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Religion, politics, and anthropology

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CHAPTER FIVE

STRUGGLING TO INTERPRET ISLAM IN CENTRAL ASIA

Religion, politics, and anthropology



Julie McBrien

INTRODUCTION

Studies of Islam in post-Soviet Central Asia had long been predetermined and foreshortened by the influence of Soviet-era scholarly frames and contemporary political and security concerns (e.g. Benningsen and Lemerrier-Quellejay 1979; Benningsen and Broxup 1983; Poliakov 1991; Naumkin 2005; Olcott 2007).¹ These works were either fixated on Islam as a source of violence and instability in the region, relied on overly dichotomist frames for the interpretation of Islam, or were mired in theoretical traditions which limited investigations. Over the last 10–15 years however, a body of scholarship, primarily in anthropology, has emerged that has broken with these concerns and examined, instead, the multiple ways that Muslims in Central Asia understand and live Islam.

This new anthropological work builds fruitfully upon and places itself in dialogue with discussions in the broader anthropology of Islam (e.g., Bowen 1993; Mahmood 2005; Hirschkind 2006; Deeb 2006; Ahmad 2017). Within this body of work, Talal Asad's 1986 essay 'The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam' is a foundational text. In it, Asad argues for the need to define an analytical field of investigation when undertaking the study of Islam. His proposition is to understand Islam as *discursive tradition*, in which Muslims attempt to carry out correct practice in reference to an established set of texts which have a long-standing history. Intriguingly, the frameworks that have recently emerged for interpreting Islam in the former socialist region may stand at odds with Asad's central assertion in his seminal text. In a 2019 panel of the Central Eurasian Studies Society, Morgan Liu and Usmon Boron argued that the conceptual frames developed for Islam in Central Asia tend to describe Islam and Muslimness in terms that reference belonging (Privratsky 2001; McBrien 2017), culture (Khalid 2007), or ideology (Pelkmans 2017). In Asad's work, however, Islam is defined as a *discursive tradition*, an articulation which may not fit with understandings that foreground culture or belonging.

This tension deserves treatment for, if it holds true, it suggests either a reworking of Asad's quintessential theory or an adjustment to the ways in which Islam in Central Asia is treated (Liu 2017; 2020; Fadil 2019a; 2019b). Liu (2020) has argued for the latter, positing that a more serious engagement with Asad's work may open up new avenues for research on Islam in the region. Against this, I assert that a close reading

of both Asad's text and the work on Islam and Central Asia, does not reveal a contradiction, but rather a compatibility and an extension of his thought (see also Fadil 2019b). Moreover, the anthropology of Islam in Central Asia is a thriving field. The more pressing question is, I stress, what this body of work can contribute to wider disciplinary discussions.

ASAD AND 'THE IDEA OF AN ANTHROPOLOGY OF ISLAM'

Asad's aim in his 1986 article is clear – to establish Islam as an analytical category. His conceptualization was made against the three dominant frames for interpreting Islam within anthropology at the time, as he outlines, namely Islam as 1) impossible to define as an isolable object (e.g., Abdul Hamid El-Zein) 2) anything Muslims say is Islamic (e.g., Michael Gilsenan) 3) 'a distinctive historical totality which organizes various aspects of social life' (e.g., Ernest Gellner) (1986: 2). Asad discusses the insufficiencies of these conceptualizations for reaching his goal. He moves through El-Zein's quickly for an endeavour which concludes by stating that 'Islam' as an analytical category dissolves' (1977:252) is surely inadequate to the task. The second causes problems, Asad argues, when Muslims begin to contest the ideas and practices of others as 'not really Islam at all' (ibid.). Rather than adjudicating between them, the anthropologist ends by allowing all. The third, at its base, fails to fruitfully deal with the diversity of belief and practices of Muslims, as well as an underlying, rather unproductive and faulty assumption, concerning the correlation of different 'types' of Islam with 'types' of social structure.

Against these ideas, Asad proposes an object which holds tradition as its centre (1986:20), though not tradition defined as something set apart from modernity. For Asad, tradition is the discourses oriented to teaching correct practice, which 'precisely because [they are] established, ha[ve] a history' and hence, a tradition (ibid.). Traditions, moreover, are not homogenous; variation in, and debate over, proper practice does not signal a lack of tradition but rather difference in 'Islamic reasonings that different social and historical conditions can or cannot sustain' (ibid.: 23). By marking out a tradition as that which 'relates itself to the founding texts of the Qur'an and the Hadith' (ibid.: 20), Asad is able to avoid the trap of Islam becoming anything (Gilsenan). He is likewise able to account for a diversity of opinions and practices (Gellner), as well as the contestation between Muslims over what Islam truly is (Gilsenan), without dissolving the object (El-Zein) or essentializing it (Gellner).

