

Islam in the Soviet Union: Attempts at Modernization

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During the 1960's those who visited or studied the USSR found that Russian Orthodox and Baptist churches were full of people, not only of old but also of young and middle-aged. Part of the Russian intelligentsia now claims to be interested in religious questions and the Soviet government has often shown its misgivings in the face of such a situation. This religious revival is unknown, however, in Islamic Soviet society. But is Islam, then, a decaying religion, just an administrative superstructure?

Islam as a religion is in decay judging by the number who openly admit their religious allegiance, attend mosques or participate in a pilgrimage to Mecca. When people travelling in Central Asia ask natives "Are you a believer?" they generally receive the answer, "No, I don't believe". Of course, old or retired people often answer "Yes, I believe", especially in rural areas. But when natives are asked whether they are Muslim, their answer is nearly always "Yes". Attendance at mosques is not a useful criterion, for by tradition Turkmenian nomads have not linked their faith with places of worship and have always had few mosques. Nevertheless Islamic feeling has remained strong. Whether believers or not, Soviet Uzbeks, Azeris, Tatars and Tadjiks claim that they belong to the same community, the Islamic Community or *Umma*. Circumcision is a practice which provides strong evidence for this attitude. It is generally observed not only in rural areas but also in the cities, regardless of a person's social or political position. What then is the meaning of "To be Muslim" in modern Soviet society?

One approach to this question is to see it from the point of view of the Muslims themselves. During the last three years the publication of several Soviet books, dealing not with the Islamic community but with its organization, suggests that it might be useful to examine the problem of Soviet Islam from the angle of Islam as it is explained and formulated by the Islamic hierarchy. Four Spiritual Directorates (Muftiats¹) are in charge of the religious problems of Soviet Muslims. *Ufa* (whose authority is extended to the Sunni Muslims of European Russia and Siberia), *Tashkent* (Sunni Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan), *Buynaksk* (Sunni Muslims of North Caucasus and Daghestan), *Baku* (Sunni and

Shi'ii). Exchanges between the Soviet government and these "Spiritual Directorates" are handled by a special agency, the Council for Religious Affairs attached to the Council of Ministers. These Directorates not only provide a channel for discussions with the Soviet government but, more importantly, they are the instrument for organizing the religious life of believers. The Spiritual Directorates maintain contact with believers through the parishes and ministers of the cult, and also by means of the *Fetwa* (decrees or authoritative pronouncements produced by Islamic leaders). Believers are informed about the decisions of the Spiritual Directorates through the publication *Musulmane sovetского vostoka* (in Uzbek and Arab) issued by the Tashkent Directorate.

Two points must be made here. Firstly, the four divisions not only reflect geographical differences but also the variety of religious traditions with their different histories: the position of Islam and its external forms are different in nomadic areas as opposed to areas with a settled population; the tsarist policy towards Muslims living along the Volga differed from that towards Muslims in the Caucasus mountains; also the cultural trends in Central Asia and Azerbaidjan differ. Secondly, we should remember that ministers of the cult are integrated into society since they are not compelled to be celibate. Generally married with large families, they do not exist within a closed society, separated from the believers and unaware of socio-political problems in the USSR. This contact with everyday life may explain why the Muslim leaders, after trying to survive through preserving traditional values, have been affected by modernist trends during the last few years. Attempts at modernization are being made in relation to political and social life, religious practices, and the status of women – the latter in particular is a point of contention between the Soviet government and the Muslim community.

The attitude of Islam towards a Socialist government is often described as positive, for on religious grounds Islam has justified the congruence of Party and Islamic aims. Thus, the Mufti Ahmed Abibullah Bozgoziev, representing the Transcaucasian Mufti, said:

The Soviet leaders, who do not believe in God nor in his Prophet . . . are realizing the laws dictated by God and explained by the Prophets.²

M.M. Khazaev, Ahund of an Azeri mosque, addressed a Muslim meeting in Tashkent in October 1970 with the words:

I enjoy and admire the genius of the Prophet who foresaw the social principles of Socialism. I enjoy it because a large number of Socialist principles fulfil Muhammad's orders.³

Khazaev also said :

We could say without error and categorically that the Capitalist order based on injustice and exploitation is going to collapse and will be replaced by a Socialist order based on just laws. The divine laws are unshakable and justice will triumph on earth.⁴

