

## RELIGION IN SOCIETY

## RELIGIOUS THOUGHT IN CENTRAL ASIA: IT NEEDS A MAJOR OVERHAUL

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Islam, one of the most stable aspects of Central Asia today, has a considerable influence on the local historical and sociopolitical processes and their trends. Its potential and stability are rooted in the unique combination of historical and political circumstances that add legitimacy to Islam and ensure its future.

Islam as an important strategic factor cannot be excluded from the region's social and political life: all the Central Asian countries are doing their best to make it more constructive and to use its huge physical and moral potential to build democratic nation-states.

Today, Islam in Central Asia is very conservative and steeped in tradition; while still an important factor in the present sociopolitical context, it is experiencing a crisis created by the gap between the type and level of religious awareness and the realities of developed contemporary society. Being weak intellectually and lacking structure, Islam is unable to play the constructive and creative function inherent in it. This explains why in Central Asia its role is

not always positive; more often than not this negatively affects the sociopolitical processes there.

The pernicious results are clearly demonstrated by two very important aspects. First, while the level of religious awareness in a society that is behind the times remains low, religion, with its untapped potential, is degenerating from a consolidating factor into a factor of instability and radicalism. Second, Islam has still not become a driving force of nation-state formation. This deprives the process of Islam's omnipotent physical and moral potential and could also deprive future political regimes of legitimacy.

It stands to reason that against the background of the permanently active Islamic factor the present crisis in religious thinking will most likely lead to negative moral, cultural, social, and political phenomena, including religious radicalism and extremism with political overtones. Religious awareness and religious thought should be raised to a level where religion will not only stop feeding conflicts (a role which does not belong to it), but also play a

constructive role in creation and consolidation. This adds urgency to the problem of reforming religious thinking and of modernizing the Islamic factor as a precaution against radicalization of religion and a guarantee of its sustainable development.

To achieve that we need a set of programs related to the following issues:

- (1) improved mechanisms for regulating relations between the state and religion, as

well as the legal basis of Islam's social functioning;

- (2) structural and meaningful changes in the sphere of religious education;
- (3) modernization of religious enlightenment;
- (4) improvement of the imperfect Muslim clergy institution, etc.

## Historical and Political Reasons for the Retarded Development and Conservation of Religious Thinking

By the turn of the 20th century, the Muslim world had become an arena of reformist trends which brought religious thought to a qualitatively new level. This process can be described as modernization of religious thinking and the Islamic interpretation of the new historical epoch. The way this issue is treated predetermines the way Islam and the Muslims will treat new social realities. The struggle between the traditional and the modern, which started early in the 20th century in many Islamic countries, gradually undermined the traditional form and idea of religion inherited from the Middle Ages; it adjusted Islam to the new conditions and created a harmonious blend of Islam and elements of the new lifestyle. This can be described as Islam's main achievement in the new era.

At the turn of the 20th century, political and religious reform movements were launched by prominent thinkers Bekhbudi, Akhmad Donish, Savdo, Munzim, Ayni, and others in Bukhara and Samarkand, two of the most influential historical and religious centers in Central Asia. Early in the 20th century, the general process of Islamic reformation in the region (and elsewhere in the Muslim world) moved into a phase of pro-nationalistic and structural changes in religious thinking. It was then that the active members of the Young Bukhara movement "Jadidia" published reformist newspapers and magazines, renovation literature, opened schools of a "new type," and created specific reformist religious and sociopolitical programs. The movement itself was gradually acquiring a clearer organizational structure and developed a program of its political activities. In 1920, when the Bukhara Emirate fell under the blows of the Bolsheviks, who established Soviet power in Central Asia, the region became totally isolated from the Islamic world.

Whereas elsewhere in the Muslim world religious thought was developing, deepening, and modernizing, in Central Asia the process was cut short. Under Soviet power, Islam was socially excluded, which means that religious thinking and religious relationships remained at the level they had reached by the early 20th century. As a result, the quality and form of religious thinking in Central Asia differ a lot from (or lag behind, to be more exact) the religious thinking in other parts of the Muslim world.

On the other hand, the social infrastructure developed rapidly under Soviet power; the entire complex of social relations was modernized; traditional Central Asian society became contemporary. It was engulfed by a wave of materialist propaganda and artificially accelerated secularization. Today these factors are contributing to the crisis of religious thinking in Central Asia; they are widening the gap between the quality and type of Islamic thinking and the sociopolitical development level and demands of the structurally developed and fairly rational and secular society.

