

ARABIC LEARNING AND RELIGIOUS CONVERSION *Dakwah* in a Women's Prison in the US

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Abstract

*The government of the State of Ohio has designed mandatory programs to help NRC's female inmates to prepare themselves upon their release back to the community; one of the programs is Islamic education for Muslim prisoners. This program reserves as an opportunity for Muslim missionary (dai) for exercising *dakwah* (Islamic proselytization) activism, not only for Muslim prisoners, but also as a gate to introduce Islam to non-Muslim inmates. Particularly for the non-Muslim prisoners, they are interested in studying reading and writing Arabic as they are voluntarily joining the Arabic class. This article tries to over a new perspective on Islamic education and *dakwah* activism. Taking a close look at the lives of prisoners at the state prison of Ohio, this article mainly discusses the intermingled sphere of Islamic education for the Muslim and religious conversion. It further argues that teaching Arabic resorts as a gate for Muslim missionary to introduce Islam for Muslim prisoner who voluntarily participated in this language class and religious conversion to Islam often follows their participation. Thus, as the discussion of this article demonstrates, there has been a close connectivity between the 'neutral' language class with religious conversion.*

[Pemerintah Provinsi Ohio-Amerika Serikat merancang sebuah program yang bertujuan untuk memperkenalkan Islam kepada narapidana di penjara wanita NRC. Program ini dicanangkan sebagai sarana untuk mempersiapkan

mereka sebelum kembali ke masyarakat. Namun demikian, tidak ada aturan yang melarang non-Muslim untuk mengikuti kelas untuk narapidana Muslim yang pada gilirannya menjadi wahana dakwah Islam dari dalam penjara. Banyak narapidana non-Muslim yang utamanya tertarik dan mengikuti secara sukarela untuk mengikuti program pelajaran Bahasa Arab. Banyak di peserta non-Muslim akhirnya memilih masuk Islam setelah mengikuti kelas Bahasa Arab. Artikel ini menjelaskan kaitan pelajaran Bahasa dengan konversi agama di kalangan narapidana perempuan di NRC Ohio. Argument penting artikel ini adalah, dalam konteks program pendidikan Bahasa Arab di NRC, Pendidikan Bahasa menjadi pintu masuk penting untuk memperkenalkan Islam kepada non-Muslim dan adanya kaitan penting antara pembelajaran Bahasa -yang seharusnya netral-dengan proses konversi agama.

Keywords: *Arabic, Religious Conversion, Prisoners*

Introduction

Dakwah (Islamic proselytization) is a key concept in Islam. It is a fundamental obligation for every Muslim to perform. This article tries to complicate the relationship between language training and *dakwah* activism. It closely examines the practice of Arabic learning at a women prison NRC in Cleveland and cases of religious conversion among the non-Muslim participants. Taking a close look at a class on writing and reading Arabic which reserves as a gate for Muslim missionaries (*dai*) for their *dakwah* activism, I argue that many non-Muslim participants were encouraged to participate in further Islamic discussion and subjects which were particularly limited to Muslim prisoners. Thus, as I demonstrated throughout the article, teaching Arabic script resorts as a starting point where non-Muslim participants later take a part in weekly *taklim* -class on fundamental principles of Islam- activities. From the *dai* point of view, teaching Arabic script provides an innovation in their *dakwah* activism.

The definition of Arabic script simply refers to the writing of the Arabic letter or *heja'i* (الحرف الهجاءي). The artistic style of writing of Arabic or *khot*, such as *divany* or *kufy*, is excluded from the discussion. The Arabic script class in women's prison NRC in Cleveland Ohio USA attracts not only female Muslim, but also female non-Muslim inmates to participate, since most inmates have the spare time while incarcerated. This Arabic script class is a non-compulsory activity, a complement to the *taklim* (Islamic learning) program which is a mandatory activity for female inmates to join. Also, unlike *taklim* which is limited only to woman prisoners, Arabic class is open for every inmate regardless their religious background and interest. In addition, the Arabic learning method is designated to be very simple thus making every participant easier to follow the class. The Arabic writing class starts an announcement for the forthcoming class in every Friday and every inmate is invited. The organiser later handed the class materials which includes a book on Arabic script, blank paper, and pencil.

