is a religion which does not oppose progress or the study of secular, “Western” sciences. In his opinion, the true path lies in following the Qur’an and Hadith.

Reflecting on Muslim solidarity Fitrat concludes that ignorance is the Muslims’ main enemy. Ignorance, as it were, was the reason why Muslims lived under the yoke of infidels. Because of ignorance, Islam was going to perish and its “cherished sons” (*farzandan-i ‘aziz*) were forced to become “servants of the enemies of Islam” (*khizmatkar-i dushmanan-i Islam*).<sup>194</sup> Muslims observe and hear the truth and listen to edifying words but due to their ignorance they do not reflect upon these and “adhere to a distorted and falsified Islam”. This leads to the lamentable condition of the entire Muslim world.<sup>195</sup> Fitrat claims that unless the whole Muslim world unites in an “intellectual thrust” the future generation will inherit nothing but “impotence, ignobleness, and servitude”.<sup>196</sup> He relates these conclusions to the situation in Bukhara where the Sunni-Shi‘i bloodshed in early 1910 had brought a rift into society. He appeals to “common sense which would wake from a fatal slumber of ignorance”.<sup>197</sup>

There was some difference in Fitrat’s understanding of pan-Islamism with that of ‘Abdurrashid Ibrahim. The latter considered pan-Turanism or pan-Turkism as the basis of pan-Islamism and claimed that pan-Turanism and pan-Islam were essentially one. Pan-Turanism was the temporary nucleus out of which pan-Islamism would germinate. ‘Abdurrashid Ibrahim considered the Ottoman sultan the leader of a united Muslim world. Some simplified form of the Turkish language of Istanbul as a common tongue for all Turkic peoples was to form the basis of this unification.<sup>198</sup>

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**193** Fitrat. Qur’an. *A’ina*, 16, 1915, pp. 443–445.

**194** Bukharali ‘Abdurra’uf. *Hasbihal ba-hamvatanan-i*, pp. 1–2; *Mijmar. Nala’-i jansuz-i*, p. 7.

**195** Bukharali ‘Abdurra’uf. *Khadang-i zahragin*, p. 7.

**196** *Mijmar. Nala’-i jansuz-i*, p. 7.

**197** *Ibid.*, p. 6.

**198** ‘Abdurrashid Ibrahim. *Panturanizm. Ta’aruf-i Müslimin*, Vol. 1, 2, 1328, pp. 17–20; ‘Abdurrashid Ibrahim “Yana Panturanizm” yaki “Aqvam-i Türk’un birleshmesi”. *Ta’aruf-i Müslimin*, Vol. 1, 5, 1328, pp. 57–58.

The idea of creating a common literary language had been promoted by Isma‘il Gasprinski from the very beginning of the publication of his newspaper *Tarjuman* in 1883.<sup>199</sup> Gasprinski widely propagated the “dialect of reconciliation”<sup>200</sup>, which he deemed a singular literary language that could serve all Turkic peoples.

Fitrat’s stance on language is different. In the mid-1920s Fitrat, summarizing his pre-revolutionary activities, wrote that until 1916 like any other Jadid he was inspired by the idea of “a common literary language” for all Turkic peoples, which sounds like a hint to Isma‘il Gasprinski and ‘Abdurrashid Ibrahim’s ideas. After that idea did not come to fruition, he, along with other Turkestanis Jadids, founded the society *Chighatay Gurungi* where they undertook serious research in order to establish “the grammar of the Turkestan dialect of the Turkic idiom”<sup>201</sup> rather than messing about with a common literary language.

Fitrat, in contrast to ‘Abdurrashid Ibrahim, did not view pan-Turanism or pan-Turkism as the very basis of pan-Islam. When he described his vision of Muslim solidarity and political union he did not dwell on the issue of a common tongue, though he did regard the Ottoman sultan as leader of this union. His major emphasis was on bridging the rift between various Muslim confessions and on establishing their unity and amity. Fitrat, adhering to this line, perceived and shared the ideas by the newspaper *Ta‘aruf-i Müslimin* only in this regard, considering reconciliation between Sunnites and Shi‘ites a must when he wrote about Muslim unity. In an article published in *Ta‘aruf-i Müslimin* its author wrote:

