

RELIGION IN SOCIETY

SECULARISM AND THE INTER-CONFESSIONAL RIFT (*Central Asia's experience*)

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Ideas about civil society, democratic principles, the constitutional system, and the separation between the state and religion are the product of secular, primarily European, cultural values which have been adopted to one extent or another as reference points in most post-Soviet states. However, the revival of religion and religious values is adding a special flavor to this situation. And to be more precise, this revival is giving rise to certain problems, in particular, open and latent conflicts between religious fundamentalists and the supporters of secular development who represent the political establishment of the Central Asian countries, as well as the often veiled appeal of politicians to Islamic values.

To a certain extent, mini conflicts of this kind are inevitable and arise from the differences in liberalism and religious culture. One of these

differences is the spiritual sphere, to which theologians are claiming a monopoly. And here they are at an advantage, since religion is the bearer of sacral precepts. In this sense, the revival of Islamic values and their use as a tribute to the religious situation in the region, so to speak, is also giving rise to several unsolvable contradictions. For example, propaganda by states of religious spiritual values and their perception in the Muslim sphere are turning religion into an ideology which, in turn, is influencing the formation of vital reference points, including the political preferences of a significant number of citizens. This is where the latent conflict between values and reference points begins. And any state that chooses the path of secular development, given the large number of believers in the country, always finds itself balanced on this barely perceptible edge.

These problems are also pertinent for the Central Asian countries, and the designated contradictions are currently a reality for all of the region's states. These conflicts can be settled by turning to our national experience and to the traditions and customs of the local Muslim community, which has learned over time to live in a polyconfessional environment. However, this is also leading to conflicts among theologians, since they have different ideas about the permissible degree of rapprochement with the representatives of other confessions and have different views about their own colonial past, the national features, customs, and rituals of the local people, and the ways to combine customs with the precepts of the Shari'a.

Nevertheless, one of the main problems in this sphere is *inter-confessional tolerance*. The theologians of different confessions often declare that they are ready to hold dialogs and that tolerance is the heart of their religion. But in my view this often nothing but ritual rhetoric and declarations and is not becoming a real norm of religious, particularly public, life. What is the reason for this? I would like to offer my own vision of the problem of inter-confessional tolerance or, vice versa, of the sources of inter-religious intolerance in the Central Asian republics.

So we are talking about one of the main reference points in the system of secular values—the call for tolerance, particularly with respect to the members of other confessions and ethnic groups who uphold different cultural values. Here I feel a special feature of our situation is related to our recent past. I am referring to repression and the Soviet policy of atheism which formed a cautious attitude, to say the least, among religious intellectuals to secular (or liberal) values and public and political institutions. This also applies to the degree of tolerance among some theologians. To illustrate this, it is enough to take a look at the Muslim religious literature published in the region. Running a little ahead, I will note that there is a big difference between the declarations of many religious leaders (which are more political in nature) and those ideas that become apparent when reading the Muslim literature legally and

illegally published these days by contemporary Muslim theologians in the region. An objective study of this literature compels us to make serious adjustments to our understanding of the real, but subconscious, aspects of religious consciousness and religious life of the local community, at least of most of the theologians who are publishing various works. I can say that after undertaking such a study, I became rather skeptical about the declared inter-confessional tolerance in the region.

I will only present a few examples here, or, to be more precise, two fragments from commentaries of the Qu'ran (*tafsir*) by famous theologians of the region. I think they precisely illustrate my earlier and later theses. I especially chose the commentaries of the 120th ayat of the Sura *Al-Baqarah*, where, I will remind you, the matter concerns the attitude of Muslims toward the infidels. In the officially published commentary of the Qu'ran (*tafsir*) by our most famous theologian, sheikh Muhammad-Sadik Muhammad-Yusuf, we read:

