

The Concept of Mission in Islam (*Da'wa*)



Fr. John Mallare, CICM (second from left), with professors of Dar Comboni Institute for Arabic Studies in Cairo, Egypt

Introduction

I would like to greet everyone participating in this Webinar. I thank SEDOS, through its executive director, Fr. Peter Baekelmans, for inviting me to talk on “**The Concept of Mission on Islam: *Da'wa*.**” This is a rather difficult theme to explore, since it is usually a Muslim who should explain this, but I took up the challenge and I hope to explain this, with the background knowledge I have.

I owe much of my explanation to David Kerr, Professor of Non-Western Christianity in the University of Edinburgh, who wrote an article entitled “Islamic *Da'wa* and Christian Mission: Towards a Comparative Analysis,” written “as part of an international research project of Christian theologians concerned with the future of Christian theological education in Muslim societies.”

Kerr highlights that “both Christianity and Islam are missionary religions; yet, little scholarly attention has been given to the comparative study of Christian mission and Islamic Mission (*da'wa*).” It can be recalled that in 1976, the *International Review of Mission* devoted an issue to “Christian Mission and Islamic *Da'wah*,” a product of a week-long dialogue conference by Muslims and Christians in Chambésy, Switzerland.

1. The Meaning of *Da'wa*

The Arabic word *da'wa* expresses the sense of “call” or “invitation”. It comes from the verb *da'a*, meaning “to call”. The active participle is *dā'i*, meaning, “the one who calls or invites”. It is here now where the question arises: Does *da'wa* correspond to “mission” and *dā'i* to “missionary”? While in Arabic, these concepts imply a centripetal movement (“calling into”), mission implies a centrifugal movement (“sending”). Here, we can call to mind what Pope Francis said in *Evangelii Gaudium*: “The Church which goes forth.” Catholic mission is one of being sent, especially to the peripheries.

2. *Da'wa* in the Qur'an

The verb *da'a* occurs frequently in the Qur'an:

- sometimes, **its subject is God**. For example, “God *calls* to the Home of Peace (*dār al-islām*), and He guides whom He pleases to a straight path.” (Q 10:25)
- sometimes, **the subject is the Prophet**. For example, “...the Messenger *invites* you to believe in your Lord.” (Q 57:8)
- frequently, **the subject is the people of Faith who call upon God**. For example, “They *cry* unto God, making sincere their religion unto Him.” (Q 10:22)

The noun *da'wa* occurs several times in the Qur'an, in the reciprocal senses of:

God's **call** to humankind and
the believer's **call** or **prayer** to God.

Kerr explains that the *locus classicus* of the verb *da'a* is found in *Sūra al-Imrān* (Q 3:104). He quotes two versions of the same verse:

“*And there may spring from you a nation (umma) who invite to goodness, and enjoin right conduct and forbid indecency. Such are they who are successful.*”

(Maramaduke Pickthall,
The Meaning of the Glorious Koran, 78)

“Let there arise out of you a band of people (umma) inviting to all that is good, enjoining what is right, and forbidding what is wrong: they are the ones to attain felicity.”

(Yusuf Ali,
The Meaning of the Holy Qur’an, 154)

These two varying translations reflect two different interpretations of the words preceding the phrase “inviting to all that is good.”

The **first** treats the whole community as the subject of “inviting,” i.e., *da’wa* is a collective responsibility.

The **second** interprets community in a restrictive sense of a “band of people”, or a “sub-group” that undertakes the responsibility of “inviting” on behalf of the rest of the community.

Kerr adds that the difference turns on the force of the Arabic preposition *min*: “from” or “out of.” It can either generalize “you” (as in “you all”) to mean the whole community, or particularize “you” (as in “some of you”) to mean a section within the community as a whole.

3. *Da’wa* in Classical Qur’an Commentary (*Tafsīr*)

Muslim commentators have been debating on the exegetical distinctions mentioned above. Roest Crollius, in an article entitled “Mission and Morality” in *Studia Missionalia* 27/1978 (257-83), reviewed ways in which Muslim commentators have interpreted the phrase “inviting to goodness,” in association with two other phrases which commonly occur: “enjoining what is right” (*amr bi’l mar’uf*) and “forbidding what is wrong” (*nahy ‘an al-munkar*).

