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ATAULLAH BAI AZITOV VS ERNEST RENAN: ISLAMIC DIALECTICAL THEOLOGY BEATS ORIENTALISM*

Abstract. The paper deals with treatises of Ataulлах Baiazitov — a prominent Russian Muslim scholar and translator. The author gives a brief summary of Baiazitov’s biography and considers his main apologetic book, *The Refutation of Ernest Renan’s “Islam and Science”*. In this work Baiazitov argues that Islamic worldview is coherent with modern science and attacks Renan from rational and logical positions. As a consequence, the author remarks, that Baiazitov’s legacy still needs philosophers’ and historians’ attention and must be rediscovered by them in 21st century.

Keywords: Ataulлах Baiazitov, Ernest Renan, Jadidism, Modern Islamic Theology, Russian Islam, Apologetics.

Baiazitov was born in 1846/1847 in a small village by the name of Temgenev (Timginav, Tjubenau), south of Moscow. He was a member of the very small group of Tatars from Kasimov, a group much smaller than the better-known Kazan-Tatars. Kasimov, in the government district of Ryazan’, which had been Islamized early through the Golden Horde. For roughly two centuries it was an independent Tatar princely state under Russian protection before it became a part of the Russian Empire in 1681. It seems to have kept its own system of Muslim education, but teachers were probably from Kazan. Baiazitov was taught the Arabic language and the foundations of Islam by his father, the mullah of the village. At the *madrasa of Baimuraad*, an institution of higher learning in the neighboring village of Cutaj (Cetaev), Baiazitov

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studied Oriental languages and the “rational sciences”, probably jurisprudence, theology, metaphysics, and Aristotelean logic — disciplines which he then taught himself. He later classified Islamic jurisprudence (*‘uṣūl al-fiqh*), rational theology (*kalām*), metaphysics and philosophy as “worldly sciences” (*svetskie nauki*) and praises Ibn Ruṣd and Ibn Sīnā as the scions of science and philosophy in Islam¹. He also seems to have been practicing the art of scholastic disputation. In 1870 he sat exams at the Orenburg Association of Muhammadan Clerics (*Orenburgskoe Magometanskoe Duchovnoe Sobranie, opened 1789 in Qyschqar, Ufa*), a government authority for religious affairs overseeing all future Muslim clerics in the empire, which conferred on him the status of an imam delivering sermons at a Friday mosque, and to teach in a madrasa as *mudarris*.

A year later, he moved to the capital St. Petersburg on the invitation of the Kasimov Tatars of St. Petersburg and became their imam. There he advanced through a number of offices to eventually become one of the most well-known Muslim clerics in the capital. Thus, he was put in charge of the spiritual affairs for the Muslim soldiers in the St. Petersburg garrison (as a *voennyi achun(d)*, the term for a mullah who is overseeing more than one mosque) [von Kügelgen, 2013, 924]. In 1881 he was briefly considered for the post of consul in Damascus. He was engaged by the Asia office of the foreign ministry as a translator and lecturer in Turkic languages. In this capacity he served as the instructor in the corps of the pages (*pazheskij korpus*) — the sons of influential aristocrats at the tsarist court — teaching them the fundamentals of Islam. Baiazitov thus moved in the highest circles, and for his loyalty he received important awards: the Order of St. Stanislaus and the Order of St. Anna, as well as five medals honoring his work as a translator.

When Baiazitov arrived in St. Petersburg in 1871, the local Tatar community could look back on a history of more than a hundred years in the capital, although, as a proportion of the St. Petersburg population, their numbers were small (ca. 0,3 percent). Nonetheless, that amounted to 6,000 Kasimov Tatars, over the period from 1869 to 1910, most of them male migrants working in the relatively upscale service and restaurant trade [Ibid., 935]. When Baiazitov took over as spiritual head of the community, there was not yet a mosque in the Russian capital. Baiazitov was the driving force behind an effort that would culminate in 1913 with the first Friday Mosque to be completed in St. Petersburg. With its minarets rising 49 meters into the sky, it was the largest mosque in Europe outside of Istanbul. The land for the mosque was financed by the emir of Bukhara, Abdalad Chan (ruled from 1885–1910) and he, along with many other dignitaries, received a special invitation to be among the honored guests at the laying of the cornerstone in 1910. Baiazitov delivered the opening prayer at the ceremony, and he delivered an address in which he stressed the importance of the aesthetic elements in Islam.

¹ To date the German scholar Anke von Kügelgen is the only one who has studied Baiazitov in depth [Baiazitov, 1883, 7; Baiazitov, 1887, 11; Baiazitov, 1898, 27–28, 35; cited in: von Kügelgen, 2013, 934].