“From this and the previous ayats, as well as from contemporary experience, it is clear that the infidels will not leave us alone. They will carry out all kinds of hostile acts against Muslims in every sphere. ...But it is not worth hoping that they will be satisfied, for they will be satisfied only when we follow their religion. There is no other way they will take a liking to us. Jews and Christians have been hostile toward each other both in the past and nowadays. But they will immediately unite into a single bloc against the Muslims. They are trying to expel Muslims from their religion. But Muslims are entering into all kinds of talks and dialogs to somehow reach some understanding with them. Oh, if only this could be of benefit! For the main goal of the Jews and Christians is not mutual understanding. ...However ... Allah's path is the only true path. There is no need to think of anything else. There is no other way! There should be no turning from the true path! And so there is no need for mutual understanding with them (the infidels). For it is well known that the search for mutual understanding and attempts to cater to each others' needs will lead (us) to disaster. And there is no greater disaster (for

us) than the search for compromise with the infidels...".¹

About 15 years ago, another theologian of the region, Abduwali-kori Mirzaev, commented on this same ayat:

*"Islamic precepts are true, even if not everyone likes them! All other rules established in the public system are not worth twopence!... If anyone borrows even the smallest thing from the infidels, his path is an untrue path! Let such Muslims remember that they can either be Muslims or infidels! There is no other way! Do not follow them and do not deny your own religion! ...If you deny your own way, you deny Allah! ...But Islam's greatest foes are those Muslims who befriend Jews and Christians and borrow their rules, customs, and political systems. ... They think that if they reach an understanding with the Jews and Christians, they are not betraying their own religion... No! They are betraying it. Understanding cannot be reached with the infidels!!... Imitating the infidels and borrowing something from their "culture" is the same thing as following them and their faith... Today, Jews and Christians are hatching their selfish plans under the guise of various "cultural exchanges," "dialogs," "political and cultural unions"... But they are doing all of this against Islam, remember that! ...In actual fact, the confrontation between Jews and Christians, on the one hand, and Muslims, on the other, is not racial or geographic confrontation, it is confrontation between religions. And remember this well! However, at different times this struggle was given different names, but its essence has always been the same..."*²

Further in the same commentary, we read harsher, even aggressive, calls to distance ourselves from the infidels in every way. For example, let's take a look at the Sura *Al-Baqarah* (No. 2), ayats 11 and 12. The commentary is directed simultaneously against the "modernists" (=Islohatchilar, that is against reformers in the broad sense of this word),

¹ Sheikh Muhammad-Sadik Muhammad-Yusuf, *Tafsiri Hilol*, Mavorounnahr, Tashkent, 2005 (Baqarah, 120th ayat).

² 'Abduwali-kori (Mirzaev), *Tafsiri Furkon*, Madinai Munawwara, 2005 (published by 'Abd al-Kuddus, 'Abduwali-kori's son).

against secular governments, and against religious officials who are loyal to the secular forms of rule. Or in the commentary to ayats 26 and 27 of the same Sura, the author claims that the way to resolve ethnic conflicts should be based only on the laws of Islam: "*Islam knows no racism or nationalism. Islam knows only two nations—the Islamic nation and the nation of infidels.*"³ No matter what nation accepts Islam, we recognize it as an Islamic nation..."

From the commentary to ayat 107 (the same Sura No. 2):

"...In this world, there are many who call themselves 'Muslims' but befriend the enemies of Islam and Muslims. To acquire financial and other assistance from infidels, they refuse to perform the laws of Islam. But Muslims should be well aware that infidels never were and never can be the friends of Islam. ...Muslims should remember that only executing Allah's laws will stop the enemies of Islam and Muslims. We should not expect help from the enemies of Islam!"

From the commentary to ayat 108 (the same Sura):

"Those who say that instead of the Great Qu'ran and Shari'a they have chosen different 'imported' ways and (political) systems and say that 'we are going the path of secular development,' are those that believe in oppressors and trouble-makers instead of one Allah..."

From the commentary to ayat 109 (the same Sura):

"Hey, Muslims, the infidels have long wanted to turn you from the path and from the precepts of true faith. ...The infidels understand that if you follow Allah's behests, they will have no way to subordinate you. This will give them no peace!... Turn away from the infidels! Do not put yourselves on the same level as them!... Allah is capable of destroying them all in one fell swoop. Be with Allah, but not with them! ... do not believe that it is possible to have mutual understanding with them and in so doing preserve your interests. This is not true!"

