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Editorial

I am delighted to have been able to collaborate once again with Dr Shirin Akiner of the School of Oriental and African Studies in bringing together in an issue of *Religion State and Society* a collection of articles on Islam in the former Soviet Union and related theoretical questions. The previous issue of this kind was *RSS* Vol. 24, Nos 2/3, 1996.

Some of the articles in this issue serve to remind us of the diversity of the religious heritage, and of religious life today, in the various parts of Central Asia. Roman Podoprigrora points out that it is wrong to describe Kazakhstan as a Muslim country. In fact there is no one dominant religion, because Kazakhstan 'has been a place of migration and deportation of many peoples with a variety of different religious faiths'. Meanwhile Daniyar Ashymov delves into the religious history of Kyrgyzstan to reveal the layers of pre-Islamic and animist belief-systems, which still have their influence today.

As far as the prospects for the development of religious pluralism and the securing of religious freedom are concerned, however, our authors are generally rather pessimistic. Kazakhstan, for example, until recently has had a relatively tolerant religious policy, but here too, as in other Central Asian countries, there has been increasing pressure in recent years for more restrictive religious legislation, and as Podoprigrora concludes, 'Despite tremendous positive changes which have taken place in the religious sphere since the end of communism, the future for religious freedom in Kazakhstan does not seem bright.'

Akiner finds that in Central Asia generally 'since independence there has been a tactical realignment amongst the Muslims, with the traditionalists and the representatives of government institutions reaching a degree of accommodation, united by their opposition to the radicals'. The term 'radicals' can all too easily begin to include any Muslims who are keen to live a life of faith and apply that faith to life in the modern world.

Akiner's article provides a comprehensive overview of developments in postsoviet Central Asia, and she points out that while these have some distinctive features, they are by no means unique in the Islamic world. 'The fundamental challenge for Muslims here, as elsewhere, is how to reconcile Islam with modernity.' This challenge is a theme in several of the other articles in this issue. In his important study of the educational activities of the so-called Nurcu movement in Central Asia, Bayram Balcı describes the aim of the movement's founders: to bring Islam into fruitful contact with modernity. They advocated the use of modern media technology and the introduction of science into Muslim educational curricula. 'The objective was to demonstrate that Islam belonged to the present and the future just as much as science and modernity did,' and to facilitate 'the debate on Islam's compatibility with democracy and the western world'.

The Nurcu schools are currently amongst the most prestigious in Central Asia.

However, the attitude of the secular authorities to the schools is rather wary: they suspect (rightly) that the aim of the Nurcu movement is to revive the Islamic faith among the population. In the current polarised climate between traditionalists and reformers the schools come under chronic pressure. In Uzbekistan they have been forbidden since September 2000. The republic with the largest number of Nurcu schools is at the moment Kazakhstan, but as we have already noted, the climate is becoming more restrictive here too.

Another important theme in several of the articles in this issue of *RSS* is that of how Islam relates to secular power, and the question is raised as to the extent to which Islam has succeeded in developing doctrinal guidelines in this area.

Looking at how the Islamic community is run in the Russian Federation, Galina Yemelianova describes and analyses the ‘mufti boom’, and suggests that it has less to do with specifically Islamic theories than with that ‘characteristic postsoviet phenomenon, the rise of the “new Russians”’. Too many of the ‘new muftis’ are men who have ‘exploited the breakup of the Soviet system for their personal political and economic advantage’; they operate ‘in isolation from the grassroots Islamic communities’. ‘Village imams, who constitute about 90 per cent of the Muslim clergy in Russia, have deplored the lack of attention and practical help, and the absence of spiritual guidance, from the muftiates.’

How does Islam relate to the state, both in theory and in practice? This is a question of particularly lively interest at a time when the primacy of the nation-state as an autonomous political and economic unit is waning and the process of globalisation gathers momentum. For Akiner, one of the essential features of ‘modernity’ is that it is ‘overwhelmingly dominated by the achievements, needs and ambitions of western powers’; and these are promoted and transmitted through the process of globalisation, both in the economic sense and in the sense that western norms of good governance are assumed to be universally applicable.

Meanwhile Amr Sabet and Abd al-Hakeem Carney both ask why it is that Islam has not succeeded, specifically, in developing a theory of the state and of the relationship of Islam to political power which takes adequate account of modern (and postmodern) realities.

