

THE CONCEPT OF TRADITIONAL ISLAM IN MODERN ISLAMIC DISCOURSE IN RUSSIA (ED. BY RENAT BEKKIN)

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Muslims in Russia would probably make a clear distinction between the propositions of “Islam of Russia” and “Islam in Russia”. Indeed, this opposition has become a hackneyed rhetorical device for signalling one’s allegiance to the ‘Traditional Islam’ of Russia, which is a concept that has been continuously repeated by the government officials and imams throughout the process of developing national and local forms of Islam. The state has persistently attempted to make an apparent dichotomy: traditional vs non-traditional, local vs foreign, good vs evil. This phenomenon has attracted the attention of researchers both in Russia and abroad. Individual and collective articles were published on this topic; however, the book “The Concept of Traditional Islam in Modern Islamic Discourse in Russia” is the first interdisciplinary, timely and valuable contribution of scholars compiled by Renat Bekkin, Stockholm-based historian and scholar in Islamic studies.

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What triggered this book though, the simple answer is the state-affiliated discourse, positioned to establish a strict dichotomy of ‘us vs them’ in the Muslim public sphere in Russia. Russian leaders and politicians repeatedly point out the importance of Islam as a historically and sociologically integral part of political statehood. However, the country today is leaving the ideological vacuum that resulted from Soviet Russia’s triumphalism, a method of religious revitalisation among Russian Muslims. Exacerbating Russian and Muslim nationalism has led to religious politicisation, and Russian policymakers have taken unusual ways to tackle this issue. Thus, the title aptly demonstrates, the authors fuse ideas to question the unwarranted, artificial construct of the terminology promoted by the official discourse, which has been transmitted by various government institutions and politicians. While the emphasis of the book is on Russia, there are many lessons to be learnt in terms of comparing similar cases with the Muslim population across the world, particularly concerning how ‘traditionality’ in Islam has been shaped in Europe and the U.S.

The book is split into nine major and distinct themes, covering different aspects of the topic. Structurally the book is divided into two parts: theoretical and practical. As Bekkin states in his introduction, in the first part of the volume, the authors provide a comprehensive analysis of the concept of Traditional Islam, while the second part of the book presents case studies in Muslim-populated regions such as Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Dagestan, and in occupied Crimea, respectively.

The Muslims of Russia today is in an intricate system of numerous strong cultures, each with its identifiable hierarchy of ethnocultural values, historical memory, complex communication and interface structure of traditional cultural institutions and religious awareness. The historically deeply-rooted elements of Islam in Russia make the image of Islam and Muslims in Russia both complex and specific. Thus managing such diversity has become a priority for Russian politics, which institutionally challenged the conditions of Islam’s existence in the region. For some Muslims and many non-Muslims, the phrase ‘traditional Islam’ connotes an Islam of piety, without any link to the Islamic law, and with less emphasis on the

political discourse. While for other Muslims, it inspires an effort to rethink Islam in a Russian context. The first scholarly contribution in the book by Leila Almazova and Azat Akhunov, “*In Search of ‘Traditional Islam’ in Tatarstan: Between National Project and Universalist Theories*”, provides a thorough historical overview of how the traditionality of Islam among Tatars evolved in a state structure and trends that dominate Tatarstan’s Islamic community. The authors develop the trajectory of Tatar tradition in Islam through Talal Asad’s (2009) concept of ‘discursive tradition’, that “consists essentially of discourses that seek to instruct practitioners regarding correct form and purpose of a given practice that, precisely because it is established, has a history”. According to the authors, the notion of traditional Islam in Tatarstan does not share a uniform understanding of what the concept means. While for some it represents the hybrid mixture of Islam and Tatar tradition, for others it is a state-created narrative in which certain leaders “are being forced to follow the rules set by the authorities” (p. 55).

The next article by Damir Shagaviev “*The Ahl al-Sunnah wa-l-Jama‘ah and the Grozny Fatwa*” takes up the overall discussions over the “Grozny Fatwa”, a declaration adopted in 2016 at the International Sunni Islam Conference in Chechnya aimed at eliminating any doubts on ideological differences between Sunni Islam and the Salafi movements. The analysis examines the definition formed around the term “Ahl al-Sunnah wa-l-Jama‘ah”, however the overall discussion does not provide an analysis of ‘traditional Islam’ in Russia and the discourse. The author states that the document has caused considerable controversy among the Muslim population in Russia and beyond. However, the provided conclusion does not recognise the many layers of the formation of the term ‘traditional Islam’, as explanation focuses on why, but without constructing the mechanics of how.