There is a need to clarify the meaning of the phrases “enjoining what is right” and “forbidding what is wrong,” since these determine the content of *da’wa*. These two phrases frequently appear as counterparts in the Qur’an, denoting the norms of belief and ethics, which comprise the Islamic way of life: *belief in the unity of the one God*, and *obedience to God’s divinely revealed commands and prohibitions*.

These phrases constitute the core of the Qur’anic message of ethical monotheism, and indicate that “inviting to the good” involves the interrelated dimensions of “right faith and right conduct.” In Crollius’ words: They “describe an attitude and a way of acting that are characteristic of Islam both as a religion and as a social reality.”

The Qur’an applies these same phrases to other religious communities, notably the “People of the Book”, i.e., Jews and Christians who received divine books / scriptures before the revelation of the Qur’an. We quote:

“Of the People of the Scripture there is a staunch community who recite the revelations of God in the night season, falling prostrate. They believe in God and the Last Day, and enjoin right conduct and forbid indecency, and vie with one another in good works. They are of the righteous.” (Q 3:114)

Crollius suggests that this combined ethical injunction, *enjoin right conduct and forbid indecency*, represents the Golden Rule of Islam, which he compares to that of Christianity: “Do unto others as you would have them do to yourself.” (Mt 7:12; Lk 16:31)

Considering all these, **who has the responsibility** of “inviting to the good, enjoining what is right, and forbidding what is wrong?” There are **two opinions**:

First: This responsibility **belongs to the entire Muslim community**, as seen in *Q 3:110*: “You are the best community that has been raised up for humankind. You enjoin right conduct and forbid indecency.” This interpretation is rather **idealist**.

Second: This responsibility **could be delegated** to an individual or group that would act on behalf of the community as a whole. This is a more **pragmatic** interpretation.

During the medieval Caliphate, an officer known as the *muhtasib* was appointed by the Caliph “to see that the religious precepts of Islam are obeyed, to detect offenses and

punish offenders.” His duty was to act as a censor of morality in the public domain, ensuring that times of public prayers (*salāt*) were duly observed, or that the hours of fasting (*siyam*) were respected during the month of Ramadan. The modern equivalent of this today is the “religious police” in Saudi Arabia.

This institutionalization of the responsibility of “inviting to the good” shows that the classical commentators generally interpreted the duty of *da‘wa* as applying within the Muslim community. Among the earliest commentators it is only **al-Tabari** who specifically dealt with *da‘wa* outside the Muslim community, especially in relation to Jews and Christians.

It should be noted that classical exegetes generally distinguished *da‘wa*, in the sense we have discussed, from *jihad* that applies to the territorial expansion of the Caliphate. *Jihad* denotes “striving in the way of God”, with the purpose of bringing God’s cause to success through “opening” non-Muslim territories for Islam. These were to be administered as “territory of Islam” (*dar al-islam*), theoretically by the Muslim ruler consulting Islamic religious authorities in matters of policy.

A further distinction is drawn between extending this territorial and juridical concept of *dar al-islam* and converting non-Muslims within its domains. The former is a religious duty, and “enjoining what is right and forbidding the wrong” applied among Muslims within the *dar al-islam*.

As regards non-Muslims the qur’anic injunction that “there is no compulsion in religion” should apply, that is, the “people of scripture” administering themselves according to their own laws. As a result, non-Muslim conversion to Islam has tended to be by a gradual process that has been termed “social conversion.”

4. *Da‘wa* in Modern Qur’an Commentary

While classical Qur’an commentary favors an intra-Muslim understanding of *da‘wa*, **modern exegesis shows lines of both**

continuity and change. Among the most influential commentators of the late 19th and early 20th centuries were the Egyptian Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905) and his Syrian disciple, Rashid Rida (1865-1935). Abduh was a professor at the al-Azhar University in Cairo where he lectured on qur’anic exegesis. Rida recorded and published these lectures in his periodical, *al-Manar*, and later produced them, which stands as a monument of the Salafiyya school of modern Islam, which seeks to rejuvenate Islam by returning to the authority of the “righteous forebear” (*salaf al-salih*) in the faith. As a modernizing movement, the Salafiyya movement has always encouraged *ijtihad* or reinterpretation of these historic precedents through rational and critical appraisal of the conditions and needs of modern society.