## Specific Features of “Fossilized” Religious Thinking

For the reasons described above the level of religious thinking in Central Asia is very primitive, limited, and negatively conservative.

1. The sociopolitical side of Islam can be described as a mechanism which molds public awareness and promotes individual socialization. Being banished from the official environment and deprived for a long time of an independent sociopolitical role, Islam lost its structuralizing function and stopped operating as a sociopolitical mechanism for socializing the faithful and shaping people as social individuals. This type of religious thinking contributed to the alienation of those broad strata of the population who adhered to Islam as a special lifestyle; they were excluded from socialization and public activities. In this way, religion developed into a marginalizing factor, while society was confronted with the problem of social mobilization.
2. As it adapted, religion alleviated or even resolved many of the problems created by the tradition/modernism dilemma. Because of its extremely limited contacts with the outside world, religious thinking in Central Asian societies is still far removed from the Islamic conception of the contemporary world. This is especially obvious when it comes to combining the Muslim lifestyle and elements of modernity. The deep-cutting reforms of Islamic thought and modernization of the Islamic world outlook in Iran, Egypt, Turkey, Southeast Asia, and elsewhere, which renovated Islam, did not affect Central Asia. They never reached the clerics or most the faithful there, who still have no idea about these changes and their meaning. As a result, there is an acute contradiction between the quality and fundamentals of religious awareness in Central Asia and current reality in this region, which is demonstrated in certain spheres of everyday life. In this context, the faithful tend to regard individual elements of contemporary life as alien and lacking legitimacy. This is a serious obstacle on the path to modernizing all of society by introducing new elements of contemporary life, some of which are purely technical.
3. The prolonged ban on freedom of conscience, the extermination of Islamic clerics, etc., destroyed the religious education system and dramatically lowered the level of religious knowledge among common people, primarily among the faithful. The sources of religious knowledge removed from circulation were replaced with clandestine, and individual, forms of religious education. In the absence of written sources, oral tuition was practiced, which gradually resulted in the absolute ignorance of the faithful.

A gradual departure from the conceptual fundamentals of Islam (or their total disappearance from circulation) and concentration on religious rites and rituals as the ultimate evidence of religion warped the idea of religion and its sociocultural and sociopolitical role: several generations of Central Asian Muslims viewed Islam as the combination of a very limited number of rituals and abstract theological ideas which had nothing in common with rationalism, science, and sociopolitical life. In this context, many rituals were performed by force of habit, while religion acquired mythical and folklore overtones. This commonly accepted view of religion stands opposed to the resurgence of genuine Islamic principles and values. In this way, one interpretation of religion competes with another interpretation of the same religion, which can be described as “opposition of religion to itself.” This is one of the main problems and obstacles on the road to reforming religious thinking in Central Asia.

4. Disappearance of the clergy as an individual social group is one of the results of the historical and political circumstances described above. Those who survived in the Soviet Union continued disseminating knowledge about Islam; the state even helped create a layer of pro-Soviet

clerics. Today, however, the Islamic clergy as a traditional institution of control and guidance for the faithful has failed to overcome its structural disunity and intellectual inadequacy. This “system-less system” and the low level of general and religious education of the clerics make it impossible for them to modernize religion and religious thinking. The intellectual potential, level of understanding, and willpower of the Islamic clerics needed for such transformations are inadequate to the task of raising religion to a contemporary level. On the other hand, the clerics’ structural disunity and the large number of petty trends among them have led to a struggle among themselves. As a result, they have developed into a disunited group incapable of winning a clear-cut social position for themselves. It is quite rare to see Islamic clerics themselves damaging their influence and status in society.

5. The persistent efforts to impose atheist communist ideas (as the green light for participation in social and political activities) on the local Muslims, who consistently rejected them, drove people away from social and political involvement and killed any interest in politics. This gradually divided society into the enlightened secular top crust and poorly educated religious masses. This meant that devotion to religion became a sort of sign of social exclusion. The highly religious Central Asian population had to face a situation in which organizational and structural laxity, the low educational level and conservatism of most Islamic clergy, as well as the low level of political culture and political awareness of most of the faithful prevented Islam from playing its constructive and unifying role.

