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## Musa Jarullah Bigiev and His Understanding of Divine Mercy

Aydın Topaloğlu

Musa Jarullah Bigiev (1874-1949) is one of the foremost philosophers and religious scholars of the Volga-Ural Muslims. He was a prolific writer, journalist, politician and, also one of the major figures of Tatar religious sciences. He dealt with many theological, philosophical, political, judicial, social and educational problems with a critical approach and put forward new ideas against traditionalist behaviour, which caused many serious discussions among contemporary Muslims. The main purpose of this paper is to introduce Bigiev as a Tatar Muslim scholar in brief and to expose his main ideas about his concept of all-inclusive mercy.

Musa Jarullah Bigiev was one of the most important intellectuals of the *Jadid* and *Tajdid* movement.<sup>1</sup> He was born in Rostov on Don on 24 December 1874 as the son of mullah Yarullah Devlikam and his wife Fatma. Almost his entire life, from his early youth until his death (Cairo, 25 October 1949), passed with searching, learning, teaching and writing. He traveled to many places throughout Russia, India, China, Japan, Turkey and Egypt, studying Islamic culture. He had started his education in a Russian elementary school and later transferred to a technical high school in 1888, until his mother sent him to Kazan to study in the *Göl Boyu Madrasah*.<sup>2</sup> Then he went to Bukhara to continue his Islamic studies. There, he received private courses in Islamic law (*fiqh*) and philosophy (*hikmat*) from the reformist teachers Damullah 'Ivaz Efendi and Damullah Ikram Efendi. After the Kazan and Turkistan madrasahs, Bigiev went to Istanbul and then to Cairo. In Egypt, he studied at al-Azhar and received private courses from Shaykh Bakhit. After four years of studies on Islamic philosophy, theology, and jurisprudence, he returned to Rostov and got married, but instead of seeking employment as a mullah or madrasah teacher he left home and went to St. Petersburg to attend classes at the Law Faculty. As a scholar interested in *tafsir*

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1. 'Jadid' movement initiated a reformation process in the fields of language, education and religion in Russia as opposed to *Qadimist* scholars who were against all kind of reformation activities.

2. Zeki Velidi Togan, "Musa Carullah Begi'nin Hayatı ve Eserleri", *Yeni Selamet* 5: 37-105 (November, 1949), p. 5.

(Qur'anic exegesis) and fiqh (jurisprudence), he wanted to acquire the knowledge necessary to compare the Islamic and Western legal systems.<sup>3</sup>

In 1905, Musa Jarullah started his activities in journalism and politics. In 1907, he translated some Arabic and Persian classics of Islamic heritage into Tatar language. In 1910, he wrote *The Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence (Qawaidi Fiqhiyya)* with the encouragement of Riza al-Din b. Fakhr al-Din. In 1910-1911 he came to Orenburg and began to teach Arabic, Islamic theology and history in the Husayniya Madrasah and to write in Riza al-Din's Islamic reformist journal *Shura*. At this time, he was very influenced by some mystic (Sufi) thinkers, such as Jalaladdin al-Rumi (1207-1273), Abu Qasim Abd al-Karim al-Qushari (986-1074) and Ibn al-'Arabi. He got many ideas from them, particularly their ideas about the inclusiveness of God's mercy toward all people, whether Muslim or non-Muslim. He was also influenced by al-Ma'arri, a tenth century Islamic poet and philosopher.

Bigiev's lectures at the Orenburg Philanthropic Association and his writings in the *Shura* journal drew severe criticisms from *Qadimist* scholars. Because of these criticisms, he resigned from the school and left the Orenburg city.<sup>4</sup> In 1917, he stayed in Russia despite the communist revolution and tried to work for Islam as much as possible under communist autocracy. Also, because of the revolutions, he was hopeful for the beginning of an era of freedom for Muslims, and he chose not to leave Russia.<sup>5</sup> In response to Bukharin's *ABC of Communism*, Bigiev wrote in 1920 an "*ABC of Islam*" (*Islam Alifbasi*). The government retaliated with arrest and imprisonment (for 3 months). In 1926 he participated in the Muslim Congress at Mecca representing his country.

He left Russia in 1930 and went to Chinese Turkistan and then to Afghanistan and India. In 1931 he travelled to Egypt and Finland, and in 1932 took part in the first Congress of Turkish History in Ankara. Between 1933 and 1937, he was in Finland, Germany, and the Middle East. In 1938 he went to India and Afghanistan with the intention of settling there but he was imprisoned by the British for eighteen months. In 1947 he went to Egypt, and died there in 25 October 1949. He left behind many books written in the Tatar, Turkish, Arabic

<sup>3</sup> Azade-Ayşe Rorlich, "Musa Yarullah Bigi", *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, (ed. John L. Esposito), I, New York, 1995, p. 216.