A good example of this is found in *al-Manar*’s interpretation of “inviting to the good.” Respecting the idealism of early Islam, it favors the inclusive interpretation of “inviting” as the duty of the whole Muslim community. It is a general duty that “each individual should keep before his eyes.” At the same time, *al-Manar* goes on to specify that *da‘wa* is also “the task of a group (*ta’ifa*) who are especially prepared for it.”

The two interpretations are reconciled as follows: “If, according to the first way of explaining the verse, each individual Muslim is under the obligation to call to what is good, to order equity and to forbid iniquity: according to this second interpretation, they are under the obligation to choose from their midst a society to fulfil this task, so that it can well take care of it and is capable of executing it, when this task is no longer fulfilled spontaneously, as it was in the line of the first Companions.”

In other words, the duty of *da‘wa* **used to be fulfilled by the entire community** in the time of the Prophet, when the righteous forebears “were living in perfect solidarity, and each one of them felt the same urgency to spread and defend Islam and to oppose everything that could detract from its

doctrine, morality, juridical regulations or the interest of the people.” **Under modern conditions, this duty should be undertaken by a specialist group**, although it is incumbent upon the rest of the community to support this group in fulfilling a duty that is binding on all.

Abduh and Rida stressed the duty of *da’wa* within the Muslim community. But they introduce a new emphasis, which sees the aim of *da’wa* being to renew the faith of the community. *Da’wa* thus becomes an important means of religious revival, and it is this sense that has been developed by several ideologically driven reform groups during the 20th century.

Another new direction emphasized in the Manar is for *da’wa* to non-Muslims, and especially Christians. This returns to the point made by the classical commentator, al-Tabari, who lived at the end of the period identified with the righteous forebears.

Abduh and Rida were much concerned with defending Islam against the challenge of Christian missionaries. They drew a direct link between evangelization (*tabshir*) and imperialism (*isti’mar*), both of which they saw as inimical to Islam. The

al-Manar repeatedly offers a rational defense of Islam against Western imperialism and secularism and the perceived irrationality of Christian faith - the latter being characterized by belief in miracles, the power of the church, the renunciation of the world, belief in the sufficiency of the Bible as source of all knowledge, and discord among Christians.

Rida devoted more energy than Abduh to answering Christian missionaries. In addition to his contributions to al-Manar, he wrote a small book on *“The obscurities of Christians and the Proofs of Islam.”* The book is interesting in that it articulates a significant principle that has been taken up in some later Muslim discussion of Christianity. Rida wrote: *“The*

Christian religion itself does not contradict the Islamic faith; it is rather the Christians themselves who seek to contradict it. The incontrovertible proofs and contentions against them (i.e., the Christians) are not the Muslims who themselves have become an argument against their own religion. Rather, these proofs belong to the Islamic religion itself.” This quotation makes clear the reasons why, for Rida, the duty of internal *da’wa* is the **purification of the Muslim community.**

5. Organized *Da’wa*

There are forms of organized *da’wa* that emerged during the 20th century of which we can identify three whose proponents are the following:

1. Rashid Rida (1865-1935): Early attempts to actualize *da’wa*
2. Maulana Ilyas (1885-1944): *Tablighi Jama’at*
3. Abu al-‘Ala Mawdudi (1903-1979): *Jama’at Islamī*

I do not intend to enter into the details of each form, but will just give the main ideas.



Fr. John Mallare, CICM (3rd from right, standing) and Fr. Jean-Marie Ntumba, CICM (5th from left, standing), on a courtesy visit to the Imams and Muslim religious leaders, in Sebikotane, Dakar, Senegal

Rashid Rida (1865-1935)

He rallied for the creation of a *da’wa* college in Istanbul, the seat of the Caliphate but he failed to convince the Ottoman authorities. Nevertheless, his efforts were not put to waste as the Al-Azhar University later

established department of *da'wa* and *irshad* (guidance).

It was fortuitous that his efforts coincided with the renewed efforts among Western Protestant Missionaries to organize Christian mission. Despite his seemingly small effort, Rida infused *da'wa* with a new dynamism that has inspired later generations.

He designed a curriculum that is inspired by *Salafiyya* principle that reflected that of the Qur'an and Sunna, but he also gave equal importance to inter-disciplinary studies on the social history of Islam, geography, psychology and political science, which were rather new for Islam.

He insisted that *da'wa* employ other languages other than Arabic, so that Muslims could match the skills of Christian missionaries "who learn the languages of all peoples."