“The believers are but one brotherhood, so make peace between your brothers. And be mindful of Allah so you may be shown mercy”<sup>202</sup> – by these words of God the Muslims, united under the banner of Islam regardless of their national affiliation, are not strangers to one another but are blood brethren. [...] Affinity in Islam is determined not by physical resemblance but also by spiritual brotherly kinship and it compels every Muslim to go for reconciliation (*islah*) with his brethren.<sup>203</sup>

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**199** For more, see: Akpınar, Yavuz. Gaspıralı’nın Türk Diline Bakışı. *Türk Dünyası Dil ve Edebiyat Dergisi*, Sayı:12/1, 2001, pp. 385–408.

**200** Baldauf, Ingeborg. *XX asr o‘zbek adabiyatiga chizgilar*. Toshkent: Ma’naviyat, 2001, p. 38.

**201** Fitrat. *Sarf*, p. 4.

**202** Qur’an 49:10. quran.com/49 (last seen 21.03.2022)

**203** Ya‘qub Kemal. İslamda ukhuvvet-i diniye ve bugünkü müsliminlar. *Ta‘aruf-i Müslimin*, Vol. 1, 1, 1328, pp. 14–15.

Fitrat's understanding of Muslim solidarity and unity regardless of national and confessional belonging very closely corresponded to this view. The Islam of Muslim unity, for Fitrat, is an Islam without sectarian or other split.

Reflecting on the future of the Muslim world Fitrat untiringly puts his finger on ignorance as the main reason for its woes. It is because of ignorance that the once-victorious Islamdom suffered defeats and humiliations. The infidels would continue to crush the Muslims and their lands. Lands and places (*mamalik*) like Kashgar, India, Iran, Afghanistan, Turkestan, Egypt, Java, Tunis, Sudan, Morocco, Kazan, Crimea, and the Caucasus all succumbed to the vice of ignorance.<sup>204</sup> One look at a political map of the world in 1914 was enough to recognize that all countries from Morocco to India and Indonesia were occupied by European powers: Britain, Germany, the Netherlands, France, and Russia. Western military power, state-of-the-art weaponry and most of all, advanced knowledge were the major "adversaries" of the Muslim world. Having the populations of these countries and regions in mind Fitrat argued that "ignorance had bowed the necks of 300 million Muslim believers"<sup>205</sup>.

Fitrat wanted Muslims, especially his people in Bukhara, to become enlightened patriots devoted to Islam. He was sure that "all those who considered themselves legitimate sons of their homeland," if only they "cherished the honour of their motherland and knew the precepts of the shari'a well," would have worked for the benefit of their country, following the maxim that "love for one's homeland is a matter of faith". But the saddest thing was that all too many poor souls had not yet opened their eyes from their slumber of ignorance. Every patriot must do his best to "awaken the Muslim masses from that slumber, which is the main cause of servitude and shame".<sup>206</sup>

As almost every Muslim reformist insisted, the main reason for Muslim backwardness was ignorance. Isma'il Gasprinski in his brochure *Russkoe musul'manstvo* ("The Muslims of Russia") wrote that the social and intellectual isolation of the Muslims, their ignorance and their quiescence in all major spheres led to sad consequences, culminating in the downfall of the Muslim world under European pressure.<sup>207</sup> Similar criticism was voiced by Gasprinski when he wrote about the problems of Turkestan. In one of his articles, he compares the Turkes-

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204 Bukharali 'Abdurra'uf. *Hasbihal ba-hamvatanan-i*, p. 2.

205 Ibid.

206 Ibid.

207 Gasprinski, Ismail. *Russkoe musul'manstvo: Mysli, zametki i nabliudeniia musul'manina*. Simferopol': Tipografiia Spiro, 1881, p. 5.

tanis to the Seven Sleepers (*Ashab-i Kahf*)<sup>208</sup>, as “they act as if they were completely isolated from this world and hear nought and do nothing”<sup>209</sup>.