The Muslim leaders in the USSR are continually claiming in the international arena that the Soviet government is striving for freedom and the preservation of peace. They assert the compatibility of Islam and Socialism – “war is rooted in injustice and Islam is also fighting for peace and justice”⁵ – and encourage Muslims to participate in political and social life. Muslims are encouraged to join social organizations, to accept responsibility in Party, State and economic organizations, not only as Soviet citizens but, more particularly, as Muslims. The journal of the Tashkent Spiritual Directorate states : “Believers who are good Muslims . . . must take part in building a new life and a new society in their own country.”⁶ This Directorate also encourages children to participate. For example, one Muslim leader in a sermon attacked the Baptist attitude towards social involvement. Quoting the Baptist ban on Baptist children joining the Pioneers, he concluded : “They are wrong. Our children must be Pioneers, members of the Komsomol and then of the Communist Party. Everywhere they must play a leading role.” At present Muslim leaders are promoting the political and social integration of Muslims.⁷ The journal *Musulmane sovetского vostoka* continually stresses the need for such integration,⁸ which would give social and political weight to Islam. Such an approach reveals a radical change in the attitude of Muslim leaders towards social life.

After the second world war, the Muslim hierarchy turned all its attention to administrative problems. Now, however, it is chiefly concerned with Muslim believers, including those who do not practise their religion, who never attend a mosque and claim to be atheists, for to belong to the Islamic community is the crucial factor. The social activity of Muslims is viewed in relation to Islamic principles. Muslim leaders always assert that social life should be a manifestation of the faith, and in order to make Islam more accessible to believers they are simplifying it and removing the difficulties inherent in the practice of religion. Many examples of this trend are given by Muslim leaders in their pronouncements on prayer, fasting, religious feasts, pilgrimages, holy war, marriage, and burial.

According to the Muslim leaders, prayer is an expression of the collective conscience. Traditionally, prayer was central to Muslim religious life and to the relation of Muslims to the rest of the community. But now the religious leaders claim that prayer is also important as an element in

the social life of a collectivist society. Of all religions, Islam is the most collectivist : it nurtures the collective conscience, an aim which is also that of Soviet society. Thus, at a Muslim meeting in Tashkent, an Islamic leader declared :

A Muslim meeting five times a day for prayer, the communal prayer on Friday at the cathedral mosque, the communal prayers during our two big feasts, *Kurban-Bairam* and *Uraza-Bairam*, the big Muslim meeting of pilgrims at Mecca – all this clearly shows the collectivist basis of our religion.⁹

The mosque, the best place for prayer, is not only a religious centre. It is also an educational one, where people are taught the same values as those demanded by the Communist Party. In many sermons, the ministers of the cult stress the part played by Islam in educating the “new Soviet man”. Concessions are made to the demands of life in Soviet society : working people are permitted to replace the five ritual prayers by only one. In 1969, the Imam-Khatib of a mosque in Tashkent, A. Djamaletdinov, said :

We cannot blame the young for not observing our basic practices. Young people perform important tasks for our State and people.

Not only prayer but also other religious duties often interfere with the daily duties of Soviet working people. For example, the Ramadan Fast cannot be fully observed by working Muslims owing to their social duties. Until recently failure to observe this fast placed Muslims in an irregular position vis à vis their religion. Now, however, the Islamic hierarchy is trying to organize the rule on fasting so as to avoid conflict with the civil authorities and regulations.

In 1958, an order was sent to all Imam-Khatibs of mosques :

They must explain to believers who work in factories, offices, kolkhozes, sovkhoses and railways that the observance of the Fast does not conflict with their professional obligations. This is particularly important for rural workers because the Ramadan Fast and the cotton-sowing period coincide – a period when peasants have a great deal to do.¹⁰

This *aggiornamento* has re-defined the meaning of the Ramadan Fast. Like the pre-revolutionary Muslim reformers or *Jadidi*,¹¹ the present leaders emphasize the spiritual rather than the formal aspect of religious observances. Thus they view the Fast not just as a form of physical deprivation : it places everyone temporarily in the same position thus promoting equality and enables Muslims to transcend themselves.

Many categories of believers are "exempted" from the Fast. There are "personal" and "general" exemptions. For example, for the 1968 Ramadan, the Spiritual Directorate of North Caucasus decided that "according to the *Sharyat* (Muslim law based on the Koran) small children, the sick, pregnant women, the elderly and people working physically are allowed to break the Fast."¹² In fact we can see from the directives, sermons, and *Fetwas* emanating from the Spiritual Directorates, that two categories of Muslims now exist: those who must observe the Fast and those who are exempted. Instead of the full period the latter can fast for several days, for only one day or not at all.¹³ However, the difference between the two groups is minimized by Muslim leaders who emphasize two points. First, the two groups have a strong sense of solidarity: all believers, whether they fast or not, can witness to their faith; they all have the same goal. Second, there is a strong sense of social interdependence during this period: those who do not observe the Fast are working specially hard for their co-believers who are fasting on their behalf.