This had pernicious consequences in two main areas. First, a situation emerged in which the level of religious thinking was low, while religion trailed behind social modernization. This transformed religion (normally a consolidating factor) into a factor of instability and backwardness, and created an environment that bred religious extremism and radicalism. Second, excluding Islam from nation-state building deprives the process of immense physical and moral potential, on the one hand, while permitting the creation of political regimes far removed from social reality and deprived of legitimacy, on the other.

## **Modernization of Religious Thinking and Its Main Tools**

If the religious thinking crisis in the region continues, the Islamic factor will have a negative influence on the social and political processes there. The “fossilized” type of religious thinking, and its specific features, is a serious obstacle on the road to religious renovation, socialization of the faithful, and overall modernization of society. At the same time, “fossilized” religious thinking leads to religious extremism, intolerance of alien cultures, etc., and, in the final analysis, to social destabilization.

### **1. Improvement of Religion’s Social Functioning Mechanism and its Relations with the State**

Even though this problem is not directly related to the issues reflecting the internal crisis of religion and religious thinking in the region, its very presence preserves and deepens the crisis. This problem is present in all the Central Asian republics. It is manifested in the fact that all of them still do not have an adequate legal basis or an adequate political conception. (Several steps in the right

direction were made in Tajikistan, yet the problem has still not been resolved.) In other words, despite religion's influence and its great potential, legislation and political practices continue to ignore it and it is not in great demand. Contrary to Islam's historical role in shaping the ethnic and cultural identity of all the Central Asian nations and despite their devotion to religion, the ruling Central Asian regimes are insisting on forced secularization. Generally speaking, these practices are following in the Soviet Union's footsteps, thus depriving Islam of an official status and perpetuating its social exclusion. As I have mentioned before, this is one of the reasons for the fossilized religious thinking in our region.

In this way, the Central Asian regimes are driving religious thinking toward radicalism. This is decreasing the ruling regimes' legitimacy and creating seats of political unrest, on the one hand, while turning religion into a factor of persistent instability and preventing it from tapping its positive potential, on the other.

### **(a) *The Sociopolitical Status of Religion and State Policies in this Sphere***

Secular state power in the Central Asian republics and Islam's considerable role in them have made it imperative to formulate national policy concepts regarding religion and determine how the state should carry them out. The following can be described as the main aims of such activities: integration of religion into social and political life to prevent it from developing into a factor of instability; channeling religion's huge potential into strengthening national security and ensuring national interests; encouraging partnership with moderate religious trends and socializing the faithful without imposing secularization on them; modernizing religious thinking, etc.

At the same time, the local countries badly need a national conception (or a legal document) for registering the social status of religion and regulating all of its relations with the state. This document (a declaration, national conception, or constitutional law) should be drawn up with the concerted efforts of all public and political forces, including representatives of Islamic thought and the clergy. The document should give a correct and contemporary scientific description of religion and the relationships within it; a clear interpretation of the principles of a secular nation-state guiding the particular republic and its relations with the key components of the people's national and cultural identity, of which religion is one; and a scientifically substantiated assessment of the place and role religion played and is playing in culture. It should also describe the attitude of a secular state toward Islam as an integral part of the nation's ethnic identity; assess the real value of religion in the context of ethnic values and identify its place in national interests and national security; provide a correct description of religion's political involvement in a secular state; outline the limits of political activities of religious organizations; provide a detailed description of the relations between the state, society, and religion, and comment on the constitutional provisions that separate religion from the state; ban the use of religion as state ideology; identify the powers of state bodies dealing with religion and religious organizations; clarify the correlation between state interference in religious affairs and the meaning of the constitutional principle of separation of the state and religious organizations; provide a clear-cut description of religious organizations and their activities; identify the relations between religious political and non-political organizations; outline the legal frames, system, and status of general (primarily higher and academic) religious education, etc.

In fact, many of the debatable issues in the sphere of religion plaguing all the Central Asian republics are generated by religion's inadequate mechanism for functioning in society and the absence of detailed national policies in this sphere.

**(b) Improvement of  
the Legal Basis of the Relations between  
the State and Religion**

The legal acts now in effect in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan convincingly demonstrate that the legal basis of the Central Asian republics has two major flaws. First, the legislators fail to see the real role of religion in society. Second, the laws related to religion are not detailed enough and, therefore, lack specificity. This suggests that to acquire (or improve) the legal basis we should liberate the spirit, add details to the legal acts, and adjust them to social realities.