<sup>4</sup> Ahmet Kanlıdere, *Reform Within Islam. The Tadjid and Jadid Movement Among the Kazan Tatars (1809-1917), Conciliation or Conflict?* İstanbul, 1997, p. 55.

<sup>5</sup> Azade-Ayşe Rorlich, "Musa Yarullah Bigi", p. 217.

and Persian languages and devoted to different Islamic issues. *Rahmati Ilahiyya Burhanlari* (The Storms of God's Clemency), *Insanların Akidei Ilahiyelerine Bir Nazar*, *Khatun, Sunnah and Shariah*, *Şariat Esaslari*, *Islahat Esaslari*, *Uzun Günlerde Oruç*, *Büyük Mevzularda Küçük Fikirler*, *Tarih ül-Kur'ân ve'l-Mesahif*, *Şerh ül-Luzumiyyat ve Kavâid ül-Fıkhiyye* are among his main books.

In the nineteenth century there was a great debate on tradition and modernism among Muslim scholars. This dispute had stemmed from contradictions between the real world and the idealistic principles of traditional religion. Muslim societies had been experiencing many problems in reconciling modernisation with tradition. At this point Bigiev followed the religious reformists such as Abd al-Nasr Qursavi (1771-1812), Shihab al-Din Marjani (1818-1889) and Riza al-Din b. Fakhr al-Din (1855/58-1936). All of them represented the major lines of the Tatar religious reform movement, which rejected *tradition* and *Taqlid* (unquestioned submission to the old religious authorities). One of the main characteristics of their school is the severe criticism against traditional Islamic theology, *Kalam*. Bigiev criticized *Kalam* as other reformers such as Salafi scholars did. In particular, he attacked the methods of the Ashari and Maturudi schools and defended *Ijtihad*.

According to Bigiev, *Kalâm* is a source of confusion and deals with unscientific and empty talk. Theologians (*mutakallimun*) deprived the Muslim mind of free inquiry and reasoning. They obstructed "the gate of *Ijtihad*". And so, Muslim countries lost their glory, civilization, and dominance. The *mutakallimun* had also caused divisions by using Greek speculative thought, and they paved the ways towards disunity, sectarianism, and doctrinal anarchy.<sup>6</sup> It is wasting the lives of children. Their established principles are most suitable for creating bad morals and political intrigue. Emphasis on the nature and essence of God is not the ideal thing to do, as the *mutakallimun*, i.e. Ash'ariyya School did. They were detached from practical problems. Reason should serve practical and social issues (*Shariati Ijtimaiyya*) rather than theology or philosophy. *Kalam* books caused the teaching system of the *madrasahs* deteriorate. They also caused the neglect of the study of the Quran and Tradition.<sup>7</sup>

As a result of his criticisms of *Kalam*, Bigiev defended *Ijtihad* (free inquiry based on personal conviction) and the use of *reason* in religious issues like other

<sup>6</sup> Mûsa Carullah, *al-Luzumiyyat*, Elektro-tipografia Sharaf, Kazan, 1907, p. 82.

<sup>7</sup> Ahmet Kanlıdere, *Reform Within Islam*, p. 35-36.

modernist scholars of his own time. He rejected the dogmatic, imitated, and unquestioned religion. At the same time he opposed to the idea of "Islahat-i Diniyye" (reform of religion), and defended the idea of "Islahat-i Muslimin"<sup>8</sup> (reforming of Muslims). He talked about free reason (*hur akl*) and free thought (*hur fikir*). Free reason is very essential for the development and improvement of Muslims. In addition to his rationalistic side, Bigiev followed great mystics such as Bayezidi Bestami, Juneyd Bagdadi and Zunnuni Misri and accepted mystical method of *intiution* (*kashf*) as a source of knowledge.

Due to his mystical side and very deep humanistic feelings, Bigiev rejected *takfir*, i.e. labelling a nation as kafir (unbeliever) because of their religion being different and excluding them from salvation (Rahmatullah). Unfortunately theologians accused free thinkers within the Islamic thought of being *mulhid*, *kafir* or *zindik*. He claimed that God would forgive all people, whether they are monotheist, pagan or atheist.<sup>9</sup> This is a very striking point in Bigiev's thoughts and the core of his understanding of God's mercy.

According to Bigiev, the Quran is at all times valid and a source of happiness for all humanity. Islam is based on freedom of thought and *ijtihad*. The Islamic world is underdeveloped due to the lack of freedom of thought and closing of the doors leading to *ijtihad*. Religious authorities, muftis, shaykhs, imams and mullas are responsible for this underdevelopment. They misunderstood the Quran and misrepresented it with their wrong comments. Muslims also misunderstood the real meaning of *Qadr* (belief in destiny). They stopped to think of supreme ideals. In society, education was distorted. Because of the proscription of artistic tendencies, crafts people become insensitive, senseless. Women were excluded from society and children became ignorant.<sup>10</sup>

In his *Rahmati Ilahiyya Burhanları* (*The Storms of God's Clemency*, Orenburg, 1910) and *İnsanların Akidei İlahiyelerine Bir Nazar*, he pays attention to the attributes of God such as love, mercy, forgiveness and creation. He does not speak of God in the way *mutakallimun* do and does not approve their *Jadal* method (speculative discussions) about God. He does not deal with the existence of God as a philosophical matter.