The author of the commentary goes on to condemn Islamic states that support cultural and

³ Underlined in the original text.

political relations with “infidel countries.” He believes that these relations should be limited to economic and goods and resource exchanges only on “mutually advantageous Muslim conditions.” He also condemns Muslim states that borrow political and public institutions and structures created by the infidels.

The same severe attacks on infidels are also found in some other publications, for example, in the Uzbek translation of Muhammad Zahid ibn Ibrahim al-Bursawi, a Salaphite theologian well known in Arab countries.⁴ And the list continues with similar publications of religious Muslim literature in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, or Tajikistan.⁵

It goes without saying that these types of quotes are far removed from the quietism publicly proclaimed by some Muslim leaders and which it would be nice to see in Islam. Moreover, it is particularly difficult to combine this position with the actual idea of tolerance, the Islamic understanding of which naturally does not coincide with secular values. We can even say that such mutual attacks in religious literature are an inborn feature of all the mono religions on the whole, if we recall, for example, the Pope’s statements about the Prophet Muhammad, or the old and already traditional mutual attacks of Jewish and Muslim theologians. These viewpoints of old mutual non-acceptance can be regarded as historical birthmarks.

But the fragments presented were written by the most prestigious theologians in the region, for whom dogma and their own understanding of the holy texts are still the main reference points. And most important, this kind of interpretation (in printed and electronic form) is becoming the motivation and justification for the extremely intolerant position of many young Muslims, particularly in the southern regions of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, as well as in Uzbekistan. I see this almost every day.

⁴ See: Muhammad Zohid ibn Ibrahim al-Bursawi, *Mu’minning sifatlari*, Mavorounnahr, Tashkent, 2005, pp. 8, 19, 34 ff.

⁵ The present author is preparing an extensive study of officially and unofficially published religious literature in the Central Asian region.

Whatever the case, it is obvious that the attitude toward this dogma among the region’s contemporary Muslim authors appeared under the influence of theologians of the past, mainly of radical reformers of the western parts of the Islamic world, whose viewpoints, in turn, were formed under the influence of the anti-colonial and anti-Western movements of the beginning of the 20th century. It stands to reason that there is no place in these ideas for tolerance, which should also be perceived as a kind of endogenous (congenital) birthmark left in the aftermath of those challenges the Islamic world faced and is facing during colonization and neo-colonization.

There are other problems in the use and interpretation of the above and similar sources relating to re-Islamization in the Central Asian republics. I am talking about the *serious difference* between public declaration and the appeals to their own audiences (in the form of legal and illegal publications). The thing is that today’s theologians in the region have learned how to use contemporary means of information communication in their own interests. To some extent, this is the natural result of the politicization of some of the Central Asian Islamic leaders, or a reaction to the superfluous, at times inappropriate, extent to which some politicians in the region’s countries become carried away with Islamic rhetoric.

As for religious figures, I think it necessary to distinguish among their wide variety of different viewpoints espoused in publications, particularly on the Internet, which are more likely designed to arouse political intrigue. Sometimes the impression is created that the religious figures themselves do not always realize that they are being used in an information war and as a tool in the interests of the largest nations in one way or another opposed to each other. And sometimes it even seems that theologians are deliberately participating in the Great Game. This can also be said of the rhetorical statements of several religious leaders aimed at the broad public and the international mass media, or made at international symposia and conferences. It goes without saying that many religious leaders are trying

to demonstrate their own tolerance, willingness to hold a dialog, and political loyalty in this way, while only making a token attempt to uphold their own isolated Islamic identity. It is understandable that, in this case, the religious leaders drawn into regional or international policy are looking to international organizations, particularly those involved in human rights, for protection from their regimes. Moreover, they already feel at home in the political atmosphere of the Great Game and have learned to use its information features in their favor. This process can be seen as an entirely natural consequence of the politicization of Islam throughout the world. And the attempt to draw it into a dialog is a very positive thing.