One of the leading debates in the Muslim intellectual field is the debate between the Traditionalists and Renovationists (which include Quranic Humanism, i.e. ‘peaceful Islam’). Renat Bekkin’s piece on “*The Renovationist Movement in Contemporary Russian Islam*” examines the movement’s ideological combination of clericalism and secular provisions. Following the view by professor Tawfiq Ibrahim, ideological inspirer of the latter, Bekkin stresses on how leading renovationists promote loyalty to the Russian state and active involvement of the state in controlling the Muslims (p.110). It is a notable feature that renovationist employed into the administrative positions, particularly within federal and regional muftiate systems. The DUM RF’s cooperation with Ibrahim reflects the efforts to incorporate Ibrahim’s ‘*Quranic Humanism*’ project which allows the muftiate to construct Islamic authority vis-à-vis the state by promoting a flexible and inclusive interpretation of ‘traditional’ Islam.

Bekkin’s second article on the Faizrakhmanists of the Volga Region is a unique case study, in which the author illustrates how the labelling of ‘traditional vs non-traditional’ in the religious communities are interlinked to the political and administrative decisions. This passage exemplifies Bekkin’s discussion on the Faizrakhman Sattarov, who was labelled as ‘non-traditional sect’ for rejecting the modern Russian state, its laws, and the mainstream Orthodox Islam. The author provides a rare scope for analysing religious movements in discussing the emergence and intellectual formation of modern ‘traditional’ classification without providing any theological and legal evaluation of a certain group. Even though he stresses that it is upon the authority to decide on what complies with tradition, it still seems more in-depth comparative examination requires to better understand the formation of official discourse utilising such groups.

Despite the centrality of the “traditionalism” narrative to many findings, its formulation is comparatively new. On this pertinent issue, the Moscow-based religious scholar, Sofya Ragozina, contributes a great article to the discussion on how Islam as an official discourse is

being constructed. It is worth noting the root emergence of 'non-traditionality' discourse, as any version of 'exported' Islam has been derogatorily lumped under the name of 'Wahhabism' (p. 118). She concludes that the term "traditional Islam" is "juxtaposed, explicitly or implicitly, with 'radical Islam' (p.126) and that this dichotomy is widely used as the official government discourse on Islam in Russia. Ragozina's article provides us with a detailed knowledge of how various government institutions had transmitted the discourse of 'traditional Islam'. However, there is a substantial gap in the theoretical frame of securitisation. As to better understand the current discourse on religious identity construction, thorough research has to be done on how the securitisation is applied to comprehend the role played by discourse and political actors in constructing something as a security threat.

In the following chapters, the book moves from theoretical and conceptual mapping into case studies in Russian regions and Crimea. Rezeda Safiullina-Ibragimova's article on Sufism in Tatarstan provides a good synopsis of the diverse landscape of Sufism as a 'Traditional' form of Islam. It is imperative to mention that the Sufi order's pronounced social and political aspect, its anti-extremist potential, is often noted. The talk over reviving Sufism as a 'traditional' form of Islam as an alternative to the Wahhabi movement has been on the agenda within the modern ideological and institutional state-linked transformations of Islam. The author concludes that "the Russian state supports traditional Sufism, because it does not see it as a threat" (p.200), but more as a "social passivity" (p. 201) where the state attempts to support the artificial bureaucratic construct of 'traditional Islam' in order to marginalise large Muslim groups.

In the Republic of Bashkortostan, the terminology of 'traditional Islam' was the distinction of local Bashkir culture and customs from the "outsiders" (p. 209). Ethnographer Zilya Khabibullina's article looks at how ethnic factor has substantially influenced the formation of religious identity within the context of 'Traditional Islam' and its place in Russian society. Providing ethnographic materials collected in the Republic of Bashkortostan, she provides analysis on how 'Traditional Islam' was shaped though the presentation of folk Islam, the veneration of Islamic representatives, Sufi movements and other similar elements. Her study concludes that there is no united understanding of terminology among religious leaders, as a division in religious and ethnic factors shape the discourse in regional perceptions.

