

## **Islam in Post-Soviet Uzbekistan: The Morality of Experience**

*Johan Rasanayagam*

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This volume is a good contribution to the growing body of ethnographic literature on religious life in Central Asia; it adds substantively to the diverse perspectives on the practice of Islam in Uzbekistan that have begun to emerge as, in effect, pieces of a puzzle that no single study has yet attempted to integrate into a fuller picture, yet it suffers from some of the problems that plague nearly all recent ethnographic works on Central Asia, including an over-reliance on terminological discussion at the expense of the “voices” of the author’s informants, and a palpable reluctance to engage with any kind of historical perspective (beyond the Soviet era) that might illuminate religious life today. The book is at once a fine example of the recent advances beyond those facile approaches to religious life, and Islam, in Central Asia, that dominated the field in Soviet and early post-Soviet times, and a sign that much more must be done, practically and conceptually, for this region to reach qualitative parity with other parts of the Muslim world in terms of the study of religion.

The book is based on the author’s research stays from 1998-2000, and again in 2003-2004, centered in the Farghana valley (in Andijan and in a village for which the author uses a pseudonym) and in Samarqand. The task he sets for himself is to assess the impact of strict, and in practice mostly arbitrary, limitations on acceptable religious activity imposed by the government of Uzbekistan upon citizens seeking to cultivate their religious, or “moral,” selves in the aftermath of the Soviet state’s official hostility toward religion.

The introduction outlines his theoretical perspective on “morality” or ethics as a social phenomenon suitable for anthropological study; here begins what is to this reviewer’s eye an unhelpful and largely unnecessary foray into terminological quibbling. The author gratifyingly rejects definitions of his subject that focus only on “belief” or the doctrinal “tenets” of Islam, and he combines in his purview those elements of belief with shrine-linked practices, life-cycle rites, healing ceremonies, and so forth; but he then insists that this complex of beliefs and practices, and the broader question of what it means to be a Muslim, are “moral” issues, repeatedly reminding us, in effect, that labeling them “religious” would detract from his work.

One senses here, and throughout the book, that he is uncomfortable with the term “religion,” and so seeks another term to contain what some might be content to call “religious” life; he insists, indeed, that “religion,” however construed, could not be a useful category for analyzing and understanding “lived Islam” in Central Asia (pp. 34-35). Even his fine discussion (pp. 18-19) of religiosity’s social context, countering the focus purely on “belief” and knowledge, culminates in patently convoluted phrasing that seems intended to withhold the label “Islamic” from the “sociality” in which “moral selfhood” that is Muslim (but also, evidently, non-Muslim selves) may be developed. Even after further examples of such wording (e.g., statements recoiling from the suggestion “that the sociality of Muslims in Uzbekistan is itself Islamic” [p. 63]), the author in fact never addresses what he means, or what should be meant, by “Islamic” or “Muslim,” and his use of these labels, as well as of “religion” and “morality,” becomes quite arbitrary and seems purely idiosyncratic.

The first chapter describes the socio-economic context in the two locales in which he conducted his research, and includes a refreshingly honest appraisal of the author’s own evolution from expecting, but not finding, a particular kind of religious activity or discourse (and by extension, categorizing what he did find as “national” or “cultural” rather than “religious”), to broadening his understanding beyond “obviously Islamic practice” (p. 31) to encompass a wider range of activities that comprise the living of Muslim lives; his acknowledgment of what he missed because he was not looking for it (p. 32) is a good antidote to the many self-assured pronouncements about religion, or its absence or insignificance, in Central Asia to appear in print over the past few decades.

The author next foregrounds state policy and its impact on religious life, offering in chapter 2 a synthetic discussion of policy toward religion during the Soviet period, and in chapter 3 examining constructions of “good” and “bad” Islam in the post-Soviet era, outlining the emergence of “authentic” cultural practices that could be identified as Uzbek national traditions as the centerpiece of the state’s construction of a good, tolerated, and even officially promoted Islam. One wonders if he is not providing an updated, but no less misleading, contrast along the lines of the Sovietological constructions of “official Islam” vs. “unofficial” or “parallel” or “underground” Islam; indeed, the author goes too far, to this reviewer’s mind, in equating government-tolerated Islam with “national” manifestations of Muslim religious practice, insofar as the state also supports, if less directly (and quite ironically), the official religious board that sponsors scripturalist *madrasa* training and contributes in

other ways as well to the production of critics of various aspects of the “national” practice of Islam. In the end it is discussions of the ambiguity introduced by current state policies regarding religion that seem most compelling.

