

RELIGION, STATE & SOCIETY

Volume 24 Numbers 2/3 September 1996

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Editorial

I am delighted to have been able to collaborate with Dr Shirin Akiner of the School of Oriental and African Studies in the production of this issue of *RSS*. We both felt the need for a volume which would constitute a convenient survey for students of the history of Islam in Russia and Central Asia and which would provide the basis for much-needed new work in the field now that proper empirical research has become possible. Dr Akiner's own contribution to this volume is a concise but comprehensive introduction which raises themes and questions taken up by many of the other authors.

Akiner argues that on the eve of the period of Soviet power there were three groups within Islam which were potentially capable of providing religious leadership: the ulama (the official 'clergy'), the mystics (notably members of the Sufi orders), and the modernising reformers (like Abdal Rauf Fitrat who forms the subject of the article by Sarfraz Khan in this issue of *RSS*). In the event it was to be the ulama on whom the mantle descended. Nevertheless, says Akiner, it was incorrect to maintain, as some western writers did in the 1980s, that there was a sharp distinction in the Soviet period between so-called 'official' (ulama-led) and 'unofficial' or 'parallel' (Sufi-led) Islam, the latter to be regarded as in some way the more 'genuine'. It seems in fact there was no clear-cut division but a graduated spectrum, with regular mosque attenders also in contact with mystical adepts.

These adepts, Akiner argues, did not however form part of my coherent underground movement. The old Sufi orders, she believes on the basis of the evidence now available, did not survive the persecutions of the 1930s. 'Later, especially in the somewhat freer climate of the 1980s, some individuals claimed to be Sufi adepts ... There is, however, little to suggest that they belonged to the "great" mystical tradition, as represented by the classical orders.' She therefore questions the contention of some western writers during the Soviet period that an underground Sufi movement was a potential instrument for widespread Islamic revival in Central Asia which might even destabilise the Soviet regime.

The group that constituted the third possible source of Muslim leadership by the end of the tsarist period, that of the modernising reformists, was according to Akiner that which suffered most under Soviet rule. Sarfraz Khan tells us that 'the need to adapt Islam to modern times became urgent in the nineteenth century as the Muslim world in general realised its weakness and backwardness in relation to the militarily and technologically powerful West.' He goes on to characterise the ensuing 'reformist' Islam, as typified in the life and work of Abdal Raul Fitrat (1886-1938) who was active over the crucial period when tsarist rule gave way to communist power in Central Asia. Fitrat lamented the moral and intellectual decline of his native Bukhara, which he blamed on the corrupt and uneducated ulama and on the ignorance and blind subservience of the ordinary people.

Fitrat and other reformers were ready to cooperate with the Soviet authorities in

the early year; but the latter were soon able to dispense with their help and they were condemned as 'bourgeois nationalists'. The Soviet authorities, then, would not tolerate reforms carried out under the aegis of Islam. In the Soviet period Islamic education was destroyed at the same time as secular education was quickly rising in standard and availability. This inevitably had the effect of undermining the intellectual impact of Islam, giving substance to the claim by antireligious propagandists that Islam was nothing more than a set of primitive superstitions and prohibitions. It is salutary to note that during the Soviet period it was the policy of the authorities towards Islam which meant that Islam did indeed demonstrate primarily those very features for which antireligious propagandists condemned it – the same features which Fitrat and other reformists had earlier criticised from within.

Yaacov Ro'i, in his article in this issue of *RSS*, also devotes some attention to Soviet anti-Islamic propaganda. He notes that propagandists laid stress both on the fact that Islam was not indigenous to the Soviet Union but had been imported from abroad, and on the fact that Islam as practised in Central Asia was heavily tainted with indigenous shamanism. These two features were 'considered as conducive to persuading believers to reconsider their adherence to a religion which either was not an inherent part of their original, national heritage or was not what it purported to be.' This oversimplification on the part of antireligious propagandists is typical of the kind of received view which needs to be superseded by responsible research. In her article in this issue of *RSS* Irene Melikoff sheds helpful light on this particular subject as she places the arrival of Islam in Central Asia in the context of the shamanistic paganism practised by the nomadic tribes of the steppes. 'When they embraced Islam it was in the form of a syncretic religion that can be described as 'islamised shamanism'.' The process of syncretism was catalysed by the development of popular Sufism.