The issue of artificially constructed traditions received more-in depth theoretical background by one of the most authoritative contemporary scholars of Islam in Russia, Vladimir Bobrovnikov. His ethnographic investigation focuses on the discourse of 'Traditional Islam' in Dagestan, in which he argues that considering this terminology is a "newly-invented" (p. 233) myth by the post-Communist Russian state, homogenous traditional Islam is subsequently regarded as a "fictional construct" (p. 253) in Muslim populated regions such as North Caucasus. Soviet ethnographers had a massive impact on bringing up "useful" local Muslim customs as a 'traditionality'. He states (p. 249) that:

"The main goal of the ethnographic investigation was to investigate "people's traditions", even where there were none! Insofar as Muslim highlanders did not accept different aspects of officious Soviet culture and lifestyle, it was explained as evidence of the resilience of local pre-Soviet traditions. Ethnographers were expected to assist in the "revival" of the "good" traditions of post-war Dagestani (and North Caucasus) kolkhoz villages, which were to be local in form but socialist in content."

Bobrovnikov records on how the impact of mass media stereotypes and influence of Soviet ethnography created positivist ethnographical cliches such as Dagestani "highlanders", which later became the foundations of 'Traditional Islam'.

The last contribution by Elmira Muratova on Crimea, a region with an impressive diversity of Islamic practices and discourses, provides a thorough analysis on Traditional Islam became part of the dominant discourse of two separate muftiates operating in Crimea: the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Crimea (DUMK) and the Spiritual Centre of Muslims of Crimea (DTsMK). Having a strained relationship between the two muftiates, the two organisations built their discourse through identifying ‘non-traditional’ movements in Crimea and deploying the dichotomy of ‘us vs them’ (p. 265). However, after the Russian occupation of the peninsula and creation of new legal foundations, the concept of ‘Traditional Islam’ used as a tool by the Russian state to eliminate competitors and monopolise influence over the Muslim public sphere. However, Muratova clearly notes that since 2014, this discourse is not yet the dominant one in the region.

Overall, the succinct excerpts should evidence the underlying complexity of the phenomenon of Russian Islam, despite the state’s attempt at gross homogenisation. Each author peels back another layer uncovering the rich historicity of Muslimness throughout several Russian regions and Crimea, illustrating the ethnic-demographic constitution of Russian Muslims, their geographical concentrations and the diverse religious traditions that exist within the framework of Russian Muslimness. These deeply-rooted elements of Islam in the region make the image of Islam and Muslims in Russia both complex and specific. Therefore, it is imperative to bear in mind the various challenges that would confront the researcher, as they embark on engaging a diverse group of concepts and categories permeating Russia’s discourse on Islam. However, even within this complication, the articles do provide answers to the question of how the various regions in Russia deal with the idea of traditional Islam. As the articles demonstrate, the term is multifaceted, in which scholars view it from (i) theological perspective; investigating madhabs, ijtiḥad, Islamic law, Sufi tariqas; (ii) ethnographic investigation of regional customs (‘adat’); (iii) theoretical and ideological difference of regional movements, (iv) state discourse and media analysis; and (v) geographical distinctions on understanding the concept of ‘Traditional Islam’.

This volume goes a long way towards addressing a long-existing ignorance on this concept and will certainly be a helpful literature review and guidebook for anyone interested in further reading and studying this topic. In sum, the book crucially represents an insightful, comprehensive and much-needed contribution to the study of the concept ‘Traditional Islam’ in Russia, particularly in the current period where the dominant narratives surrounding Muslims and Islam in Russia are built upon this term. This system is aimed at suppressing an extensive range of phenomena, from very dangerous to relatively harmless, lumped together based on being perceived as ‘not traditional’. Bekkin’s book places contemporary forms of Muslim identity shaping within the structural oppression that is taking place against Muslim communities but also informs us of how we got here, to begin with. Once we understand where the roots of ‘traditionality’ coincide and the role it plays in society, we can better understand how to remove the very notion that is necessary as a form of Muslim protection in Russia. By rethinking and challenging this terminology, we can rethink how to be better societies.

SOURCES

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