He emphasized the moral education of the *dā'i* ("missionary"), as well as stressing *jihad*- not the military *jihad*, but the greater *jihad*, which is the *jihad* of inner spiritual and moral improvement.

For Rida, *da'wa* is the vocation of individuals who form themselves into a voluntary association on behalf of the whole community. It should be supported by the public authorities, but must be exercised as a spiritual commitment.

Maulana Ilyas (1885-1944)

He belonged to the Sufi tradition of Islam in India. Sufism emphasizes the interiority of Islam with attention to the internal purification of the soul (*nafs*) and mystical experience of God.

Founded the *Tablighi Jama'at*, which has grown to become one of the largest mass movements in modern Islam of *da'wa* in India and worldwide. Its name contains its basic commitment which is *tabligh* ("preaching"). Its more popular name is *Tahrīki Iman* ("Movement of Faith").

His preaching is based on **5 spiritual principles** which is the code of piety:

- ① Sincere repetition of the testimony of faith (*shahada*); i.e., affirmation of the sovereignty of God and the servanthood of Muhammad;
- ② Regularity of Prayer;
- ③ True knowledge of God's commandments;
- ④ Kindness and respect for all humankind;
- ⑤ Sincerity of Intention and constant vigilance against consternation.

He travelled and visited places to train preachers and develop skills of rural preaching. **For him, it is the duty of all Muslims to preach, and a few volunteers should always be ready to offer to leave their homes to travel to distant place for striving in the path of Allah.** He emphasizes on direct preaching by ordinary people to ordinary people. They would either visit mosques and preach in groups or do person-to-person preaching.

He believed in the **firm distinction of coercion vs. persuasion** and ruled out the former. He also prohibited his followers from engaging in politics as part of their *da'wa*.

Abu al-'Ala Mawdudi (1903-1979)

The *Salafiyya* movement has influenced the rise of other ideologically-orientated renewal movements in the 20th century, prominent among which are the Society of Muslim Brothers (*Jama 'at al-Ikhwān al-Muslimūn*) in Egypt, and the Society of Islam (*Jama 'at -Islamī*) in Pakistan.

Though a scientific study of their understandings of *da'wa* is still much needed, a summary reading of their literary productions suggests that, during the middle decades of the century at least, they adjusted the al-Manar's balance between intra- and extra-Muslim *da'wa* in favor of the former.

This started in 1982 when an Institute for *da'wa* and *Qira'at* (Qur'anic recitation) was established in the recently founded Islamic University. When the University was re-chartered as the International Islamic

University in 1985, the Institute was given autonomous status as the Academy of *da'wa* and the Training of imams. The institute had a plan to develop an integrated approach to national and international *da'wa* although both dimensions relate primarily to intra-Muslim activities within Pakistan, and to international cooperation with like-minded *da'wa* groups in other Muslim countries. The government, itself committed to a policy of islamization, is called upon "to utilize their existing administrative machinery for the propagation of Islam."

These aim to cultivate a *Salafiyya* outlook among participants, and with it a sense of belonging to a transnational movement that is committed to renewing Islam worldwide.

It is in this context that the need for *da'wa* outside the Muslim community is recognized: the importance of strengthening effective *da'wa* in countries where Muslims experience religious pluralism, especially as Muslim minorities.

The plan seeks to professionalize *da'wa*, with a strong emphasis on *da'wa* training that combines *Salafiyya* teaching and interdisciplinary studies, and the creation of a popular *da'wa* literature using vernacular languages and English as the main international medium of communication. The plan envisages *da'wa* as a means of renewing the faith of the community as a whole, through the dissemination of *Salafiyya* ideology. This in turn envisages the re-unity of all Muslims in the spirit of nascent Islam.

6. *Da'wa* and Christianity

The Muslim debate about Islam and Christianity has produced a wider diversity of opinion in the late 20th century, as Muslims, like Christians, face old question of religious pluralism in new ways.