**(c) Change the Nature and  
Status of the State Structure Dealing  
with Religion**

Today, the state structures dealing with religion mainly control them and, in particular, identify the nature and limits of religious activities in society. Still very much affected by the Soviet anti-religious ideology, these structures continue to actively interfere in the internal affairs of religious organizations (from appointing their leaders to censoring speeches and sermons). On many occasions this interference does nothing but complicate the relations between the state and religion and preserves distrust of the state and the state leaders among the faithful.

It should be borne in mind that attempts by the state to control religion and limit its role do not usually produce positive results in Muslim societies; they merely aggravate the relations between the state and religion. For this reason, the Central Asian republics should change the functions and roles of the state structures dealing with religious affairs and transform them into coordinators and partners.

**2. Improvement and  
Modernization of  
Religious Education**

In Islam, the religious education system plays a key role in shaping the type of religious thinking prevalent among the faithful. While preserving their key position in society, the makhtabs, madrasahs, and hawzahs gradually acquired symbolic meaning and a sacred status. At all times, madrasahs, together with mosques, have been regarded as the main religious institutions, for that reason all their initiatives were seen as legally justified. At the same time, religious education is functioning as an institution of accumulation and distribution of intellectual potential, and a mechanism for its improvement, rationalization, and systematization. Religious education determines the place and role of each member of the clergy and helps to preserve the system and integrity of faith. The history of Islamic reformist movements says that most medieval and contemporary reformist movements were launched by institutions and centers of religious education. In other words, the quality and level of religious thinking in Central Asia largely depend on whether or not the system of religious education will accomplish modernization and improvement.

Today, this system is in a crisis; it does not meet the requirements of the times. The educational establishments are preserving their traditional forms, while their curricula are based on the curricula of the Bukhara madrasahs of the 19th century, highly distorted at that. A typical graduate of a religious school in Dushanbe or Tashkent does not have adequate intellectual potential or social awareness of the current times. This suggests the following changes in religious education.

### **(a) *Structural Improvement***

For better results, measures in this sphere should include: an improved legal basis and a clear official status for religious education; centralized (yet not necessarily state) regulation of religious education and its modernization with the aim of achieving general and internal systematization of its institutions; specification of the stages and creation of a multi-stage unified system; correlating diplomas and other documents of religious and secular education.

### **(b) *Modernizing the Content of Religious Education***

Specific measures in this field should embrace the following aspects: improvement of outdated curricula; introduction of new socializing and rationalizing disciplines (history of one's country and world history, sociology, political science, foreign languages, etc.); improvement of the traditional teaching methods; elaboration of the requirements needed to award scholarly degrees and identify qualifications of the graduates (something like the entrance, graduate, candidate, doctoral, and other exams used by the secular education system).

### **(c) *Restoring Ties between Teaching and Scholarly Activities***

The following can and should be done in this sphere: encouraging fundamental research in the sphere of religious education; help in writing teaching aids which will meet all contemporary requirements; help in setting up research departments or centers at educational establishments; support in publishing a journal to supply information about the state of affairs in religious education.

### **(d) *Strengthening the Technical Basis***

Material and technical aid is needed in publishing the necessary teaching aids; aid in supplying technical equipment for special purposes: classes of foreign languages, computer classes, research departments, offices, etc.

## **3. Raising the General Level of People's Religious Awareness**

Religious ignorance and lack of knowledge about religion are responsible for the inadequate perception of the meaning of religion and lead to dangerous abuse of religious principles and values. Religious education should be concerned with providing a more rational understanding of religion by society as a whole and by the faithful in particular; with cleansing religion of phenomena alien to its nature, and with modernizing religious thinking.

To achieve this, the religious education system should be adjusted to the demands of the times; and it should raise the intellectual potential of the Islamic clergy in all the Central Asian republics. More specific steps should include: teaching world religions, the fundamentals of religion, and the history and basics of Islam in secular schools; we need books written in clear language about the constructive principles of Islam, by which I mean solidarity, brotherhood, peace, craving for knowledge, creative efforts, charity,

and explanation of the common roots, elements and values of all the world religions; Islam should be recognized as one of the component parts of the region's culture and should be studied as such; we need radio and TV programs to achieve the above aims.