Fitrat continued this tradition of castigation and severely criticized Bukharan domestic affairs using “ignorance” as a pretext. Lack of accountability of local officials, iniquity toward common people, squandering of government funds, and pauperization of peasantry and craftsmen were the major factors of Bukhara’s downfall and he saw all these as a result of that “accursed ignorance.”<sup>210</sup>

He appeals to the ‘ulama, asking them “to save and to preserve our sacred religion” and keep to the saying that “the ‘ulama are the successors of the prophets”. He quotes from the Qur’an: “Of all of Allah’s servants, only the knowledgeable [of His might] are [truly] in awe of Him”<sup>211</sup> and considers scholars to be privileged by God. In his interpretation, these words oblige those “who possess knowledge, to give strength to the community and send it on the path of progress and truth”. The community should accept this path without any hesitation, since only in this way “we can preserve our sacred faith and protect our holy land”.<sup>212</sup>

At the beginning of his career as a public intellectual Fitrat was in agreement with ‘Abdurrashid Ibrahim, who also saw the ‘ulama as the saviours of Islam. Fitrat’s deliberations concerning the ‘ulama are very similar to the ideas of ‘Abdurrashid Ibrahim on the role of Muslim clerics in a resurgence of Islam. ‘Abdurrashid Ibrahim wrote about the ‘ulama that according to the words of the prophet they should stand between God and the people and reveal to the latter the commandments of the former. But the actual scholars did not fully comprehend their mission and failed to deliver the true word to Muslims. Their true task is to first re-shape and reform (*islah*) themselves and then apply their efforts to reform the community which is about to fall into an abyss.<sup>213</sup>

In the mid-1910s Fitrat radically changed his opinion on this issue and no longer regarded the ‘ulama as the leaders of the community. He would from now on call upon the Muslims to seek guidance only from the Qur’an which, he argued, was the only reliable guide to salvation for all Muslims.<sup>214</sup>

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**208** Turkistaning hali, *Tarjuman*, 136, 20.06.1913, p. 1.

**209** Isma’il. Rusiya Turkistani. *Tarjuman*, 37, 12.04.1906, p. 1.

**210** Bukharali ‘Abdurra’uf. ‘Ajaba Bukhara chira kharab ast. *Hikmet*, 50, 30.03.1911, p. 8; 51, 08.04.1911, p. 7–8.

**211** Qur’an 35:28. quran.com/35 (last seen 21.03.2022)

**212** ‘Abdurra’uf. Hasbihal ..., p. 7.

**213** ‘Abdurrashid Ibrahim. Qū anfusakum ... *Ta’aruf-i Müslimin*, Vol.1, 1, 1328, pp. 7–9.

**214** Fitrat, Abdurauf. *Najot yo’li*, p. 64.

As Fitrat claimed, he met many people, visited plenty of places but still could not find satisfactory solutions to the problems that beset the Muslim world and impeded its progress. Eventually, he found them only in the Qur’an. He rhetorically asks the Muslims whether they should really trust the words of “our esteemed ‘ulama”, who insisted that the current situation was a result of the will of God, and whether Muslims should really desist from taking initiative in solving their problems. In response, he suggests to disobey the ‘ulama, get active and search for solutions in the Qur’an.<sup>215</sup>

There is little doubt that Fitrat during his time in Istanbul was in conversation with many influential Muslim intellectuals and sought answers to the questions and concerns which troubled him, a young and devout Muslim worried about the future of his community. It is conceivable that the publications and actions of influential Muslim intellectuals like ‘Abdurrashid Ibrahim, Isma‘il Gasprinski and Ahmed Midhat captured Fitrat’s imagination and wielded a considerable influence on him at the inception of his career.

For Fitrat, European powers were enemies of Islam. He considered these powers responsible for the destruction of “the honour, good name, happiness, life, homeland, and rights of the three-(hundred)-million-strong, hapless Muslim community”. In his opinion, this dire situation arose as a result of the continuous harm done to Muslim communities by the Europeans. Subsequently, all major Muslim powers collapsed and their territories fell apart and were captured by infidels.<sup>216</sup> The Muslim countries he had in mind were probably the above-enumerated ones from Morocco to Kashgaria and Java. It can be deduced that Fitrat had an acute understanding of contemporary world affairs and imperial and colonial history. His political assessment was very close to the opinion of Isma‘il Gasprinski, who came to similar conclusions about the dire effects of ignorance on Muslims while analysing their affairs.