THREE MAIN APPROACHES OF ISLAM DA'WA TO NON-MUSLIMS:

The SUPERCESSIONIST approach

This extends the qur'anic principle of "abrogation" (*tansikh*), which allows a later verse to abrogate the authority of an earlier one, to the history of religion. Therefore, **the authority of revealed religion in one age is abrogated by a later revealed religion, and ultimately the qur'anic revelation of Islam abrogates the authority of all religions.** In this case, Christianity has been superseded, and insofar as it continues to exist after the revelation of Islam, it can only be regarded as a corruption of the original teaching of the Prophet Jesus. Muslims believe that Jesus foretold the coming of Muhammad. "*Good tidings of a messenger to come after me, whose name shall be Ahmad.*" (Q 6:61) With this approach, Christianity and Islamic *da'wa* have no relationship. One of its proponents, Sayyid Qutb, leading ideologue of the Muslim brothers, advised Muslims to keep no contacts with Christians.

The REVISIONIST approach

The revisionist position is theologically more accommodating. It is essentially the Salafi position, which we have already identified with Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida. It looks at all religions through the qur'anic perspective of *din al-fitra*, "natural religion." This recognizes a natural disposition in all creation, inanimate and animate, to exist in obedience to the Creator. **Revealed religion is therefore consistent with nature, and Islam - the final revealed religion - represents the complete harmonization of religion and reason in the life of the Islamic *umma*.**

True Christianity is likewise based in natural religion. It also was confirmed by revelation, **but the truth of the gospel (*Injil*) has been corrupted by the malpractice of generations of Christians whose superstitions have obscured the rationality of the gospel.** It is the duty of *da'wa*, therefore, to bring Christians back to their original truth. Once this revision has been achieved, they will need no persuasion to accept the truth of the Qur'an and convert to Islam.

Rida emphasized in his book that it is essential for intra-Muslim *da'wa* to reform Muslims themselves and return them to the proper practice of Islam.

The ECUMENICAL approach

The ecumenical position takes essentially the same approach as that of the revisionist, **with the difference that it does not require Christians who return to the pure faith of the gospel to convert to Islam.**

This is to take a twice-repeated verse of the Qur'an at face value: *"Those who have faith, and those who are Jews, Christians, and Sabeans - whosoever has faith in God and the last day and performs good deeds -these will have their reward with their Lord. No fear shall come upon them, nor will they grieve."*

Supercessionists interpret this verse as being historically contingent, referring to Jewish, Christian and Sabeian contemporaries of the Prophet Muhammad who accepted his prophethood. Revisionists interpret the verse to mean that religious pluralism is a phenomenon of history, but insist that it does not negate the duty of *da'wa* to "invite" all religions to confessional acceptance of Islam. Since other religions include people of good faith and conduct, they emphasize that Islamic *da'wa* should always observe the Qur'anic injunction to *"call unto the way of your Lord with wisdom and fair exhortation, and argue with them in the better way."*

The ecumenical interpretation, on the other hand, sees this verse as endorsing religious pluralism in principle. The late Palestinian American scholar, Professor Isma'il al-Faruqi, stated this position with clarity in his presentation on *da'wa* at the 1976 World Council of Churches' colloquium on "Christian Mission and Islamic *Da'wa*." *Da'wa*, he wrote, "is ecumenical par excellence."

For the first time it has become possible to hold adherents of all other religions as equal members of a universal religious brotherhood. All religious traditions are *de jure*, for they have all issued from and are

based upon a common source, the religion of God which He implanted equally in all men. This does not give license to lazy ecumenism (in al-Faruqi's words "kitchen cooperation"), however. Al-Faruqi opposes relativism among religions, and propounds a view of *da'wa* that draws Muslims and non-Muslims into a dialogue of mutual self-criticism in what he likens to "a domestic relationship between kin." Within this relationship, *da'wa* invites "an ecumenical cooperative critique of the other religion rather than its invasion by a new truth."

Conclusion

Our discussion of *da'wa* has focused on Qur'anic principles, varieties of Muslim exegesis, and varieties of approach to the re-thinking of *da'wa* and *da'wa* training in the 20th century. Important areas of concern have not been included: for example, the growth of *dakwa* activities in Malaysia and Indonesia, or the state-sponsored *da'wa* of countries such as the Libyan Arab Republic or Saudi Arabia. More research has to be done, particularly in the context of specific regions. But I hope to have given a representative account of *da'wa* discussion among Muslims, with attention to lines of continuity and areas of innovation.

I also hope that by knowing all these, we can Christians can gauge our way of doing mission, and to see if we are really effective in the mission work entrusted to us by God.



Interreligious Dialogue forum organized by Fr. Markus Solo, SVD, and held at the PICD office, Vatican City.