But I think we are dealing with a very different problem. As I mentioned above, many of these religious leaders are espousing opposing ideas and making appeals in their publications or hutbas to their own audiences based more on an almost *total rift* with the non-Muslims. There is no need to prove that a rift always provides favorable ground for conflicts, religious extremism, and radicalism. As we noted above, some theologians (whereby the most prestigious) are openly calling for not entering into dialogs with the non-Muslims, thus latently fomenting inter-confessional confrontation. But according to my observations, this rift is at times escalating into hidden or open aggression in the inexperienced reader, particularly if he is young.

This is why a differentiated, as the specialists say, approach is needed to the sources, that is, broad public (information) rhetoric should be separated from appeals to their own audience. This approach will help to evaluate more correctly *where the political game of one religious leader ends and his ideology begins*. And it is not worth limiting such evaluations to the ordinary religious hypocrisy characteristic of the representatives of many confessions. It is utterly obvious that every researcher should be able to evaluate such ambiguous views of the religious leaders (as a result of their politicization) himself. I am talking only about the method of evaluation and interpretation of not only declared information sources, but also those aimed, so to speak, at "their own audience."

But under Central Asian conditions, the mentioned confessional rift has its own historical roots, which should also be kept in mind. Yes, our traditions and customs and our natural openness have been defined (including by geographic specifics). We have always been and are still, as is often declared today, at the junction between civilizations, cultures, and religions. Although relations between local Muslims and the representatives of other confessions and ethnic groups have not always been peaceful. But in the past 150 years, we have had to defend our own cultural and political independence and uniqueness, including our religious identity. And more often than not, our own culture (particularly religion) was preserved in the form of adaptation that always risked growing into assimilation. Moreover, it should be kept in mind that due to Bolshevization in the region, local Islam did not undergo any natural evolution or adaptation to the present-day conditions (due to the atheist policy in the past), and the reform movement (primarily the *jadids*) was also suppressed. The tradition of intellectual creativity was also violated. Throughout the entire Soviet period, not one significant or original theological work was written.

Nevertheless, in the Soviet period, it was cultural traditions and customs (including religious) that once again showed their tenacity and could oppose the total communist ideology. Re-Islamization began in the region and in other republics of the former Soviet Union during the years of Gorbachev's reform and after the collapse of the U.S.S.R. But religion was revived (and is being revived) in extremely conservative forms with the constant expectation (like *poor historical memory*) of unfriendly action by infidels, apostates, etc. And most important, according to the results of my extensive studies, I can confidently say that all of these ideas are interpolated into the perception of secular liberal values, or to be more precise, their non-acceptance (most often latent). I repeat that I am judging this first hand, including on the basis of the results of my study of the religious literature published in the region.

On the whole, it is not by chance that I am reminding you of this colonization period, par-

ticularly Bolshevization of the region. It is clear that the conditions created at that time cannot be referred to as positive with respect to maintaining historical tolerance. On the other hand, when Soviet policy was liberalized and the Soviet Union collapsed, we, in fact, entered a period of re-Islamization. In so doing, it happened at a much faster rate than the restoration and development of religious teaching. But returning to Islam in no way meant *understanding it as a complex system of dogmas and precepts*, particularly since the historical experience of peaceful relations with the members of other confessions was substantially discredited, particularly in Soviet times.

On the other hand, the new generation of theologians proved entirely unprepared for such rates of religious revival, there were no generators of new ideas, and new/old religious ideas and paradigms began to be imported from other regions of the Islamic world, mostly in very radical and extremist forms. To be more precise, these were paradigms formed among fundamentalists and extremists, whose ideology was born on the wave of religious, ideological, political, and military confrontation. This ideology, which was artificially interpolated into the Central Asian or Caucasian countries, gives rise to a mass of problems, conflicts, and clashes which are primarily detrimental to the Muslims themselves.