“God is beautiful and loves beauty”. Our mosque will be beautiful and will serve the glory of architecture and the beauty of the city. Such a mosque, as we shall have in St. Petersburg, exists neither in Paris nor in London. The mosque is beautiful, yet in order that it shine not merely due to its outer beauty, we must pray to God that this mosque will cultivate spiritual and moral beauty within us [von Kügelgen, 2013, 937].

Not only in Russia was Baiazitov honored for his services to Islam. He was also awarded honors by the emir of Bukhara, singled out by the government of Iran for the spiritual and mental support he provided for Iranian students and given a third-class Order of the Medjidie by the Ottoman sultan.

Biazitov wrote both in Tatar and in Russian. His applications to establish a Tatar-language newspaper in the capital of the empire were twice denied (in 1891 with *Häftä*, “The Week”, and in 1893 with *Čišmä*, “The Source”). Only in June of 1905 was his third submission to start a newspaper, *Nūr* (“The Light”), approved. This Turk-Tatar magazine was committed to discussing knowledge and education, world events and current needs. Many of its articles dealt with the social, business, and spiritual affairs of Muslims living in the Russian empire. State decrees and laws were also published, and issues like military service were discussed from an Islamic point of view. Baiazitov kept his paper on course, which was therefore respected in government circles and regarded as a serious and objective publication, reflecting the character of its founding editor himself.

Biazitov published three works in Tatar: a biography of the Prophet Mohammad (Kazan 1881; 2nd edition 1885) and two textbooks on the fundamental legal and moral tenets of Islam (Kazan 1883; St. Petersburg 1897). *Das Enzyklopädische Wörterbuch von Brockhaus und Efron* (composed in the years 1890 to 1907) had this to say about them:

The biography of Mohammed compiled by Baiazitov in the Tatar language under the title *The Emergence of Islam* (1881) and a general education text also in Tatar, *Dunja-Manschat* (*Light and life*) were much loved among the Muslims in Russia’s central and eastern jurisdictions [Das Enzyklopädische, 1905, 228].

He also published three books in Russian, in which he characterised Islam as a religion which promotes science and progress and is compatible with “modern civilization”. He understood Russia to be part of European civilization which he took to be universalistic, the (only) civilization which had achieved “progress”, very much in line with the views elsewhere in Europe — except that he postulated that Islam was compatible with this civilization.

It was Ernest Renan’s lecture on “Islam and science” which had triggered his interest in — and insistence on — this question. He was among the first to respond to Ernest Renan. His refutation of Renan’s essay appeared in the same year the latter

was published, in 1883, after he read its translation into Russian by Aleksei Vedrov [Renan, 1883].

Whether Baiazitov knew of Ġamāl al-Dīn al-Afġānī's response, or knew al-Afġānī personally, is unknown, although it would be astonishing for the two not to have met during al-Afġānī's stay in St. Petersburg (1887–1889) — a period of two years, after all. Al-Afġānī, the agitator, was no doubt too radical and too unpredictable for Baiazitov, the cautious holder of high offices, who, in any case, makes no reference to al-Afġānī in his writings. Namik Kemal's critique had not yet been published [Schäbler, 2016, 110].

Baiazitov sent his refutation of Renan to Ahmed Midhat Efendi (1844–1912), an Ottoman writer and translator as well as the publisher of the well-known journal *Tercüman-t Hakikat* (“Translator of Truth”). Ahmed Midhat had it translated into Ottoman. This was achieved by Madame Olga Sergeevna Lebedova, also called Gülnar Hanim Efendi (1854–1909), who had already translated works by Pushkin and Tolstoy into Ottoman. Managing editor in charge was journalist Ahmed Cevdet (Oran). Ahmed Midhat Efendi, who travelled a lot and represented the Ottoman Empire at international congresses, had met Madame Olga Lebedova at the Eighth Congress of Orientalists in Stockholm, Sweden [Findley, 1998]. Both articles were published in *Tercüman-i Hakikat* in Ottoman. They were subsequently translated into Turkish by Ibrahim Ural [Bayezitof, 1993].

Olga Lebedova translated Baiazitov's works of 1883 and 1887, which were also published in *Tercüman-i Hakikat*. They appeared as early as 1308/1890/1891 in book form: *Redd-i Rihnaan Islaamiyyat ve funuun* and *Islaamiyatin ma'arife ta'alluqi ve nazar-e mu'ariziinde tebyini*.

