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Report

on the doctoral thesis of Mr. Damir Vaisovich Muhetdinov

**on „The Islamic renovationist movement from the end of the 20th century to
the start of the 21st century“: ideas and prospects**

This report is based on the English version of the above-mentioned thesis. Unfortunately I am not familiar with Russian.

The author has focused his research on a crucial topic for Muslim life and self-understanding in our present time, and not least for those living in Russia and in Europe as a whole. I highly appreciate his choice, since the topic is of utmost scientific importance with clear prospects of a considerable practical impact.

The author plausibly focuses on the work of four of the most influential Muslim („neo-modernist“) thinkers since the second half of the 20th century, taking them a reliable basis for further reflections on the basis of maintaining the religion of Islam as a continuous and living source for contemporary Muslim life and thinking.

His approach is not limited to the kind of works dealing with single authors and their ideas, but aims at demonstrating the common ground of these thinkers: Islamic neo-modernist thinking as a single, trans-border intellectual phenomenon and as a basis for a productive revival of the ideas of the Russian theological school.

The author is a bridge-builder in the best sense of the word. Regarding the theological debate of Muslims in Russia, he gives access to the obviously broadly unknown reflections of prominent neo-modernist thinkers. From a European and even worldwide perspective, the evaluation of ample Russian sources in particular is a landmark in the scientific landscape of contemporary Islamic theology. Unfortunately, due to the lack of sound knowledge of Russian, most of the interested scholars have no access to such sources. Thus, the author enriches our knowledge by describing and analyzing largely unknown, but nevertheless important developments among Muslims living as minorities regarding their theological or philosophical self-positioning in a mostly non-Muslim and secular environment.

At the same time, the thesis affirms and develops the often neglected rich intellectual potential of the Islamic Shariah to react to the changes in time and space of human life and interaction. Since the author is active in related issues in high responsibility, he is an ideal candidate to work in depth on his chosen topic.

The thesis is divided into five chapters, followed by a sound conclusion. The starting point is the author's more than plausible observation of an „inevitable intellectual modernization“ as well as the fact that „ the desire for renovation has always been an inseparable feature of the Islamic tradition“ (p. 4). In the first four chapters, the author discusses the ideas of Fazlur Rahman, Muhammad Arkoun, Muhammad Shahrur and Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd regarding the necessities,



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methods and goals of reformist approaches to Islamic sources. While these authors are certainly not uncontested or even heavily rejected in traditionalist circles (Muhammad Shahrur in particular), they still are widely accepted for their groundbreaking approaches to Islamic normativity and its handling in present times: They are dealing with the very core sources of Islamic theology and normativity, the Qur'an and its interpretation, the role of the prophet Muhammad and his conduct, and of the Sunnah as a whole as a normative source, the range of own independent reasoning and other crucial issues on a high intellectual standard and deeply rooted in the tradition of Islam, while not being stuck into it.

In addition, since these authors represent different academic and intellectual backgrounds, the comparison of their works sheds light on a very broad field of Muslim contemporary thinking. Thus, it is indeed an equally challenging and well-reflected approach to evaluate their respective attitudes and to draw on an intellectual synthesis of them for formulating an own concept of renewal in light of Neomodernism.

I do refrain from simply para-phrasing the author's bright insights in the works of the four thinkers he has analyzed. Instead, it suffices to say that he managed to bring together ample and diverse works in a clearly structured analysis based on a prudent and convincing in-depth analysis of their respective argumentation, which is the necessary basis for his own reflections in a synthesis (but not generalization) of or inspired by these works.

The thesis reveals the author's deep knowledge of both the Islamic theological tradition and the different methods of preserving the core of the religion of Islam while necessarily adapting the „periphery“ to the exigencies of time and space. In addition, his excellent command of Arabic gives access to his sound understanding of theological and philosophical texts which could otherwise easily

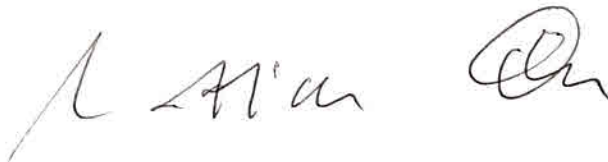
be misunderstood. On this basis, he develops an impressive program for renewal concerning core parts of Islamic theology and religion as a whole in an equally ambitious and modest intellectual manner. His reflections and proposals on methodology, speculative theology (kalām) in the sense of a new approach to Qur'anic ontology, the status of revelation, the scope and methods of ijtihad (own reasoning) in a contextual setting, reconstructing Islamic ethics in view of its application to modern problems, the theory of the Sunnah and the status of the hadiths, the deconstruction of the established ahistoric understanding of tradition, socio-ethical concepts in opposition to Islamism, the re-discovery of conceptual pluralism in Islam and the necessary embeddedness in civilizational contexts are thoroughly rooted in the riches of Islamic rational thinking, far beyond mere pragmatist approaches, intellectually convincing and socially more than desirable.

The thesis is based on a sound structure discussing ample sources in different languages and written in a clear language and sequence of argumentation. Being deeply embedded in the Russian Islamic culture and its renovationist movement since the late 18th century, the author righteously does not shy away from calling the renovationist debate to be „ a second formative period of Islamic thought“ (p. 6).

The author has obviously achieved his ambitious goals and at the same time throws light on the possibilities of bridging the gap between Islamic and Western philosophical/normative thinking in the footsteps of the authors whose works he has analyzed and of the Russian Muslim tradition of jadidism. This concerns particularly the last sub-chapter of his programmatic evaluation (pp. 326 ss.). Beyond that, in the last chapter he provides a well-reflected basis for further theological/philosophical Islamic studies and self-reflection among Muslims in

Russia, and re-vitalizes the innovative potential of Russian Muslim thinking. What more could one expect by a doctoral thesis?

In sum, I am convinced that the author has provided an excellent and groundbreaking study of modern Islamic renovationist thinking as well as a landmark program for further reflection of Muslim self-understanding and culture in Russia, and thus suggest to the Faculty of Theology in full conviction and without any reservation to accept it as a doctoral thesis.



(Prof. Dr. Mathias Rohe)

P.S.

With respect to the publication of the thesis, it is highly desirable that the English version of this thesis will be published to achieve an outreach into a worldwide readership, which is not familiar with the Russian language. The transliteration of Arabic terms should be reviewed before. E.g.:

pp. 29, 74, 82, 276 and elsewhere: Muhammad Abduh (not Abdo)

p. 73 Batinis (not batinis)

p. 305 Ibn Miskawayh (not Miskaweih)