The Political Aspect

First let us take a look at the domestic political aspect. When the region's republics declared their independence, Islam was faced with the problem of retrieving its historical role of *social regulator*. But the Islamic leaders of the Central Asian countries have had no real opportunity so far to play this role. The social status once removed from religion is unlikely to regain its previous form in the new conditions. Some religious leaders are carrying out their activity very legitimately and are striving to preserve non-conflict relations with their governments in exchange for political loyalty and political estrangement. An exception is Tajikistan where the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) has been legitimized. Although it is obvious that the official authorities, which are trying to take the initiative from the politicized Muslim leaders by attempting to create their own "Tajik Islam," will also gradually oust it from the legitimate political field.

The other Islamic leaders of the region are carrying out their activity illegitimately, or, to all outward appearances, latently. They are openly or surreptitiously raising the question of the political status of Islam as the only necessary condition for preserving the Islamic identity and protecting it from infringements, as they believe, by the Christian world and the representatives of other confessions. At one time (at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s), almost all the Islamists of the region (with complete religious freedom) went on to exert significant efforts to create (or, according to their ideas, recreate) an Islamic state based exclusively on the laws of the Shari'a and, in so doing, maintaining extreme intolerance toward the infidels.

Some Western analysts suggest involving the Islamic parties in the legitimate struggle for power. Let us recall, for example, Charles William Maynes (the chairman of the Eurasia Foundation), who in one of his articles (in addition to everything else) put forward several approaches to Islam in the Central Asian republics. In particular, he wrote that the U.S. and other Western countries should use every available diplomatic and political means to insist on all the parties "striving for peaceful transformations," particularly Islamic political parties, to be incorporated into the official political system.⁶

⁶ See: Ch.W. Maynes, "America Discovers Central Asia," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 82, No. 2, 2003, p. 132.

Other authors (A.K. Zaifert and I.D. Zviagelskaia), while agreeing with this posing of the question, nevertheless justifiably note that there is still the real possibility that the Islamists who become part of the power system in this way will resort to orchestrating a radical change in the existing constitutional norms. And, consequently, the attitude of the European states to this power system is still open.⁷

In my opinion, there is still the danger in most Central Asian countries that if Islamic parties participate in the political struggle, they will most likely follow the religious radicals, thus shattering all hopes of preserving the secular institutions. In my opinion, this scenario is more likely in Central Asia today, keeping in mind the extremely intolerant and conservative mentality of most of the local Islamists. This viewpoint can be substantiated by at least referring to the quotes presented above from the works of the region's famous theologians.

It should also be noted that contemporary political Islam in the Central Asian states is a primarily imported phenomenon. And when we talk about the earlier political strivings of the same Sayyid Abdullo Nuri (the first leader of the IRPT, died in August 2007), or his Uzbek associates (Rahmatulla alloma, Abduwali-kori, and others), we should not forget that their political breakthrough (as a reaction to the atheist policy) began to form as early as Soviet times, but under the influence of the works of such pillars of the ideology of political Islam as Abu-l-'Ala' al-Maududi (1903-1979), Muhammad 'Abduh' Abdo (died in 1906), and Sayyid Qutb (sentenced to death in 1966), whose works were analyzed in their illegal study groups (*hujra*) primarily in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Such reference points and clichés borrowed from militant political Islam played a significant role in forming the views of the local Islamists, defining their intolerance and radicalism.

Moreover, many followers and heirs of the ideas of political Islam, in Egypt for example, are already critically reconsidering their militant past and officially rejecting violence, thus expressing their willingness to adapt to the new conditions.⁸ While most of their like-minded followers in the Central Asian countries, particularly the radical wing,⁹ were extremely far from this.

It goes without saying that the Islamic religious party will sooner or later look for ways to justify its goals, ideas, and postulates in its own dogma, if only out of fear of losing its rating among its own electorate. And it is still not clear what direction this search will go in. At least for the moment, the views of the Central Asian Islamists striving to legitimize their own status boil down to an inflexible political ideology (to be more precise, phraseology) based on ayats selected with partiality from the Qu'ran, examples from the Sunnah, or based on a sacral idea of the history of Islam.¹⁰ And judging from the results of our polls and the content of a large amount of literature they illegally published, most Islamists of the region regard democracy as grounds for destroying Islam, and secularism as a "regime of apostates."¹¹ Moreover, the question of religious (Islamic) legitimacy of the concepts of democracy in general, modernism, or, let's say, the constitutional system has still not been resolved ultimately and positively among most of the local Islamists.