In his article Sabet argues that the relationship between the international system of nation-states and globalisation resembles that between modernity and postmodernity. Like postmodernity, globalisation seeks to deconstruct the state and reconstruct it in a particular image. And inasmuch as globalisation is a ‘form of continuation of an American hegemonic order’, the process will be likely to reshape states that have traditionally been on the receiving end of the colonial process. This includes most of the states of the Muslim world.

Sabet argues that the Arab ‘state’ as it exists today is a ‘contingent by-product’ of developments in the wider world rather than a natural product of the Islamic understanding of power and its structures, and that ‘With form and content in the Muslim world no longer coinciding ... the modern Muslim “state” and its contradictions have reached a historical impasse.’ He goes on to explore how Islam might develop its classical understanding of the relationship between the ‘Abode of Islam’ and the world outside (classically known as the ‘Abode of War’) to open up new possibilities for the development of the former, which will free it from this impasse.

Sabet’s approach could be fruitfully applied to the declared aims of the Islamic fundamentalist movement Hizb ut-Tahrir in Central Asia to establish a worldwide caliphate transcending any national or political boundaries. Sabet himself sees the aspiration towards a restored caliphate as ‘the Islamic, though perhaps yet un-

articulated, equivalent to the secular European Union project and even to that of the US “federation”. It is surely also arguable, however, that it represents the aspiration towards a ‘globalisation’ on Islamic terms as a rival to the current process of globalisation, which overwhelmingly reflects American interests and values.

There is also food for thought in Sabet’s suggestion that in a reformulated doctrine ‘the “Abode of War”, against which jihad or just war may in principle be conducted, becomes imperialism and not the West as such, policies not categories’. One is instantly reminded of the ‘war against terrorism’ as the global successor to war against individual rogue states.

Sabet is no doubt justified in his conclusion that the development of a ‘neoclassical framework’ for an Islamic understanding of international relations would herald the ‘end of simplicity’, in much the same fashion that ‘the end of the Cold War ushered in the end of simplicity associated with a bipolar structured world’.

Carney questions the very assumption, which has become entrenched amongst Muslims as well as non-Muslims, that Islam is essentially a political religion, and if Sabet is right in his contention that Islam has never developed an adequate theory of the state and its functions, Carney’s arguments may help to explain why not. He points out ‘the degree to which political quietism and the ideal of a pious withdrawal from the political sphere has played a dominant role in both Sunni and Shia thinking throughout history’ (and in this context he interestingly outlines the great influence of the ideas of Plato on the development of Islamic political thought).

According to Carney, in the classical Islamic tradition the state has been viewed merely as a necessary evil, and the apparently paradoxical fact that Sunni Muslims have historically shown a desire to ‘hold fast to the state at almost all cost’ is explained simply by the fact that the alternative was worse: the removal of secular power would ‘create an anarchy which would destroy all of civilisation’. In the classical tradition, then, the state was desacralised in a way completely contrary to modern revivalist movements.

Carney points out that the revolutionary quest for a perfect state on earth has historically been mainly the preserve of Shiite ‘extremist’ (*ghulat*) groups, and that

What is surprising about the wide spectrum of Islamic radical movements which exist today (from Hizb at-Tahrir to the radicals in the Iranian government) is that this is the first time in history that traditional ‘orthodox’ Sunni and Shiite doctrine has been used to justify and motivate movements which are fundamentally utopian.

Carney would agree with Sabet, then, that an Islamic political programme has never been fully developed. He says that it was prevented by the prevailing quietist approach, and that ‘such a development has begun only in the modern period, where state power has come to be sacralised and theocracy has risen to become an unquestioned part of Islamic doctrine’. Akiner agrees that the politicisation of Islam today is a real phenomenon, and also a new one (dating from the 1990s). In Central Asia

the discourse of opposition is now cast in doctrinal terms. Consequently virtually all forms of political disaffection are subsumed under the umbrella of ‘radical’ Islam. It might have been supposed that this would lead to a dilution of the purely religious content of the agenda. On the contrary, religion appears to be assuming an ever more powerful role.