Asad's definition has become a loadstone in the anthropology of Islam (e.g., Bowen 1993; Mahmood 2005; Deeb 2006; Hirschkind 2006). In Central Asia, however, few anthropologists have engaged with it directly, Rasanayagam's monograph (2011) being a notable exception. Recently, some have questioned whether the understandings of Islam in Central Asia produced by scholars of the region are compatible with Asad's notion of Islam as a discursive tradition (Fadil 2019a; Liu 2020). Islam in Central Asia, in contrast, they argue, has been characterized as ideology, culture, or belonging and as such, is either misguided or irreconcilable with Asad's seminal work. This begs the question of exactly how Islam in post-Soviet Central Asia has been conceptualized by anthropologists.

THEORIZING ISLAM IN CENTRAL ASIA

When anthropological research on Islam in post-Soviet Central Asia began in the 1990s and early 2000s, the field was dominated by literature preoccupied by a set of strong Soviet-era frames. During the mid-to-late Soviet period, Soviet researchers were often concerned with understanding Islam in order to uncover how and why it persisted despite social and economic interventions, and anti-religious campaigns (Poliakov 1991). They interpreted Islam in dichotomist frames with textual, pure, and official understandings and practices of the religion on one side and traditional, popular, and unregulated on the other (Sukhareva 1960, Saidbaev 1984, Basilov 1992). Outside of the USSR, Islam was usually analysed by Sovietologists in Europe and America through similar dualistic frameworks, in addition to seeing it as a possible source of political instability (Bennigsen and Lemerrier-Quellejey 1979, Bennigsen and Broxup 1983, Fierman 1991). These tropes persisted in the post-Soviet period. Islam continued to be viewed by academics – but also journalists, policy makers, and aid workers – from both in and outside Central Asia, in the same bifurcated terms (Ro'i 2000) and/or primarily as a threat or in reference to its perceived potential for violence (Rashid 2002; Naumkin 2005; Olcott 2007).

The anthropology of post-Soviet Islam in Central Asia is a fairly new field and the English-language monographs that describe it are not only few in number, but rather recently published. Each of the works is concerned with a slightly different set of questions, but all, in one form or the other, do two things – reckon with the existing literature, including the bifurcated conceptualization of Islam and the fixation on violence, and reflect on the Central Asian's own understanding of themselves as Muslims. *Muslimness* (Kazak: *musilmanshiliq*, Uzbek: *musulmonchilik*, Kyrgyz: *musulmanchylyk*) is the ubiquitous Turkic Central Asian term used by Kazaks, Kyrgyz and Uzbeks alike to refer to, reflect upon, and discuss their own state or quality as Muslims.² It is *muslimness* rather than Islam that seems to concern most Central Asians and the two are used as (near) synonyms in the region.

Muslimness likewise appears as one of the most central terms in anthropological research on Islam in the region. It is in *Muslim Turkistan* (2001) that the term first enters contemporary studies of the region. In this book, author Bruce Privratsky argues that when discussing religion, most Kazaks speak of *muslimness* or the 'clean path' (*taza jol*) rather than Islam.³ *Muslimness*, for Privratsky's interlocutors, is practised in the veneration of saints and holy places, marked by the keeping of life-cycle events and rituals related to the home, and consigned primarily to women and the elderly. *Muslimness*, in his work, describes the way in which his interlocutors understood both themselves and their religious lives.

Examining Islam in Uzbekistan, Maria Louw too prioritizes the concept of *muslimness*, summarizing her book as a description of Bukharans' negotiation of Muslimness in their struggles for agency, meaning, and belonging in uncertain times. Nevertheless, Louw does not explicitly reflect on the origin or nature of the term. She does discuss what has been an enduring debate in the study of Islam – the relationship between what is variously referred to as either 'Great' and 'Little' tradition (Gellner 1981), or Orthodox/scripturalist traditions and customary/folk/traditional ones, frames which parallel the discussions of Islam in the Soviet Union. In these studies, scholars debate which ideas and practices fall within Islam and which do not,

which are part of religion and which are anathema, superstition, or culture. But it is not only in scholarly debates about Islam that this boundary-drawing between what counts as Islam and what does not has occurred. It has been a perennial discussion among everyday Muslims and can be seen in, for example, disagreements between reformist movements and those they criticize. Reflecting on both these debates, Louw demurs, taking no stance. Instead, she articulates her decision to focus on the ways in which her interlocutors ‘live, experience, and use’ their ideas and beliefs (2007:19).