In addition, it should be kept in mind that most of the political elite in most of the Central Asian countries, which, according to Soviet tradition, are called "secular," regard themselves as Muslims

⁷ See: A.K. Zaifert, I. Zviagelskaia, "Primirenie Evropy i islama v Evrazii," *Vostok (Oriens)*, No. 5, 2004, p. 81.

⁸ See: G. Kraemer, "Introductory Presentation," in: *State and Religion in Countries with a Muslim Population*, ed. by Z. Munavvarov, R. Krumm, Tashkent, 2004, p. 158.

⁹ According to the information of current chairman of the IRPT M. Kabiri, in 1996, the party leaders agreed to begin talks. In response to this, head of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan T. Yoldosh repeatedly stated that the IRPT had "betrayed the interests of Islam" and that jihad had to be waged until a single Islamic state was formed in all the Muslim countries of the region.

¹⁰ The most characteristic example is the intolerant position of the Hizb ut-Tahrir party, which incidentally is also one of the "exported" organizations.

¹¹ Compare this with the position of the Turkish Islamists.

(recognizing Islam as a historical-cultural, ritualistic, and spiritual tradition). Moreover, in the current situation, the secular states of the region are manifesting significant liberalism toward religion, freedom of confession, and so on (political Islam is the exception, toward which there is also an ambiguous attitude, ranging from liberal-speculative, as in Tajikistan, to downright non-acceptance, as in other countries). Religion is also recognized as a spiritual and cultural value, its symbols, provisions, and figures (Islamic authorities of the past) are used as a component of the official ideology in essentially all the countries of the region. Although problems also arise here, which we will look at below.

On the whole, we will remind you again that local Islam is still extremely conservative. At present, the question of reform is particularly urgent, especially in the context of the global changes. The political circles of the Central Asian countries are offering different types of reform: in the form of “secular religion,” “enlightened Islam,” and so on. Some theologians see reform in a more conservative framework, by means of fresh approaches to interpreting legal questions and other problems that contemporary Muslims (*ijtihad*) face, using an already time-tested tool—development of the foundation of fiqh and making decisions (*fatwa/fatwolar*) in the spirit of the times.¹² But we are sure that in the current situation any attempt to carry out regional reform of Islam in one form or another will definitely result in the politicization of this process. And this, in turn, will give rise to a mass of problems in the local societies and governments. Great care should be taken when raising the question of drawing Islamists into the political process (or of their “political legitimization”) in such conditions; all the possible consequences of this step should be analyzed in advance.

For example, if we presume that Islamists come to power peacefully (as the above-mentioned authors presume) in one of these countries, in addition to the above-mentioned consequences, the first result will be that large numbers of secular residents of this country will leave it (which happened at one time in Iran). The representatives of other confessions will also most likely leave such a country (and we are talking about millions of people). This situation will realistically lead to the appearance of a mono religion and open the way to actual “Talibanization” of Central Asia. Under local conditions (where the timid steps of religious reform are far from complete and where the local Muslims hold a wide variety of different views), we can definitely expect a struggle for power within such an Islamic regime, as a result of which power will most likely be seized by radical forces. On the other hand, erosion (emigration or Islamic adaptation) of the secular strata of the population will mean that there is simply no physical foundation on which the secular part of the state’s political elite or even its “constitutional orientation” can rest (which some experts are writing about as the main prerequisite for allowing the Islamists to take power). While under the conditions of, say, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, this situation could lead to a standoff between the more secular northern regions and the Islamic south of these republics. Of course, I have no wish to paint such a gloomy picture, but most of those who are studying the problems of political Islam in the Central Asian countries do not have any serious objections to this development of events (if the Islamists become legalized).