Throughout this article, I would like to introduce a view from within as I have been part of the program. I have been assigned as a *dai* and a teacher for the Arabic class at NRC prison since 2003. Thus, this article serves as my peculiar reflection on positionality that strands between scholar and *dakwah* activist. I further argue there has been a close association between *dakwah* activism and Arabic learning. Learning Arabic, as for participants of Arabic training is concerned, is a way step towards religious conversion into Islam.

On *Dakwah*

Dakwah, literally meaning invitation or calling, is an important concept in Islamic tradition and appears several times in the Qur'an. *Dakwah* is prescribed in the Qur'an as a religious obligation for Muslim (*farid kifaya*). It particularly refers to the practice of Islamic propagation for collective betterment of community (al-Imran: 104 and 110). In

one instance, *dakwah* also includes invitation to Islam or as a form of religious proselytisation (an-Nahl: 125). It is also often translated to mean “Islamic Mission”. For a respected Islamologist, Islam is indeed missionary religion, similar to Christianity.¹ It encourages its adherents to spread the religion through peaceful *dakwah* activism. As for Islam, two famous orientalists Goldziher and Arnold² refuted the accusation of other orientalists that Islam “was spread with sword in one hand and Qur’an in the other.”

The Qur’an strongly emphasises the peaceful Islamic missionary as it exemplifies three modes of *dakwah*: (1) *fattabi’ūb* (follow My straight way) (al-An’ām [6]:153) to which the early Muslim narrator Ibn Mas’ūd referred to as “Allah’s way not Satan’s”³ (2) *ad’ū ila Allah* (I am calling you to follow Allah) (Yūsuf [12]:108) which the 14th century Qur’anic exegete Ibn Katsīr explained as “the confession that no god but Allah and Prophet Muhammad is His Messenger”⁴, and (3) *ud’ū* (pleased call or summon) with good manner (an-Nahl [16]:125), “with the best way available as Allah commanded Moses to summon Pharaoh with a good manner”⁵. The command to call people to Allah’s way applies to the pagans, the Jews and Christians as well⁶ as the Qur’an claims that this scripture is the ultimate revelation which intend to confirm and correct the earlier scriptures of revelation: the Bible of Christianity and the Torah of the Jews.

The prophetic tradition (*ḥadīth*) also records the meaning of *dakwah* as a peaceful means for Islamic proselitisation. It is a personal religious

¹ Thomas Arnold, *The Spread of Islam in the World* (Delhi: Goodword Books, 2002), p. 1.

² *Ibid.*, p. 5.

³ Isma’īl Ibn Katsīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-‘Azīm* (Beirut: Dār al-Kotob al-Ilmiyyah, 2008), p. 174.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 445-446.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 553.

⁶ Arafat El-Ashi, *The Holy Qur’an’s Message to Jews and Christians* (Ontario Canada: Muslim World League, 2001), p. 10-27.

obligation (*fard 'ain*) of every Muslim to deliver Islamic messages as the *hadiths* says “*balligū ‘annī walau āyatan* [Convey from me even it is one verse only].”⁷ The Qur’an is the heart of *dakwah* activism as an *ḥadīth* mentions “*keboirukum man ta’allama Qur’ana wa ‘allamahu* “the best people among you are those who learned Qur’an and then teach it to someone else”⁸ and another *ḥadīth* narrates “*wa mājtama’a qaumun fī baitin min buyūtil-Allabi yatlūna kitāba-Allah i wa yatadārasūnahu bainahum illā naẓalat ‘alaihimus-Sakinatu wa gasyiyathumur-Rahmatu wa haqqathumul-Malā’ikatu wa ẓakarathumul-Allah u fīman ‘indahum* “Any group of people that assemble in one of Allah’s Houses in order to recite Qur’an and to teach it to one another, then the tranquility will descend upon them, the mercy will cover them up; and Allah will mention them to the angels surrounding Him.”⁹

