

The Role of Cyberspace in Religious Dialog between Muslim Minority and Non-Muslim Majority in the Czech Republic

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Abstract

The article is focused on Czech Muslim community and its efforts to educate, to raise public awareness and to create a dialog with Czech majority population using the internet, social networks and other modern cybernetic ways and tools. Special attention is put on Shia community in South Moravia region of Czech Republic and its recently opened Muslim Cultural Center Ahlulbayt followed by Facebook campaign and electronic media coverage.

In the background of current so called migration crisis in Europe there is a huge impact of cyberspace on public opinion formed by anti-Islamic movements on one side and pro-refugees activists on the other. In Czech Republic, a state almost untouched by migration wave and with small Muslim community, the issue of Islam in Europe and its coexistence with Christian / atheist domestic population has become an important political topic. Islamic organizations face much pressure and responsibility for introducing their religious and political orientation. Cyberspace, the internet and social networks are highly effective option to distribute information and statements or to communicate with outside world with low costs and high impact.

Analyzing these channels and their effectivity within Czech environment is one of the main aim of the article.

Key Words: Cyberspace, Religious, Dialog, Muslim and Non-Muslim

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Introduction

The Czech Republic and Czech society are usually considered one of the most atheistic countries in Europe due to targeted atheization of society programmed and performed by a communist party during the communist rule in Czechoslovakia.

The popularity of formal religion and churches in Czech society has been declining even after the so-called Velvet revolution in 1989 until now and according to last research in 2011, only 20% of Czech consider themselves as believers; But it can't be easily explained by demographic development or people's antipathy toward religion or the church. The point is, there's been a huge increase in a number of people refusing to answer this optional question about their religious orientation and beliefs in the population census.

Almost 45% of respondents omit to provide any information about their religious feelings and church affiliation.

From the institutional perspective, there are right now about 38 registered churches (most them Christian) by the state plus many unregistered religious communities.

Their size and power are very different from each other. The biggest and strongest one is the Roman-Catholic church (with a dominant position among believers).

Other world religions than Christianity are for the Czech Republic highly marginal.

Traditionally Judaism is present at Czech territory (since 10th Century) and in recent 30 years also Islam has become more and more relevant.

Compared to the Western Europe the Muslim minority in the Czech Republic is relatively small constituting community smaller than 0.1% of the Czech population.

According to Czech Statistical Office, more than 3000 people declared themselves as Muslims; but the sociologic research by Daniel Topinka (2016) states there are about 22000 Muslims with immigrational background plus an additional couple of hundreds of Czech converts.

Most Muslims living in the Czech Republic don't feel any need to organize themselves or practice their faith in a collective way.

There is only one Islamic organization registered according to Czech church and religious law – the Center for Muslim Communities in the Czech Republic – but it's relevance or effect on Czech-Muslim environment is debatable.

On the other hand, due to so-called migration crisis and growing Islamophobia in Europe, more activity of Muslim representatives in Czech society would be advisable.

Sunni Muslim Community and Cyberspace in CR

There are several projects in the Czech cyberspace dealing with Islam teachings and representing the Islamic culture to Czech society.

As mentioned above, the most important organization of Muslims in the Czech Republic is the Center for Muslim Communities in the Czech Republic (Ústřední muslimských obcí v České republice – UMOCR).

The Center has its own web page <http://www.umocr.cz/> for providing basic information about the organization and its activities.

Nevertheless, the web itself can't be considered a medium for a religious dialog at all, because it is only about the organization and basic information about its structure, statuses, and basic declaration of the federation.

There is absolutely no contribution of this web page to religious dialog or Islamic education at all.

Picture 1: Center for Muslim Communities in the Czech Republic Web Page, <http://www.umocr.cz/>



But there is another online project connected to the Center - a web page E-islám www.e-islam.cz.

It is an informative web administrated by Lukáš Větrovec, a Czech convert who is very close to the UMOCR and its branch in the city of Brno, Czech Republic.

The web page is prolific on many articles about Muslims, Islam, Islamic law, and many other topics provided in the Czech language.

It provides the Q and A platform and many e-books translated or written in Czech.

The personal and organizational connection to the UMOCR provides the necessary background of knowledge and sources.

The web page itself is not so much attractive from the perspective of a visitor or a viewer, but the content is very rich.

A visit rate of the page is raised by an affiliated Facebook page called Islamic teachings and Islam in practice (Islámské nauky a islám v praxi, www.facebook.com/islamskenauky/).

This page has about 1 500 followers and mainly shares information about new articles and contributions at the E-islám web page.

Various kind of people follows this Facebook profile, from Czech Muslims and converts to Czech public, journalists, and academic researchers etc.

Although the impact of both pages is relatively low, it represents a good combination of social networking, web presentation, and e-book distribution.

Shias in Czech Cyberspace

A Shia community in the Czech Republic is very small compared to other European states; Moreover, Shias in the Czech Republic are highly passive in matters of religion.

There is very weak association tendency among them, and if so, it is based mainly on ethnic or national level instead of religion.

From this perspective, the Shia community in the Czech Republic is constituted mainly by Iraqis, Afghanis, Lebanese, Syrians (Alawites), and Iranians.¹

The only Czech-Shia organization so far created is the Ahlulbayt Islamic Cultural Center in a city of Brno.

It is run by Abdulrahman Adday, Iraqi Shia and local businessman, and has its residency in Brno since 2016.

It is a relatively new project while Adday himself has been trying to develop and consolidate local Shia community for the last couple of years.