Notes on Contributors

Shirin Akiner is a lecturer in Central Asian studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, where she convenes and teaches courses on Central Asian history, politics and religion. She is also an associate fellow of the Royal Institute of International Affairs, London. She has long first-hand experience of the region. Her publications include *Islamic Peoples of the Soviet Union* (London, KPI, 1983, 1987), *Central Asia: New Arc of Conflict?* (London, Royal United Services Institute, 1993), *The Formation of Kazakh Identity* (London, Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1995), *Minorities in a Time of Change: Prospects for Conflict, Stability and Development in Central Asia* (London, Minority Rights Group, 1997), *Tajikistan: Disintegration or Reconciliation?* (London, Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2001) and also numerous scholarly articles on such topics as Islam, ethnicity, political change and security challenges in Central Asia.

Daniyar Ashymov, 28, obtained a master's degree in international relations at the International University of Kyrgyzstan (Mezhdunarodny universitet Kyrgyzstana) in 2001. His research interests are in the fields of politics, national security, culture and religion, and he has published a number of articles. He is deputy to the acting editor of the academic educational journal *Tsentrāl'naya Aziya i kul'tura mira*.

Bayram Balcı obtained a doctorate in political science and Oriental studies at the University of Grenoble and Aix-en-Provence, spending four years in Central Asia. His research interests are: Turkey's policy in Central Asia and the Caucasus; the religious revival in Central Asia and the Caucasus; Central Asian and Caucasian communities in Turkey; and Uzbek and Uighur communities in Saudi Arabia and the role of the pilgrimage to Mecca in the preservation of their cultures there. He has published several articles on these subjects. He is currently a researcher at the Institut Français d'Études Anatoliennes d'Istanbul.

Abd al-Hakeem Carney is working for a doctorate at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, researching the epistemology of Shia Islam and its relationship to Islamic reform movements. He is a Shiite Muslim cleric in London.

Roman Podoprigora was born in 1966 and obtained a doctorate at the Faculty of Law at the Kazakh State University in 1993. He was a Fulbright Scholar in 1995. He is now chair of the Constitutional and Administrative Law Department at Adilet Law School, Almaty, Kazakhstan, the legal consultant for many religious organisations in Kazakhstan, and since 2000 a member of the Advisory Panel of Experts on Freedom of Religion and Belief of the OSCE/ODIHR. He is the author of some 50 publications on state-church relations and constitutional and administrative law issues.

Mikhail Roshchin was born in Moscow in 1952. He graduated in Arabic and Muslim studies from Moscow State University in 1974, and obtained a doctorate in contemporary Arabic History at the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences in Moscow in 1982. Since 1980 he has been a fellow of the Institute of Oriental Studies. His research interests are the history of Arabic countries and the comparative study of the religious, ethnic and socio-cultural situation in the Northern Caucasus (Dagestan, Chechnya and Ingushetia). He has published three books and numerous articles.

Amr Sabet is a political scientist from Canada specialising in international relations, comparative politics and Middle Eastern and Islamic politics. His research interests are in the fields of Islamic politics and the state, Islamic-western relations, and issues of legitimacy. He has been affiliated to the University of Calgary, Alberta, Canada, and has also held scholarships and taught at the Universities of Vienna, Copenhagen, Odense and Vaasa (Finland).

Stephen Turner is a freelance writer and broadcaster on religious affairs in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.

Galina Yemelianova obtained a doctorate in Islamic history at Moscow State University in 1985. Until 1994 she was a research fellow at the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences in Moscow. Since then she has been a research fellow at the Centre for Russian and East European Studies at the University of Birmingham (UK). Her research interests are history and contemporary ethnopolitical and religious issues in the Middle East and the Islamic regions of the Russian and Soviet empires and postsoviet Russia. Her many publications include *Russia and Islam: A Historical Survey* (London, Palgrave, 2002) and (as coeditor) *Islam in post-Soviet Russia: Public and Private Faces* (London, Routledge, 2002). She is currently conducting two closely-linked research projects: 'Ethnic politics and Islam in the western North Caucasus', 2000–2003, funded by the Leverhulme Trust, and 'The growth of Islamic radicalism in Eurasia: international determinants, comparative perspectives and potential consequences', 2002–2004, funded by the Nuffield Foundation.