Ahmed Midhat too had defended Islam in several of his works and he had translated into Ottoman John William Draper's *History of the Conflict Between Religion and Science* — a book dealing primarily with the conflict between the Roman Catholic church and scholars representing the natural sciences.

Baiazitov remained preoccupied with the issue of Islam and science from that point on. Within fifteen years of his response to Renan, he produced two additional monographs that more comprehensively represented Islam as a religion that was supportive of science and progress and compatible with modern civilization: *The Relationship of Islam to Science and Superstition* (1887) and *Islam and Progress* (1898). With these texts, Baiazitov hoped to “do away with false ideas about the relation of Islam to education and progress”, not only on the part of Europeans, but also of Muslims themselves. Among the latter, he said, “it is well-known that a long-lasting spiritual lethargy has become widespread, leading to conservatism” [von Kügelgen, 2013, 939].

Baiazitov's response to Renan is a careful and logically reasoned scholarly treatise, which he concludes with an appeal to modern scientists to find a point of departure for a mutual understanding between science and religion. Reaching back into the rich Islamic tradition for his counterarguments, he extends Renan's fixed ideas

ad absurdum — in particular the idea that Muslims were irrational and strangers to science. The writer's essential training in Aristotelian logic is unmistakable. His thinking is less political than Kemal's and al-Afgānī's in their respective responses to Renan, seeing theology as his primary call.

Above all, he criticizes Renan on the grounds of logic. Renan argues that, which is designated by the term "Arab science", is not Arab because it had its origin in Greece, then the (western) European sciences are not (western) European. Rather, they are Greek or Asian, because their origin lay in Greece or Asia (with Greece having been influenced by Asia) [Schäßler, 2016, 113]. Baiazitov's reasoning here is not far from the arguments made by post-colonial authors today. Baiazitov also brings up the familiar argument about the Islamic world being 600 years younger than Europe, but he takes it further. The fact that Christian Europe, the older brother, took a full 1200 years to learn rational science — that is Greek philosophy — from its younger brother, i.e. Islam, makes the abilities of the younger brother over the older obvious. Thinking in family images, along the lines of European religious studies at the time, he argues that rational science had Greece as its father and Arabia or Islam as its mother and educator. It is therefore equally Greek and Arab [Ibid.].

Baiazitov also criticizes the muddle Renan makes of geography. Renan attempts to explain Europe's backwardness compared to the Arab Muslims for 1200 years, geographically, citing the greater distance separating Europe from the centers of the ancient world. But Bukhara, Samarkand, Persia, and Spain were not farther from Baghdad or Syria than France, and yet Muslims were sent from these places to Baghdad to study the new philosophical doctrines.

In the main, however, Baiazitov relies on his knowledge of Aristotelean logic and uses the syllogism to disprove Renan's argumentation as "unlogic". Renan maintained that many of the Abbassid caliphs had not been Muslims; they had, after all, been "curious about everything, especially exotic and pagan matters; they inquire about India, the old Persia, and Greece especially". Baiazitov lays this argument out in the form of a classic syllogism, with two premises and a conclusion.

Premise 1: Whoever has an interest in foreign or heathen things belongs to them, i.e., to the foreigners or heathens, respectively.

Premise 2: The caliphs had an interest in all things foreign or heathen.

Conclusion: The Muslim caliphs were not Muslims.

According to this "logic", the Prophet himself would not have been a Muslim as he had an interest in Judaism and Christianity. By the same logic, Christian academics with an interest in classical antiquity and Islam would not be Christians. And since these statements are obviously false, it must be the case — this is where the argument has been heading — that the caliphs were both good Muslims and open to all kinds of knowledge. The caliphs had always kept leading scientists at court, and thus had Islam and science become "inseparable twins".

That there had been cases of philosophers or natural scientists being persecuted in the Muslim world, Baiazitov accepts. But he protests the way that Renan considers only cases where the persecution traces back to Islam. Oppositionists and fanatics can be found everywhere. Baiazitov seems aware of Renan's position in France and reels off a list of relevant incidents in the history of Europe: Martin Luther, the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre, the Thirty-Years War. But he also knows about the battles in revolutionary France over the public display of religious symbols. Where, in that case, he asks, lies "the guilt of the religion of Christ?" In general, Baiazitov, unlike Kemal, never attacks Christianity, and he is always very balanced in his assessments.