Perhaps these circumstances also define the fact that there are no equal alliances between official politicians and religious figures. And in this case, a strange, although entirely legitimate, picture is revealed. Almost all the leading political figures of the region are beginning to play a role that is entirely uncharacteristic and uncustomary for them in trying to seize control over the so-called “Islamic factor.” But this is still manifested only in the officials’ rhetoric and in their patronage of various religious-political undertakings (although Islamization of official rhetoric at times becomes absurd and makes us doubt the secular nature of some of the Central Asian states).

¹² See: Sheikh Muhammad-Sadyk Muhammad-Yusuf, *Ihtiloflar haqida*, Mavorounnahr, Tashkent, 2003, pp. 72-78.

For example, let us recall the recent resolutions or official speeches of Tajik President Emomali Rakhmon, who quoted the Qu'ran and hadith to substantiate them.¹³ This may have been interesting had Mr. Rakhmon's utter religious illiteracy not been so apparent. He, whether he wanted to or not, was playing into the fundamentalists' hands, at least with respect to the ways he resorted to when presenting his arguments, both in his speeches and in the decrees he initiated on the fight against "religious vestiges."

In any case, the attempts of the region's political figures to use the Islamic factor as part of the political game and to raise their own ratings are officially encouraging Islamization (or encouraging radical Islamism) rather than promoting a spiritual or cultural revival. Nation-building in the Central Asian countries is still at the early stage of development when national and religious identity cannot always be fully separated from each other.¹⁴

Of course, the transformations in various spheres of public, economic, and political life began not that long ago and will not be easy, creating, as already mentioned, much room for social tension. In so doing, the radical Islamist will exploit the dissatisfaction among those strata of the population deprived to one extent or another of the public benefits in their attempts to replace secular states with Islamic. What is more, the countries of the region are not coordinating their religious policy, although many of their problems and challenges are identical. As I see it, the former Soviet nationalism/region-alism is preventing this, which has acquired all the features of a regional standoff, either in the form of a struggle for "regional leadership," or in territorial claims, or in mutual claims regarding water and hydrocarbon resource distribution, and so on. In so doing, the once common history of the region is becoming a hostage in this standoff. The new "national interpretation" and "rehashing" of history can be likened to the distortions and interpretations in official Soviet history. Ordinary Muslims cannot help but see these problems, who, according to my observations, have two outwardly opposing reactions to them:

- 1) serious nostalgia for the Soviet period (mainly among the older generation) and
- 2) greater sympathy for the idea of a "regional Islamic state," a version of the caliphate (primarily among theologians and the youth).

These and similar circumstances, in my opinion, will still long define the "face of Islam" in the region's states, particularly as far as mutual confessional tolerance is concerned. It is very obvious that this requires long *transformation and evolution of the believers themselves*, particularly of the authors of large and small theological works. For the time being, however, many of them regard secular liberal and democratic principles as alien, or, at best, simply tolerate them. Politicians should also change their way of thinking.

Moreover, the ideas of inter-confessional tolerance in the Muslim world are also being subjected to another kind of test, if we keep in mind the *external irritants* prompting a constant revival of radical ideas among some Muslims and searches for their substantiation in the Qu'ran and Sunnah. The matter concerns military conflicts in the Muslim countries. And while they exist, these irritants will also remain a serious factor directly encouraging inter-religious intolerance.

I believe that even these facts *in no way mean* that Islam is intolerant, dangerous, and permanently aggressive. It, as other religions, is diverse, and the discourse with religious radicals is in no way hopeless. Particularly since the local governments are searching for and independently choosing their own path and methods for opposing the ideas of confessional intolerance, radicalism, and terror-

¹³ From the video cassettes of President Emomali Rakhmon's speeches (these are election campaign speeches, as well as that presented at the ceremonial gathering devoted to the 16th anniversary of independence, and others).

¹⁴ See: A.K. Zaifert, I.D. Zviagelskaia, op. cit., p. 77.

ism (alas, not always successfully). But I think that it is more reasonable in this policy to support and encourage local customs and rituals that can create natural and time-tested ground for maintaining confessional tolerance. After all, it is no accident that those who uphold an aggressive ideology are severely criticizing those who uphold local religious traditions for their religious and political conformism.