***Dakwah* at NRC Detention Center**

As for religion, the NRC was housing 517 female inmates in 2011; among them there are six prisoners, but the number increasing 10 in 2015. This number is only 1,5 percent of total Muslim female prisoners in the whole US that reaches up to 600 during the course of 2003 to 2016. These ten Muslim prisoners were participating in *taklim* activities. However, despite the fact that *taklim* is limited only for Muslim prisoners, some non-Muslim were also participating. They were particularly interested in joining the *taklim* session for general purposes, for instance to have a brief knowledge on Islam and to simply accompany her fellow Muslim inmate. As the *imam* of the *taklim*, I particularly observed the participants and their intention. As for the contents and teaching methodology, I tried to send as simple as information and knowledge about Islam. I taught basic Islamic practices, such as the Islamic confession (*shahada*), the ritual of ablution (*wudu*), and the prayers (*shalah*). Importantly, I also delivered

⁷ Imam Abu Zakariyya Yahya bin Syaraf An-Nawawy, *Riyāḍus-Ṣāliḥīn*, Vol. I (Riyāḍ: Dārus-Salām,1998), p. 1035.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 802.

⁹ *Ibid.*

session of Arabic language, particularly the class on Arabic script for the prisoners.

There had been nine women prisoners who participated in the Arabic script session in 2013-2015. They are Muslim and non-Muslim who were born and raised in Christian families and non-practicing Muslim. Their cultural background demonstrated a high level of fluidity and complexity. For instance, one of the participants was non-Muslim prisoner who was raised in Christianity by her French-American mother while her father is a Middle Eastern Muslim. Another participant was a Caucasian-American Muslim convert who married to an African-American Muslim. Three of participants are Muslim converts while in the NRC detention. They particularly converted into Islam following their participation in the Arabic training and later joined the *taklim*.

The Session on Arabic Script and Orthography

The Arabic script class at the NRC women's prison in Cleveland Ohio USA resorted as a means for *dakwah* activism. There have been reasons for the participants to participate in the session. They are particularly impressed that session is entertaining, while others seek for emotional comfort as one of the participants summarized "correctional inmates may also become involved with religion to gain protection, meet other inmates, meet volunteers, or obtain special prison resources."¹⁰ For me, as the *imam*, it is imperative to deliver each subject of the session entertainingly and to send it as simple as possible, such as how to correctly write and pronounce every Arabic letter (*heja'i*). Later, the participants also learn the vocalised letters (*barakat*).

The general framework of Arabic letters forms as the introductory session where the participants learn the characteristics of Arabic

¹⁰ Harry R. Dammer, "Religion in Corrections," *University of Scranton*, <http://www.scranton.edu/faculty/dammerh2/ency-religion.shtml>, University of Scranton, Scranton, PA USA; <https://wayback.archiveit.org/3006/20130313231304/http://www.scranton.edu/faculty/dammer/corrections.shtml>, accessed January 17, 2017.

compared to other language letters. This introduction session starts with a general overview on Arabic letter which starts from right-side to left (◀◀). Variants of Arabic letters were introduced and they also learn to write and pronounce each letter. After several meetings and the participants are knowledgeable about writing Arabic letters, they later learn the Arabic orthography.¹¹

The Arabic orthography is an essential subject as the participants learn how to connect every vocalised Arabic letter and form a word. The curriculum of orthography is quite simple; it is focused to interconnect Arabic scripts to make the words and to pronounce them correctly. This Arabic orthography needs at least eight session. The *first* session, they learn how to write and pronounce all Arabic letters with *harakat*. The *second* session, the participants learn how to write *hamza* ء located in the first and last position of any given word. The *third* session, they learn how to write the ^ا (*alif*) letter located in the first and last position of any given words. *Fourth* session is to write ^ا letter located in the first and last position of any given words. *Fifth* session is to recognize and write the initial, medial, final, and isolated letters. *Sixth* session is to write the initial, medial, final, and isolated letters in subsequent morph in any given words. The last sessions, the participants learn how to write and connect all seven isolated letters in a various combinations in the different words.