#### ***4. Modernization of the Institution of Islamic Clergy***

In all the Central Asian republics, the Islamic clerics are disunited, their intellectual level is low, and they can be described as a "system-less system." Incompetent and not wishing to introduce changes, they present a serious barrier to the modernization of religion and society. To improve the situation, the structure of spiritual administrations should be enhanced, along with the decision-making mechanisms; the type of thinking and lifestyle of the Muslim clergy should be gradually modernized. A corresponding program should embrace the following spheres.

##### ***(a) The Structure and Functions of the Spiritual Administrations***

As soon as the Soviet Union disappeared, the former branches of the Central Asian Spiritual Administration of the Muslims (CASAM) in the republics acquired independence. In Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan they have preserved all the features typical of their predecessor, which undermines their legitimacy and authority among the faithful. First, despite their non-political status they have to support the official authorities and their political positions. Second, they hire clerics loyal to the government, not all of whom are competent or respected religious leaders.

Their dependence on politics and their lagging behind (in many respects, including their quality) foreign religious leaders do not allow these structures to develop into religious centers. This has undermined religion's potential and allowed alternative religious centers to emerge, thus preserving the split among the faithful and even widening it. The example of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan has demonstrated that those elected to head the corresponding spiritual administrations are not always the most respected clerics. In Tajikistan, for example, the council of the ulema set up according to this principle does not enjoy authority among the faithful and cannot formulate and protect their rights. What is more, it is equally unable to regulate the complex relations among the clergy and inside the religious community in general.

##### ***(b) The Mechanism of Decision-Making***

The lack of coordination in issuing fatwas and the discrepancy between the official and real structures of religious authority are widening the split in the religious community. In all the Central Asian republics, the fatwas and commentaries issued by the official spiritual administration (empowered to issue such documents) are ignored by prominent religious figures and a certain part of the faithful because of the lack of respect for and trust in the official religious structures.

To remedy the situation we should restore the Islamic tradition according to which the right to issue fatwas belongs to respected "shuros" (religious councils composed of respected religious leaders). Each republic should be advised to issue periodical collections of fatwas passed by respected ulema in order to prevent oral religious "law making."



### **(c) *A System of Religious Ranks and Degrees***

I have already written that the conservative nature of religion in Central Asia is preserved by the “system-less system” of the Islamic clergy, which allows its members to damage the influence and authority of Islam. To avoid this, the hierarchy and structure of the Islamic clergy in the Central Asian republics should be changed and ordered; the way of thinking and lifestyle of the local clerics should be modernized. To achieve this, a clear system of religious ranks and degrees should be created corresponding to the clerics’ spiritual, scholarly, and official level; spheres where such degrees and ranks can be used should be identified; efforts should be made to create a class of clerics aware of their civil responsibility and a layer of “middle-class” clergy (a group of moderate Islamic technocrats and intelligentsia).

## ***C o n c l u s i o n***

An analysis of the position of religion in Central Asia has demonstrated that, all local specifics notwithstanding, the entire region is caught in an acute religious crisis with possible grave moral, social, and political repercussions.

### **(a) *Inference***

In the future, too, Islam, as a key strategic factor, will continue to influence the sociopolitical picture in Central Asia. Islam is experiencing a grave crisis created by the gap between the way and level of religious thinking and current reality; religious thought in the region has become “fossilized” because the region is trailing behind the general trend toward modernization in Islam. This largely happened because Central Asia was part of the Soviet Union and its anti-religious policies.

This crisis gives rise to religious conservatism and radicalism; through them the Islamic factor (potentially very powerful) is having a negative influence on the social and political processes in Central Asia. The time has come to systematize religion’s social status and modernize the quality and level of religious thinking.

### **(b) *Recommendations***

The Central Asian countries should improve religion’s social functioning mechanism and its relations with the state, especially when it comes to elaborating national policies in the religious sphere. The legal basis of the relations between religion and the state should be improved, liberalized, and specified. The nature and status of the state structure dealing with religion should be readjusted to make it a partner, rather than the controlling body it is today. It is expedient to improve the content and structure of religious education, unify its system, and modernize outdated curricula.

At the same time, the need to raise the general level of religious thinking is overripe; we have to achieve a more rational perception of religion and change the structure and functions of the spiritual administrations in order to transform them into real and competent centers of decision-making engaged in coordinating religious activities in each specific country.