Taking Islam to be that which one’s interlocutors say it is, is a fairly conventional position among anthropologists, but one that Asad criticized (1986). Louw’s, but also Privratsky’s and Johan Rasanayagam’s (2011), move to do so however, is not only informed by the anthropological tradition of understanding things from the perspective of one’s interlocutors’, but, as Louw explains, is also informed by the particular position of Islam in Central Asia during the Soviet period, and the impact this had on Muslims of the region and their own reflections on their qualifications *as Muslims*. As Louw describes

[...] the Uzbek Muslims that I worked among were themselves acutely aware that they lacked religious knowledge, that history somehow had made them forget what it meant to be Muslim – intellectually, morally and practically. It has been a major concern of mine to take this perceived ignorance seriously as a very important aspect of what it means to be Muslim in post-Soviet Uzbekistan [...].
(Louw 2007:19)

Louw’s interlocutors wrestle with what it means to (seemingly) lack the kind of deep knowledge of Islam/being Muslim they suppose is commonplace to Muslims around the world. While they, just like the Kazaks in Privratsky’s study, are unquestionably Muslim, the lack of knowledge is a source of discomfort and dregs up uncertainty about their own qualifications.

The acknowledgement of and anxiety about a lack of religious knowledge on the part of Uzbeks that Louw worked with would be echoed in future work on Islam in the region, becoming a hallmark of many descriptions of Central Asians’ own reflections of their position as Muslims (e.g., Kehl-Bodrogi 2008; Hilgers 2009; McBrien 2012). There seemed to be a connection between this notion of muslimness, and what happened to Islam and Muslims, during the Soviet period. It indexed both the *persistence and loss* of religion. Muslimness, however, was also connected to communal belonging, which was articulated not only in reference to religion, but also nation, as Louw, Privratsky, and many after them would note. While not an anthropologist, Adeeb Khalid, a historian, describes a similar connection:

In a way, there is nothing new about this: historically, ‘customary’ Islam, which ties community, custom, and tradition to Islam, has been the dominant way in which Muslims have understood Islam. In the modern world, this form of Islam has been challenged by numerous reformist movements and assaulted by secularizing states. In Central Asia, it survived in the interstices of Soviet society, but it did not remain unchanged. Today, customary Islam is wedded to modern national identities and exists in a political realm that is still de-Islamized.
(Khalid 2007:122)

Here Khalid indexes both Muslims' keeping of Islamic practices during the Soviet period, the inclination of these practices to be assessed by some Muslims as improper or not truly Islamic, and the tie to belonging in the form of ethno-national identity, that Louw and Privratsky noted. Khalid makes much more explicit the way that community within Islam became tied to the idea of belonging to the modern nation-state during the Soviet period, arguing for the role of Soviet-era programs, politics, and socioeconomic processes in facilitating this union, as well as its position in fostering what is, when contrasted to other Muslim majority countries, a 'political realm that is still de-Islamized' and in which the 'public presence of Islam is highly muted' throughout Central Asia (Louw 2007:122).

Taken together, Privratsky's, Louw's, and Khalid's work lay out the elements that later would become the most central components of discussions of Islam in Central Asia, namely: the abiding importance to many Muslims of *being* Muslim, believing in God, and keeping a set of rituals related to the home, ancestors, saints and the life cycle; an anxiety among many Muslims about the loss of true knowledge and practice of Islam over the course of the Soviet period; debates about what *really* counts as Islam, and the entangling of Islamic and ethno-national belonging. *Muslimness* becomes a key term in much work on Islam in the region, precisely because it points to all four of these elements and, for the anthropologists involved, stays the closest to the terms and ideas used by Central Asian Muslims themselves.

Not all anthropologists researching Islam in the region use the term 'Muslimness', yet all those who conducted at least a portion of their fieldwork in two decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union, wrestle with what impact the Soviet past had on religion in the region, the question that is perhaps at the heart of the notion *Muslimness*. For most, *Muslimness* formed the backdrop to other investigations like those examining questions of memory (e.g., Privratsky 2001; Louw 2007), morality (Stephan 2010b; Rasanayagam 2011), religious knowledge and education (Stephan 2010b; Schwab 2012; Peshkova 2014; Montgomery 2016), saints, holy places, and shrine veneration (Privratsky 2001; Kehl-Bodrogi 2006b, 2008; Aitpaeva et al. 2007; Louw 2007; Rasanayagam 2011; Féaux de la Croix 2016), transnational religious connections (Bissenova 2005; Ismailbekova and Nasritdinov 2012; Nasritdinov 2012; Toktogulova 2014), or development, modernity, and the state (Beyer 2016; Bissenova 2016; Mostowlansky 2017; McBrien 2017; Nasritdinov and Esenamanova 2017). For others, religion and politics were more central to their research and here the Soviet atheist project loomed larger and formed a focal point for central arguments and theoretical interventions (Khalid 2007; Hilgers 2009; McBrien 2017; Pelkmans 2017).