When the participants of Arabic letters have sufficient knowledge about basic Arabic scripts, they are allowed to attend the orthography class as the advanced level of learning. The first step to learn orthography is to understand the position of each Arabic letter in any given word. In this example of **قعد** it comprises three letters with different position; **ق** is in the first position, **ع** is in the middle or second, and **د** is in the last. In another example of **دليل** the **د** letter is in the first, **ل** is in the second, **ي** is in the third, and another **ل** is in the last. The **د** letter as the first one within word of **دليل** may not be connected to **ل** right away on the adjacent. For

¹¹ Abul Hashim, *Arabic Made Easy* (New Delhi: Kitab Bhavan, 2003), p. 1-7.

this situation, د is so-called the isolated letter. In Arabic alphabet there are 7 isolated letters which every beginner has to learn carefully. The isolated letters are ا - د - ذ - ز - و - ه. These seven magnificent letters may not be connected to any letter afterward, the examples are . اثري - دستور - ذنب - رمد - زين - أنت وصل - However they may be connected to another letter if they are located in the last position of any given word except hamza ه; for example ملء - بنو - عزيز - نفر - منذ - وعيد - كما.

Every single Arabic letter has four positions in any given word i.e. initial, medial, final, and isolated; and every position would subsequently change the way to write it down. For example 'ain ع an isolated script has to be written ع as initial letter within a word, it becomes ع as a medial, and it morphs into ع whenever it comes in the final letter in a word. The examples are عرض - سمع - معجزة - respectively. The other example ha ه should be written ه as initial letter, it becomes ه as a medial, and it mutates into ه when it comes as a final letter; the examples are هجن - عليه - يهجر - respectively.

From the perspective of the participants, the above model of learning is entertaining. Particularly they are pleased to write their names in Arabic letters. additionally, as delicate yet joyful session for all participants, Muslim and non-Muslim inmates, they quite are happy and it is their way to spend time during incarceration. For those who have been studying Arabic language for a long period especially the Islamic school students, the arrangement between Arabic letters seems to be easy; and even they are able to take the dictation lesson (*imla'*). In the advanced Islamic school, normally whenever the teacher asks students to write قعد down what he/she is pronouncing e.g. "qa 'a da" then the students may right away write قعد down correctly; they would not write it down in loose letter ق ع د since they knew how to interconnect the Arabic letters. However, for the beginners this dictation is very complicated and baffled; for novice participants it is suffice for them to write Arabic scripts and practice the

orthography accurately. All in all, this Arabic letter training is a gate for further learning on Islam. This language learning activities is entertaining for many participants, both Muslim and non-Muslim. As for the latter participants, they are particularly interested in learning Islam in a more detailed way, through *taklim* activities. Their participation furthermore often leads to religious conversion.

Toward Religious Conversion

The United States government grants the freedom of expression and freedom to embrace any religion or not to embrace;¹² therefore any inmate in the prison may change her/his affiliation any time she/he wants. In 1791, the first extension of the United States Constitution was amended; it was well-known as the First Amendment. The First Amendment to the United States Constitution clearly states “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion; or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or the press; or of the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress or grievances.”¹³

In fact, the non-Muslim inmates do not convert to Islam in precipitous event; there is a process and time space. The steps of them to convert into Islam start from the announcement of the free Arabic script class, and the inmate who has interest to attend this class to enrol at Correctional Officer. When the participants are ready in a class, they are introduced to the writing system of Arabic letters i.e. to write it down from right to left. It is a delicate process since they used to write from left to right. It takes a couple of weeks before they are accustomed to resist the temptation to write from left to right as they did in English. As they passed the simple evaluation, not a formal test or examination, they are encouraged to attend the *ta'lim* class where Islamic education was introduced.

¹² Geoffrey R. Stone (et.al), *The First Amendment* (New York: Aspen Publishers 2003), p. xxxvii.

¹³ *Ibid.*

While in *taklim*, they were informed about the history of Prophet Muhammad, especially on the figure's piety and honesty. The selected narration for them is "he is the role model of mankind, a perfect personality who attained the nickname of *al-Amīn* (the trustworthy)¹⁴ who invited mankind to monotheism wisely and peacefully.¹⁵ The history of Prophet Muhammad is a key narration to impress the non-Muslim inmates to follow his teachings. After this delicate process within 4 to 5 weeks, one of non-Muslim inmates came forward to take *shahadah* in Arabic and English that she confessed "that there is no God but Allah and the Prophet Muhammad is the messenger of Allah"; and she became a female Muslim.