Fitrat reckoned the inertia of Muslim scholastics “a misuse of Islam”. He again quoted the Qur’an: “[It is to] have faith in Allah and His Messenger, and strive in the cause of Allah with your wealth and your lives. That is best for you, if only you knew.”<sup>217</sup> And he obligated his fellow Muslims to be ready to fight for their sacred religion.

How, then, did Fitrat imagine this fight for the sake of Islam? In his opinion it was a campaign for studying the modern sciences and healing people from ignorance. Again, Fitrat relied on the Qur’an in support of his stance: “If your pa-

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<sup>215</sup> Ibid., pp. 63–69; Fitrat. Qur’an. *A’ina*, 16, 1915, pp. 443–445.

<sup>216</sup> ‘Abdurra’uf. Hasbihal, p. 7.

<sup>217</sup> Qur’an 61:11. quran.com/61 (last seen 21.03.2022)

rents and children and siblings and spouses and extended family and the wealth you have acquired and the trade you fear will decline and the homes you cherish – [if all these] are more beloved to you than Allah and His Messenger and struggling in His way, then wait until Allah brings about His will. Allah does not guide the rebellious people.”<sup>218</sup> The campaign should continue until all Muslims appreciated the aforementioned quote. In this opinion, Fitrat was in line with the reformists who wholeheartedly and in masse were admonishing the Muslims to study the modern sciences. In Istanbul Fitrat had a chance to read and learn from numerous periodicals printed in Ottoman Turkish, Arabic, and Persian which had a wide circulation in the Empire. Printed outlets like *Servet-i Fünun* (1891–1944, Istanbul), *Al-Manar* (1898–1935, Cairo), *Al-Muqtataf* (1876–1952, Beirut, Cairo) popularized science along with their support for reformist policies.

Early on Fitrat publicly rejected the particular way of life and “unfounded superstitions” which in his opinion had come to be associated with religious faith in Bukhara. In his writings produced in Istanbul, Fitrat was very cautious in criticizing the policies of the Bukharan emir while he was intolerant toward perceivedly incompetent mullahs and imams, as Allworth rightfully observes.<sup>219</sup> However, it was still the religious elites to whom Fitrat appealed to lead the necessary reforms, although he did not spare clerics from his criticism and insisted that their primary duty before the nation and Islam was to edify the Muslims on the way of progress. They ought to consolidate their congregations, not to bring strife to the already fragmented community. They should ameliorate the political situation in Muslim countries, not aggravate it:

What is the matter with you? God forbid, perhaps you are against Islam's progress and the Muslims' tranquility? Heavens above, are you aware of your sacred duty of defending your homeland? Aren't you the champions of Islam? What a pity, you are not saviours of our faith nor a source of life to our nation. You have fallen into the others' trap and became their lackeys. You have failed to recognize those enemies of Islam who are urging you to destroy it.<sup>220</sup>

Anticipating objection on the part of the 'ulama, or in fact facing it, Fitrat is alerting them:

It will not benefit Islam if you consider my previous words meaningless and continue to talk the commoners into believing that such words make ablutions and prayers void.<sup>221</sup>

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<sup>218</sup> Qur'an 9:24. quran.com/9 (last seen 21.03.2022)

<sup>219</sup> Allworth, Edward A. *The Preoccupations of Abdalrauf Fitrat*, p. 13.

<sup>220</sup> 'Abdurra'uf. Hasbihal, p. 7.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

Thus, Fitrat found the source, the cause, and the cure for ignorance in the ‘ulama to whom he allotted the role of saviours of the Muslims from their slumber and ignorance. They were supposed to lead the reform movement, although they failed to adequately perform that task. Fitrat saw the salvation of Islamdom in unity beyond all possible sectarian dissonance and other religious disagreement. In his incessant reference to the Qur’an Fitrat takes a “salafite” stance, beseeching the Muslims to turn to a true Islam. At the same time, he deviates from Salafism as we know it: instead of encouraging the return to the days of early Islam and the adoption of its rules, Fitrat advocates a true Islam guided only by the Qur’an and simultaneously appeals to the Muslims to master the modern sciences.