That said he is hardly free of apologetics, especially when he equals political opposition in England or France with "attacks by a mass of uneducated Arabs on scientists or philosophers". What he has in mind is expressed in an example of how insults were hurled back and forth at a congress of homeopathic and allopathic doctors in Moscow. The many controversies that have split Muslim theologians — who have likewise showered each other with scorn and derision — have not ended with them being burned at the stake as heretics, as happened in Europe. Over the centuries under Islam, disputants were able to seek out patrons in other cities or principalities. That Renan would demand that Islam do away with what Europe itself has not been able to do away with is a rather clear-sighted analysis. Baiazitov finds that demand "not entirely fair".

Based on Renan's logic, we could conclude the following: Muslims hate science because they regard it as heresy, and this is completely justified from the standpoint of their religion. On this basis, the following conclusion is allowed: to all people who regard their religion as the revealed truth of God, all sciences, aside from theology in support of the revealed truth, must be hateful. Everyone — from the standpoint of their religion, and again with complete justification — can describe science as godless and heretical. In light of all that, can Renan's conclusion that it is only the Muslims who "hate science" still be considered logical, when — according to his own logic — practically anyone professing belief in a theistic religion would have to hate science?

Where Kemal polemicized, Baiazitov offers reasoned consideration, showing how Renan is guilty of false inductive reasoning that leads to incorrect results. In a display of his scholarly erudition, Baiazitov concludes his response with several quotes and a reference to the superiority of reasoning over tradition in Islam, as practiced by the theologians, the *mutakallimūn*, in Islam. This is what al-Iznīqī (d. 1458) had to say about tradition: "Any passage in the tradition that cannot be accepted by the intellect through reasoning must be interpreted in terms of allegory". To Baiazitov, this meant that it was to be interpreted not literally but with common sense, for, as al-Iznīqī said, "the argument which stems from tradition cannot serve as definitive proof if the ultimate justification at which it arrives has no rational basis". Baiazitov also quoted al-Gazālī (d. 1111), who was "renowned in Islam for his erudition and

piety”, and was, in fact, one of the most famous theologians in Islam: “Logic (*mantiq*) is the propaedeutic and balance beam of all scales of thinking, irrespective of doctrine or knowledge; there is no fundamental knowing without logic, and nothing reliable can be known by anyone who lacks it” [Schäbler, 2016, 227].

According to Baiazitov, al-Ġazālī also called for the study of logic to come before the fundamental study of the Koran, Sunna, and jurisprudence. Logic is the most important and most useful of the sciences. Only a truly ignorant person could ever deny or prohibit logic, according to al-Subkī, a theologian from the fourteenth century who argued against the literal interpretation of the Koran. Logic and medicine were duties imposed on the community of believers (as opposed to being the duties of individual believers). Traditionally, that meant that only experts educated for the task were to carry out these duties, just as not everyone can be a doctor. As the Prophet said, “the first thing Allah created is the intellect”.

The Islamic scholars Baiazitov cites are the ones who, throughout centuries of Islamic thought, favored a powerful role for logic in theology. They were frequently at odds with philosophy as it was practiced by scholars such as al-Afġānī, but they also stood for the variety that was to be found within Islamic thought (as al-Ġazālī), showing that it amounts to more than the casuistry of Islamic jurisprudence, against which also al-Afġānī and Kemal argued, as well as later Muslim intellectuals. Baiazitov is thoroughly convinced that the religious feeling common to all people in whatever stage of development is permeated by intellect, capable of being understood according to the laws of logic, and inherent in human individuals as rational beings. But because different people are constituted differently, their conceptions of God, religion and the laws of nature also differ. God reveals himself to the individual to the extent to which he or she is in a position to understand Him, and therefore all individuals must develop their own thinking.

Yet, the supreme ideal that humanity is striving for — the ultimate goal of its development on earth — is to bring religion and science together, to reconcile these two loftiest domains of the human spiritual world. May god grant, continues Baiazitov, that contemporary scientists would realize this truth and devote their knowledge and talents not to the detriment of religion — and also not to the smothering of religion in the lap of science — but rather, to the cultivation of a mutual respect between science and religion. The wisdom of scientists and philosophers consists not of burying religion as a hostile phenomenon in favor of their frequently changing systems of thought. Rather, the task of contemporary science is much more to find a point of departure for the creation of a reciprocal understanding between science and religion, so that the two can attain the truth together. It is important to forge close reciprocal ties between the two spheres of the spiritual and intellectual world of the human mind — religious sentiment and intellect — and at the same time get rid of the fanaticism of the fanatics on both sides. Then religion and science can walk hand in hand on the path to those truths, the higher ideals of moral reason and virtue that make up

humanity's ultimate goal on earth. Baiazitov closes with an appeal, but one which reads substantially more modern and sophisticated than Renan's. For Baiazitov, religion and science strive for different forms of knowledge. They should therefore respect each other. Religion should not stand in the way of scientific research, nor should natural science denigrate religion and its sacred figures (by, for example, comparing them to people with mental illnesses or epileptics). In fact, Baiazitov's conclusion is reminiscent of the writing of Max Planck, for whom religion and science were complementary rather than mutually exclusive. For the believer, God stands at the beginning of all consideration — for the scientist, at the end.