<sup>8</sup> Mehmet Görmez, *Musa Carullah Bigiyef*, Ankara, 1994, p. 94.

<sup>9</sup> Musa Carullah, *Rahmet-i İlahiyye Bûrhanları*, İstanbul, 1996, pp. 258-259.

<sup>10</sup> A. Battal Taymas, *Musa Carullah Bigi-Kişiliği, fikir hayatı ve eserleri*, İstanbul, 1958, pp. 36-37.

For Bigiev, Divine Mercy (*Rahmatullah*) encompasses everybody regardless of their beliefs, race and nations. The Divine Mercy is inclusive of all humanity. In his *Rahmati Ilahiyya Burhanlari* Bigiev challenged the belief that God's mercy and forgiveness were not extended to unbelievers. On the contrary, Bigiev said that God extended his forgiveness to everyone.<sup>11</sup> Islam, like Divine Mercy (*Rahmatullah*), for Bigiev, includes all humanity as well. It does not exclude other people at all. It is extremely vast. But some narrow-minded people constricted it. People, who are not able to enlarge their hearts, reduced Islam to their limited, small and narrow hearts. In the phrase "Bismillah ar-Rahman ar-Rahim", "Rahman" is for everybody in this world, but *Rahim* is only for believers, in the hereafter. Bigiev rejected this approach and said that it was not true. It was a limited view of God's mercy.<sup>12</sup> The Quran forbids us to be desperate and hopeless. Because Allah said: O my people! Do not give up seeking my mercy ("people" refers here to all, even the *kafirs*). In the second life, at the end, all humanity will be saved and embraced by divine mercy. For God there is no necessity. Theologians say that rewards and punishment are necessary for God, but this is not true. According to Bigiev, Allah will forgive all sins in the Day of Judgment. If Allah forgives all people this is not contrary to the *vaad* (promise) of the Quran. Forgiving is not contrary to God's words. It fits with his mercy. Divine punishment (*Jahannam*) will not be eternal. The idea of eternal Hell, *Jahannam*, is contrary to the Islamic belief, "Allah is the most merciful and most compassionate". He found support for his belief only in the books of Sufis (mystics) such as the *Masnawi* of Jalaladdin al-Rumi, the *Risale* of al-Kushayri and the *Futuhati Makkiyyah* of Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi.

For Bigiev, the belief that "Allah will never forgive kufr (unbelief)" is not valid. "Allah will never forgive paganism" is referring to questioning (*Mu'ahada*) not eternal punishment.<sup>13</sup> Prophet Jesus wanted forgiveness for his people; if blasphemy was unforgivable, how could he do that? According to him, God will forgive *kufr* as well, since there is more certainty in the rule that Allah will forgive all sins and all crimes.

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11 This idea is very essential in Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi's thoughts. In Turkey, İsmail Hakkı İzmirli defended the same idea. He said that there is no wisdom in eternal punishment (*Nâr'ın Ebediyet ve Devamı Hakkında Tedkikat*, İstanbul, 1341, Darul-Fünun Matbaası, p. 31.

<sup>12</sup> Musa Jarullah, *Rahmet-i Ilahiyye Burhanları*, p. 301

<sup>13</sup> Musa Jarullah, *Rahmet-i Ilahiyye Burhanları*, p. 304.

The Ottoman Scholar Mustafa Sabri Efendi (1860-1954) and some *Jadid* reformers like Ismail Gasprali (Gasprinskii) criticized Bigiev due to his ideas of divine mercy.<sup>14</sup> Mustafa Sabri Efendi wrote a book titled *Yeni İslam Muctehidlerinin Kıymet-i Harbiyyesi* (The Value of New Muslim Muchtahids) in 1919, as a criticism of Musa Jarullah Bigiev's ideas, especially his refuting the *fuqaha*, *mufasssirs* and especially *kalam* scholars. Because of this objection to *Bab-i Meşihat*, Bigiev's works were banned in Istanbul by the Ministry of Domestic Affairs. Because of this censorship, Bigiev wrote a severe criticism of the Ottoman *Şeyhulislam* in the Tatar newspaper *Vaqt*. Along with some serious criticism, Mustafa Sabri Efendi distinguished Bigiev from other Muslim reformists, that is, those who borrowed their ideas from Western sources and were ignorant of religious issues.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Musa Jarullah Bigiev, *Rahmet-i İlahiyye Burhanları*, p. 340.

<sup>15</sup> Mustafa Sabri, *Yeni İslâm Muctehitlerinin Kıymeti İlmiyesi*, Istanbul, 1996, p. 21.