1. Unfortunately, there is still no research on Shia community in the Czech Republic, which would identify the representation of different nationalities among Shias. Above mentioned estimation is based only on the author's judgment and his personal experiences and survey.

With the Ahlulbayt Center, he targets not only Shia community, but also Czech society.

According to an author's interview with him, the main goal of the Center is to develop a mutual understanding between Arabian and Islamic culture and the Czech society which should lead to a rapprochement of both.

Main activities of the Center can be described as an education, cultural lectures, holidays celebration, language courses etc.

Nevertheless, the Center doesn't provide so much mentioned activities targeting Czech society so far.

It focuses mainly on small Shia community willing to participate and visit it sporadically.

Although there has been a couple of events and lectures in cooperation with the Masaryk University (the biggest local university) for public or interested persons (students), still the Center is in a sort of "standby mode" preparing itself mainly for a future.

According to Adday, there must be solved some organizational issues and created needed background first, then the Center can set up more activities.

Picture 2: Ahlulbayt Islamic Cultural Center Facebook page,
<https://www.facebook.com/ahlulbaytbrno/>



Nevertheless, in cyberspace, the Ahlulbayt Center is already active. In the past, the only channel of propagation of Adday's activities was the only web page about Shia belief written in the Czech language - www.islam-ahlulbayt.cz, where was a short mention of Shia community around the city of Brno and contact to Mr. Adday; But this web page has not been updated for a while and Adday had no control over it. That is why he decided to advertise and represent the Center at Facebook.

The Center Facebook page www.facebook.com/ahlulbaytbrno/ is mainly used for presentation of Center's activities and presentation of Mr.

Adday himself. Most of the contributions are about a celebration of different kind of Islamic (and Shia) holidays, some of them accompanied by photos from the Center if the celebration took place there, and about sporadic events hosted by the Center (such as students' visit and lectures).

The Facebook page so as the Center itself still does not provide any spiritual or cultural education for the public, although it is in a plan to the future.

The Facebook profile in combination with other social networks or media can be a good tool for spreading ideas of the Center and Ahlulbayt.

Other Cyberspace Islamic Projects in the Czech Republic

Although the UMOCR is the only registered and official representative of Muslims in the Czech Republic, there is another one alternative project aspiring for the Islamic leadership at least in the virtual world.

It is the Muslim Union of the Czech Republic (Muslimská unie v České republice- <http://muslimskaunie.cz/>).

This organization is considered as controversial due to its chairman Muhamed Abbas who had several problematic public speeches on Czech Television and other media demanding the Islamic rule in whole Europe or defending stoning as a punishment etc.

So, it is difficult to mention this organization as the one helping the creation of intercultural dialog.

Nevertheless, from the educational perspective, the Muslim Union is very active in cyberspace. It has its own web page with basic information about Islam (basics of the religion, how to pray properly etc.), several online books of spiritual content in Czech translation, a discussion forum with Q and A between readers and editors (almost empty) and information about the Union itself; Moreover, the page references to other channels, such as Facebook and YouTube.

Picture 3, The Muslim Union web page, <http://muslimskaunie.cz/>



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Although the Facebook profile www.facebook.com/muslimskaunie/ is very poorly full-filled, mainly by pictures with religious motives and quotations, the YouTube channel is interesting from the perspective of an education and an intercultural dialog.

There are about 25 short videos with a different kind of content available.

Some are introducing the basics of Islamic thought to the Czech public, explaining a principle of Tawhid and Ramadan in a Czech language, the other is showing how a Muslim should clean himself properly before a prayer (main character played by a Czech convert), other is dealing with the topic of women and Islam etc.

The Muslim Union produce majority of those videos itself, only a few are brought from abroad and translated.

Picture 4, The Muslim Union YouTube channel,

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCNkPC-IFbkpHLXaRZze9awg/feed>



Nevertheless, the impact of those videos is very low. Most of them have been viewed less than fifty times, so it can be said almost nobody from Czech society has seen it. So, the effort of the Muslim Union is unutilized, so as the impact on the religious education and the dialog creation.

Another virtual project is the Facebook page called Islam is not the enemy (Islám není nepřítel, www.facebook.com/IslamCz/).

It is the virtual initiative competing many anti-Islamic Facebook pages by introducing the friendly and peaceful face of Islam to Czech public.

Most of the content is shared articles of Czech news agencies and servers about Czech Muslim community, its activities in creating intercultural dialog etc.

There is no original text posted by the account, only shared articles from different sources.

So, its added value for the religious education or dialog development is very low.

Conclusion

This short article described the current state of the role of cyberspace in religious dialog and education in the Czech Republic from the perspective of a Muslim minority.

The minority is relatively small and passive compared to minorities in many West-European countries.

This lack of activism causes a low attention of the Czech society to the topic of Islam (except the security level); Nevertheless, a move from a standard presentation from the web to social networks in cyberspace is quite noticeable.

While some projects are mainly relevant at the web, such as the E-islám offering many articles and e-books and use social network mainly for promotion of newly added articles, other projects – e.g. Shia Ahlulbayt Center – are active only on Facebook in cyberspace.

Nevertheless, the impact of all virtual projects in matters of religious dialog and education is very low in case of Islam.

A number of Facebook followers, article readers or YouTube viewers is very small, especially compared to anti-Islamic virtual initiatives.

It is not clear, and it wasn't the goal of this contribution, how to improve this state or what are main problems preventing massive and effective Islamic education among Czech society.

The author of this text believes it is a combination of factors, mainly a lack of attractive contributions at social networks, low medialization or promotion of such virtual activities, and a high immunity of Czech society towards the religious education and the dialog itself.

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