The will to preserve the unity of the *Umma*, to reduce the difference between those who do and those who do not fulfil Islamic rites is revealed in the meaning given by the leaders to the ceremony known as the *Iftar*, when the Fast is broken. There are several views on this ceremony: in Central Asia, the Spiritual Directorate produced a *Fetwa* which condemned the transformation of the *Iftar* into a general banquet attended by all, including those who had not fasted;¹⁴ but in the Caucasus, in Bashkiria and Tatar areas the Muslim leaders stated that the *Iftar* should be attended by the community as a whole.

The feast of *Kurban-Bairam* is another example of the trend to maintain rites and traditions by adapting them to the present. During this feast, believers have to sacrifice an animal and give parts of it to the poor. In 1945 a *Fetwa*, issued by the Spiritual Directorate of Central Asian Muslims, stipulated that this sacrifice was not *obligatory* but only desirable. From 1969 onwards all Spiritual Directorates, aware of the Soviet authorities' hostility towards such an anti-economic tradition, agreed to interpret this sacrifice differently. The believers were asked to give some money to the mosque as an offering equal in value to an animal. Thus the sacrifice was maintained without coming into conflict with Soviet laws.

The pilgrimage to Mecca (*Hajj*) for Muslim citizens of the USSR is beset with problems. It is true that several groups of Soviet Muslims have had the chance to make their pilgrimage, but they constitute only a small section of the total Soviet Muslim community. The practice of pilgrimage

per procurationem is an old one common to the Muslim world as a whole and also practised in the Soviet Union. But to the Spiritual Directorates the *Hajj* provides an important opportunity for establishing relations between the Soviet *Umma* and Muslims in the rest of the world.¹⁵ Those chosen as pilgrims have generally been the most intelligent representatives of Soviet Islam, articulate in religious matters and well-versed in Arabic. Owing, however, to the difficulties surrounding the *Hajj* the extraordinary phenomenon of visiting "holy places" within the USSR has arisen. The best known "holy places" are *Yassawi's grave* and *Shah i Zindah*. After Stalin's death they were much frequented. During the '50s and early '60s, the Spiritual Directorates welcomed these local pilgrimages as signs of popular faith, and accepted them as substitutes for the *Hajj*. But, during the last five or six years the Muslim leaders have begun to discourage them; formal practices are useless, they argue, and contrary to the genuine spirit of Islam. As the real meaning of the *Hajj* is self-exertion, enabling the Muslim to improve himself, the pilgrimages to "holy places" within the USSR are regarded as useless; they give a false picture of Islam, that of an "obscurantist" religion, not subject to change and based on formal laws and rites. Attitudes, however, on this question vary from one area to another. In Central Asia, Muslim leaders oppose anything which thwarts a believer's efforts at personal improvement and assert that such improvement has to be realized in the present world rather than in some ideal one. In the Caucasus, the religious leaders continue to organize local pilgrimages.¹⁶ So no general agreement exists.

The new trends concerning the *Djihad* or Holy War are more clearly discernible. A sermon in a Moscow mosque defined the *Djihad* thus :

Islam obliges us to carry on a holy war, to build a social life ruled by love, fraternity and happiness for all, and an international life based on peace.

So the Holy War is defined as a personal, social and political war, the aims of which are the same as those of the Soviet government.¹⁷ Thus the duties of believers and those of Soviet citizens can be easily combined.

This compatibility between Islamic obligations and traditions on the one hand and Soviet values on the other, is now asserted in many ways. Muslim leaders now encourage change and do not feel threatened by it. For example they are not opposed to the civil ceremonies created by the Soviet government to undermine the religious ones : they adopt them and integrate them into their own tradition. For example, the following was said of civil marriages :

We approve of the civil registration of marriages. We also approve of the Komsomol marriage ceremony, after which we have to celebrate the religious ceremony.

The Muslim's acceptance of Soviet civil ceremonies is also shown by his attitude to funerals. Again the civil ceremony is followed by the religious one. Thus a synthesis has emerged between Soviet or, in other words, European values on the one hand, and religious traditional values and national values on the other.