Before, during and after having confession, the inmates used to ask a lot of questions such as: who is Muhammad why his name is not mentioned in the King James Bible, is Islam supporting violence, does Islam respect the women, why does woman wear head scarf, why the "god" sometimes was written with capital letter "G" and sometime with lower letter "g", who is Jesus, and was he crucified, who is Mary, and what is her genealogy, who is John The Baptist, does Islam acknowledge Yesaya or Isaiah as a prophet? The other questions are: does a husband have a right to physically beat his wife, why did a husband hurt his wife when they went to American court several years ago, why did a Muslim father hurt his own daughter recently, did Islam condone radicalism, does Islam hate the Western life? There are more serious question which are not easy to answer such as: is Islam compatible with the Western democracy, what is sunni – shia – wahabi, do Muslim worship a black box named *Ka'bah*, why do female Muslim in a country wear *hijab* and in the other wear *niqab*, does Islam allow a Muslim woman to marry a non-Muslim man and vise-versa, does Islam permit

¹⁴ Marmaduke Muḥammad Pickthal, *The Life of Prophet Muḥammad* (Delhi: Goodword Books, 2007), p. 10; Marmaduke Muḥammad Pickthal, *Al-Amin a Life-Sketch of the Prophet Muḥammed* (Delhi: Kitab Bhavan, 1999), p. 1; Dalal Al- Alami, *Muḥammad's Honesty* (Delhi: Islamic Book Service, 2000), p. 5; Philip K. Hitti, *History of the Prophet Muḥammad* (Delhi: Goodword Books, 1998), p. 12.

¹⁵ Muḥammad Al-Khuḍory, *Nūrul-Yaqīn Fī Sirati Sayyidil-Mursalīn* (Beirut: Dārul-Fikr, 2001 M/1421 H.), p. 32.

a Muslim to work in *haram* business e.g. selling alcoholic beverage, pork products, lottery while they are legal business in America; why Muslim men keep their beards growing, why Muslim men are circumcised? These last questions are really delicate to respond: is Muslim celebrating Christmas, why Moslems are killing each other in the Middle East countries, why is so many Muslim refugee today, is it permissible to have a dating before marriage including a pre-marital relationship.

Among all nine non-Muslim Caucasian-American inmates who attended Arabic script class; two of them have decided to take *shahadah* and converted to Islam before leaving the NRC; and one Muslim convert is still in NRC and attending the *Ta'lim* regularly. The another 4 white non-Muslim inmates have left the NRC before taking *shahadah*; it is a reasonable confidence based on the other three participants who already converted into Islam, that these four non-Muslim inmates would be converting into Islam had they stayed longer in NRC. However, the guidance is divine; while the effort has been done accordingly; and it is time for reliance, keep trying, and never give up.

The Arabic script class has benefited Muslim who do not know the Arabic scripts, and non-Muslim inmates as well; and the other benefit is the non-Muslim inmates are eventually familiar with Islamic terminology such as *ta'lim*, Friday service (*jum'at*), *Ramadan*, *Idul-Fitri*, and *Idul-Adhā*. This terminology is simple thing for common Muslim, but in fact it is a new one for non-Muslim inmates who never heard of. The familiarity toward Islamic terminology among non-Muslim inmates would in turn direct them to be closer to Islam and avoid them from considering Islam as a strange religion.

Conclusion

The Arabic script and orthography class inside the women's prison NRC of Cleveland Ohio United States of America have a significant impact on the non-Muslim inmates. During my four-year service as an

imam for the Muslim prisoners, nine non-Muslim inmates have attended the Arabic script class; it is a slow process but eventually, three of them converted into Islam. The gradual process of non-Muslim inmate to be a Muslim surely mirrors the *dakwah* activism from the prison. The Arabic training is a gate stone for further Islamic education and later to conversion. As this article demonstrates, the Arabic training class, through entertaining methods, is crucial explaining the rising number of religious conversions at the prison-space.

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