Chapter 4, “The Practical Hegemony of State Discourse,” considers ways in which citizens of Uzbekistan “express themselves as Muslim” while subject to an authoritarian regime that severely limits the range of acceptable Islamic practice; here the dichotomy noted above is more firmly entrenched, as the author proposes to discuss discourses that diverge from that of the state, but in fact begins with the jadidists and discusses only “reformist” discourse. Nevertheless, this chapter includes an interesting account of a case of traditionalist/reformist conflict, noting the potential for some citizens to manipulate the state discourse of “good” and “bad” Islam in order to settle scores.

In chapter 5, the author discusses what he calls “experience as a site for moral reasoning,” focusing first on “moral sources,” defined as “the transcendent locations that give experience its moral quality” (p. 154). This chapter offers some good descriptions of religious life in post-Soviet Uzbekistan; again, however, one misses a broader historical perspective, beyond a review of “state” policies, entailing sensitivity to the fabric of Muslim religious life in earlier times. Reading the account of a rite during which a participant recounted a narrative of the Prophet, for instance, one is reminded of the irony that anthropological accounts typically pay little attention to such narratives, or to the exegesis offered by those who recount or hear them; these are prime venues in which to examine what we might call, following the author, the inscription of a Muslim self, and indeed the “moral reasoning” at work therein, but instead this work, like others of the genre, features far more observation and “free-form” discussion by informants (not to mention extrinsic theoretical intrusions) than the kind of grounded self-referential and “lived” exegesis that might reflect, and be compared with, historical records. Such exegetical discourses might have been missed, or left unelicited, because ethnographers did not think to ask for them (or because they were too closely linked with the category of “religion”); this in itself detracts from our overall understanding.

Likewise, reading the account of “the Teacher” (pp. 167-72) and the decidedly “unorthodox” religious hybrid he evidently purveys, one laments that such life stories are not compared with those recorded, or constructed, in the rich hagiographical literature of earlier times, as is done in ethnographies of South Asian Muslims; for Central Asia, anthropologists are content to give the impression that such figures are *sui generis*, or at best emerge on the model of Soviet-era religious figures – much in the same way that they

are content to suggest that contemporary post-Soviet religious debates or alignments go no deeper than the Soviet era and bear no historical “weighting” in terms of relative valorization.

Chapters 6 and 7 present examples of religious healing, from the perspective of the “patients” and of the healers, respectively. Chapter 6 includes a long discussion of one informant’s narrative of his rediscovery of Islam, involving a recovery from illness. In chapter 7 (a revised version of an article published in 2006), the author considers the healers themselves, and the different engagements with scripturalist Islam they represent. The author argues that accounts of “magic” and spiritual healing should be taken seriously from the standpoint of those who experience them, and not simply assumed to be masks for other “real” phenomena; to some extent the author himself then resorts to such a mask, i.e., his rhetoric of “moral reasoning” and the development of Muslim selves, but his caution against the impulse to “decode” such accounts is well presented, and well-taken.

The eighth and final chapter bears a title (“Experience, Intelligibility, and Tradition”) suggesting that the sort of definitional pedantry found elsewhere in the book will be resumed; it is, to some extent, but the chapter begins with the author’s insightful observation of the paradox posed by religion in Uzbekistan today, namely the fact of severe state regulation of religion vs. the “riot of exploration” regarding religion (p. 230).

The impression one takes from the book, in the end, is of a solid ethnographic discussion that nevertheless suffers from a failure to engage substantively with historical perspectives; one might protest that this is not the ethnographer’s job, and indeed the author himself comes close to arguing for a sort of “fundamentalist” ethnography in which only the present matters (pp. 216-17), but the well-known peculiarities of the study of Islam in Central Asia make it clear that the present will not be understood if studied without reference to historical evidence. Evading historical discussion may be justifiable in certain contexts, but doing so instantly renders a host of issues addressed in this study problematical, beginning with the author’s approach to the “debates” over what is and is not properly Islamic in contemporary Uzbekistan. On the surface an “even-handed” approach seems laudable, but historical trajectories do matter, as do arguments about such trajectories; to pretend that the contending views are simply on equal terms and that history adds no “weight” to one side is to distort our understanding of the present. For instance, the author often notes the claim by some of his informants (the more Salafist-inclined) that the religious practices they deride as contrary to the Qur’an and the hadiths are legacies of the corrupting effects of the Soviet era; it is not dif-

difficult to reject such claims, on the basis of historical evidence from the pre-Soviet era, and even if it is not the author's business to note such evidence when discussing the issue with his informants, it again does a disservice to the reader to pretend that the two sides are on an equal footing. In the end, an attempt to focus on the ever-shifting timeless "pivot" between past and future, with no sense of historically-framed social or intellectual momentum, is doomed to misrepresent the present.

Devin DeWeese  
Professor, Central Eurasian Studies  
Indiana University, Bloomington, IN