The status of women has been a source of conflict between the Soviet moral and intellectual system and the Islamic social system. The integration of women into the economic and political life of the country has been strongly encouraged by the Soviet government, but for long the religious authorities struggled against such integration. The latter failed in their struggle and are now generally silent on the subject. Should women take part in religious life, attend mosques, funerals and other religious ceremonies? Attitudes differ from one area to another. In the RSFSR and Siberia, the Spiritual Directorate insisted that women attend the Friday prayer meeting and burial services. This is also the case in Kazakhstan and Azerbaidjan. But in Central Asia and North Caucasus, the religious authorities hold different views. In North Caucasus women are not allowed to attend mosques and in Central Asia they are excluded from burial services, including those of their closest relations.¹⁸ The spiritual leaders justify the ban by claiming firstly that they are following the basic principles of Islam, and secondly that these principles are related to local tradition which combines Muslim and national laws.¹⁹

From an examination of the Spiritual Directorates' pronouncements it is clear that they wish to avoid conflict with the Soviet government and to maintain their official position as representatives of all Soviet Muslims. But the "agreement" between the Soviet government and the Islamic leaders is based, as far as the former is concerned, on the assumption that religion, including Islam, will progressively die away. Yet not only has Islam survived but it appears to be undergoing a revival.

The ability of Islam to survive was, until now, primarily due to two factors: the attachment to the faith of a disappearing generation and the overlapping of national and religious feelings. The present attempt to modernize and so to revive Islam has several aims: to restore a deep and living meaning to the Islamic faith as understood by believers by stripping it of all formal rules which impede its practice in the contemporary world; to build inside the USSR a strong Islamic community which unites those who practise and those who do not, thus affirming the unity of the Islamic people; to assert the solidarity of the Soviet *Umma* with the

worldwide Islamic community. As in the past, the spiritual side and the temporal side of this attempt are closely linked, but in a new way more adapted to present problems. By thinking in terms of their present political and economic conditions, by asserting that the struggle for individual improvement and the modernization of society at national and international levels are interrelated, the Islamic leaders are giving to all those who feel they belong to Islam a precise reason for being Muslim and for claiming to belong to the Islamic community. The recent evolution of Soviet Islam is a unique phenomenon amongst Muslims in general. The development of these trends, if allowed to continue, will make Soviet Islam the centre of a revival and an example for all the Islamic world. Is this not strange for a Socialist state, an avowed enemy of all religion?

¹ Or Nizarats – administered by an elected executive committee of 7-9 members; a regional meeting of clerics and believers, presided over by the Mufti in the case of the Sunni and by the Nizarat or *Sheikh ul Islam* in the case of the Baku Nizarat.

² Quoted by Ashirov (Nugman) *Evolyutsia islama v SSSR*, Moscow, 1972, p. 51. Ashirov is quoting from *Musulmane sovetskogo vostoka*, No. 3/4, 1970, p. 33.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁵ Declaration of the Mufti Babahanov to the Tashkent Conference.

⁶ *Musulmane sovetskogo vostoka*, No. 2, 1969, p. 11, quoted by Ashirov.

⁷ F. Duluman, "Vosproizvodstvo religii", *Nauka i Religia*, No. 7, 1968.

⁸ See Ashirov op. cit., p. 66, citant *Musulmane sovetskogo vostoka*, No. 3/4, 1970, p. 46.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

¹⁰ Directive of 8 March, 1958 from the Spiritual Directorate to Central Asian Muslims.

¹¹ H. Carrère d'Encausse *Réforme et Révolution chez les Musulmans de l'Empire Russe*, Paris, 1966, pp. 95-115 and pp. 168-183.

¹² Ashirov, op. cit., p. 135.

¹³ An enquiry in the Kazan area revealed that out of 396 persons questioned about their attitude towards the Fast and who declared themselves Muslims, 40 per cent of the women and 60 per cent of the men did not observe the Fast.

¹⁴ *Fetwa* of 9 December, 1966.

¹⁵ Declaration of Ismail M. Sattiev on his return from Mecca on 21 March, 1969 at the cathedral mosque in Moscow.

¹⁶ See G. V. Smyr *Islam v Abkhazii i puti preodoleniya ego perezhitkov v sovremennykh usloviyakh*, Tbilisi, 1972, pp. 162-63.

¹⁷ The religious leaders also stressed this point at the Muslim Conference of Tashkent.

¹⁸ Smyr, op. cit., p. 169. See also M.V. Vagabov *Zhenshchina i islam*, Moscow, 1968.

¹⁹ See the text-book *Stroitelstvo kommunizma i preodolenie religioznykh perezhitkov*, Moscow, 1966, p. 143.