In the flood of literature on Islam which has appeared in the post-Soviet period, notes Akiner, there is still a tendency for writers uncritically to repeat received opinion which has not been tested against new research. In this issue of *RSS* the survey by Dmitri Trofimov of functioning mosques and their imams in the former Soviet Union on the basis of recent data gathered over some three years is an example of the kind of field work which is now not only possible but essential. Five years after the end of the Soviet Union there is ample scope for detailed and empirically-based research into what Akiner calls this 'highly complex and obscure subject'.

Looking ahead, how might Islam in Central Asia develop? In one or more of three main ways, argues Akiner. It could become a political force, involving the creation of Islamic states, or the use of Islam by a ruling secular elite as a legitimising tool, or the use of Islam as a voice of protest by alienated, disadvantaged groups. It could become primarily a marker of ethnic identity. Finally, it could become a vehicle for spiritual renewal. There are many unanswered – and indeed unposed – questions about the role that Islam is playing and will play in the development of the former Soviet Union. This issue of *RSS* concludes with an article by Amr Sabet which, focussing on the Islamic Revolution in Iran, sets out a thought-provoking research agenda for understanding the role of religious dynamics in the shaping of social and political reality. A similar methodological approach could be extremely rewarding for the study of contemporary Central Asia.

Note on Transliteration

The simplest and least ambiguous forms of transliteration have been used. Apparent inconsistency in the transcription of the sound 'j' (as in 'John') arises from the fact that it is rendered as 'j' in words of Arabic or Persian origin but as 'dzh' in words of Russian origin. The use of diacritics has been avoided, as has the use of the single inverted comma to indicate a glottal stop. No attempt has been made to show vowel length.

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Shirin Akiner is director of the Central Asia Research Forum at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. She has some 20 years' first-hand experience of the region and speaks several of the local languages. She is the author of a number of works on Soviet and post-Soviet Central Asia and has acted as consultant for award-winning radio and television documentaries.

John Anderson is lecturer in international relations at the University of St. Andrews. He is the author of *Religion, State and Politics in the Soviet Union and Successor States* (Cambridge University Press, 1994).

Vladimir Bobrovnikov is a researcher at the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences.

Janice Broun, a graduate of Oxford University, is a freelance journalist specialising in religion in communist and former communist countries. She is the author of *Conscience and Captivity: Religion in Eastern Europe* (1988).

Ravil Bukharaev graduated in mathematics from Kazan' State University and pursued postgraduate studies in computer science at Moscow State University. A writer and lecturer in the field of Islamic studies and cultural studies of the peoples of the former USSR, he is a member of the PEN Clubs of Hungary and Tatarstan and of the Unions of Writers of Russia and Hungary.

Felix Corley writes on post-Soviet affairs and has a special interest in the Caucasus. He has made numerous visits to the region and has personal experience of the conflicts in Nagorny Karabakh, Chechnya and Ingushetia. His book *Religion in the Soviet Union: an Archival Reader* was published by Macmillan in 1996.

Gasym Kerimov graduated from the Oriental and Philological Faculties of Azerbaijan State University and the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR. From 1967 to the collapse of the USSR he was a member of the Institute of Scientific Atheism at the Academy of Social Sciences. He is now a professor in the study of religions at the Academy of Administration for the Russian Federation.

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Irène Mélikoff was born in Petrograd and emigrated with her family to Paris in 1919. She graduated from the Sorbonne and then from the *École Nationale des Langues Orientales Vivantes* where she studied Turkish and Persian. In 1968 she was appointed professor at the University of Strasbourg. In 1995 she received an honorary doctorate from the Seljuk University in Konya, Turkey. She is the author of a number of works on Islam and mysticism.

Yaacov Ro'i, of Tel Aviv University, is currently on sabbatical at St Antony's College, Oxford. He edited the book *Muslim Eurasia: Conflicting Legacies* (1995). His present research project is on Islam in the postwar Soviet Union.

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