Baiazitov is progressive for his time also when it comes to women. He wrote:

[Prophet] Muhammad, who studied human nature in detail, denied women access to the company of men who were strangers to them and barred them from free association with them. In our civilized century, given the contemporary understanding of citizenship, women can of course no longer be unconditionally prohibited from moving and interacting in society. Instead, however, social morality should be improved so that its rules are equivalent to a law and protect the honour and good reputation of women from impertinent assaults [Baiazitov, 1887; quoted from: von Kügelgen, 2013, 946].

Women, he maintained, should be allowed to work, but husbands should not be allowed to force them to work — instead they should help them with household chores [von Kügelgen, 2013, 946].

While in his refutation of Renan in 1883 Baiazitov adopted a slightly ironic — yet scholarly — style, five years later he sounds exasperated about how nothing seemed to counteract European prejudices about Islam. In “Islam and Progress” (1898) he notes that these prejudices are even used to justify colonial conquests:

The false idea of the *ḡihād* as an unbridled attack for the glory of the Prophet and to spread Islam has struck such deep roots in Europe that no criticism whatever is permitted. Do the generally known historical facts still not adequately demonstrate the absurdity of this idea? Let us take, for example, the most recent events in Asia and Africa. Reality shows precisely the opposite. Tunis defends itself against French attacks and neighboring Morocco stands by idly watching. Egypt uses the strength it has remaining bracing itself against the British civilizers, while Turkey, the whole of Muslim Africa, and even the holy cities of Medina and Mecca, as well as others, wait quietly for the bloody outcome. It is possible to adduce a long list of such ready facts. Is that really not enough to do away with this preposterous inversion? [Baiazitov, 1898, 56]².

² Baiazitov refers here to the *Times* of October 8, 1887; see also: [Schäbler, 2016, 111, 112].

Baiazitov wrote at a time, when views about *magometanstvo* (“Mohammedanism”) were as critical (and hostile) as they were in the rest of Europe. Ernest Renan was read and quoted profusely. Anti-Muslim polemics were often written by missionaries. In this Islamophobic discourse there was nothing “civilizing” in Islam and its founding text, the Qur’an, at least not for the civilized world. Backwardness, hostility to modern science, passivity and fanaticism — the whole repertoire of 19th century scholarly and unscholarly literature could be found. Especially dangerous in this line of thinking were those Muslims, who were “educated in Russian schools, conversant with the Russian language, [and] privileged by the imperial context” [Lazzerini, 1998, 55].

Not surprisingly, Baiazitov came under attack by influential administrators in Tashkent (Turkestan, part of the Russian Empire), who were trained in Oriental Studies at a Christian missionary academy. The aim of this and other institutions was to stem the tide of both a rising secularism and anti-clericalism in the Empire and, after thousands of formerly christianized Tatars returned to Islam in the 1860s, to engage in new efforts of proselytizing [von Kügelgen, 2013, 951, 952]. Michail Aleksejevic Miropiev (1852–1919) and Nikolaj Petrovic Ostroumov (1846–1930) engaged with and wrote against Baiazitov. Ostroumov’s response in his book *Quran and Progress — On the Intellectual Awakening of Today’s Russian Muslims* (1901/1903) is also a testimony to the suspicion of the government about alleged separatist and pan-Islamic tendencies of the reformers [Ibid., 953, 954; Lazzerini, 1998]. Ostroumov’s polemic targeted not only Baiazitov, but also much more famous Krim-Tatar Ismail Gasprinskij (1851–1914). Gasprinskij had a large following in Russia and Central Asia. Their movement came to be known as “Djadidist”, derived from the new teaching methods they were propagating. Baiazitov did not count as one of them and was not acknowledged by them — too close to state power as he was, and a moderate, not a radical in his views.

Thus, Baiazitov, who founded Russia’s first Tatar journal, was the driving force behind the establishment of first Friday mosque in the capital of the Russian Empire, St. Petersburg, and wrote one of the best refutations against Ernest Renan, along with several books in Tatar and Russian, and articles and commentaries in newspapers and journals, has remained fairly unknown both in Western and Eastern scholarship, even in Tatarstan. It is only recently that his books have been reprinted there, and that scholars, in the West and in Russia, have rediscovered him.

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