It is especially the latter works that foreground the impact of the Soviet anti-religious and other modernizing campaigns on Islam, and bring the case of Soviet atheism to bear on wider academic discussions, resulting in the notions of belonging, culture, or ideology that Liu and Boron highlighted in their critique. Each of these terms, however, covers a different field of investigation and attempts to discuss different phenomena. While they all wrestle with secularism, the politics of religion, and understandings and practices of Muslimness in Central Asia, they are asking different questions. Importantly, they do not aim to conceptualize Islam in Central Asia. Pelkmans' discussion of ideology (2017), for example, can hardly be characterized as a description of Central Asian Islam. Rather the term is for him

a way to analyse the relationship between ideas and power, and the affective role of ‘pulsation’ therein, which can be found in religious and non-religious movement alike. So, while he discusses ideology in reference to Islam, specifically the Tablighi Jamaat, he likewise does so in regard to Pentecostalism, Soviet atheism and spiritual healing.

Belonging was a central term in my work on Islam in Central Asia. Ironically, it was a term I developed *not* to describe *what Islam was* during the Soviet period (or is, during the post-Soviet one), but rather what the category of acceptable public religion came to be as a result of the Soviet political project of secularism.⁴ In this way, my notion of *belonging* is a contribution to discussions of secularism, not religion. I started from Asad’s work on secularism in which he demonstrated how, in Western Europe, religion as individual, internalized belief, is the notion that the state monitors, defends, and delineates in its political project of secularism (2003). It is allowable religion because it does not undermine the authority of the state and it is from this definition of religion that the state gets, in part, its power. The modern state emerged in tandem with this definition, shaping it as it was shaped by it. Building on this, I argued that in its project, the Soviet State, like its European and North American counterparts, inadvertently and unintentionally created and allowed a particular mode of publicly allowable religion (McBrien 2017). However, I argued, the only understanding of religion that could be publicly articulated from within the logics of a modern Soviet state was that of religion as a part of ethno-national belonging (cf. Khalid 2007). This contrasts with the essential definition of religion in Europe and North America, but is a historically contingent outcome of what was a similar modern project of secularism.⁵

For both Asad and me, these conceptualizations of religion were neither an analytical definition of religion to be deployed by anthropologists in their work, nor were they offered as complete understandings of religion for the particular people, time, and place researched. In short, in my case, it was not a depiction of Central Asian Islam writ large. Rather, in both instances, they were descriptions of dominant notion of publicly admissible religion allowed by a modern state in its political project of secularism; the ideas and practices of religion by religious actors exceeded the limited definition of the state. As a case in point, in Asad’s work, there were Christians to be found who asserted an essential notion of belonging to their definition (Asad 2003:139), while in my research with men and women who came to full maturity during the Soviet Period, there were Muslims who professed internal faith as vital to true Muslimness (McBrien 2017:94). *Belonging* was a heuristic used to attune the reader to the category of acceptable religion under Soviet secularism, a category that, I assert, applied whether the religion under question was Islam or Orthodox Christianity. Research on the intertwining of religion and nation all throughout the former Soviet Union bears this out (McBrien and Naumescu 2022).

The works on Islam reviewed here do not stand in tension with Asad’s notion of Islam as discursive tradition, because they do not aim to dissect whether Islam in Central Asia is or was definable as the analytical object Asad proposed. They also do not offer alternatives to his articulation. Finally, they do not set out nor claim to characterize Islam *writ large* in the region. Those texts which employ notions like *belonging* or *ideology* aim to accomplish something else. The former seeks to

understand the qualities of publicly allowable religion in the context of Soviet secularism, while the latter asks questions about the relationship of ideas and power and the function of affect therein.

It is true that many of the early texts on Islam in Central Asia were more concerned with questions of religion and politics (Hilgers 2006, 2009; Kehl-Bodrogi 2006a, 2006b, 2008; McBrien 2006, 2017; Rasanayagam 2011; Stephan 2006, 2010), rather than about religion itself. This was a common trend in initial research on the former Soviet Union, regardless of topic or region, as researchers sought to grapple with macro-scale changes and their various impact on people's lives. However, there is no need to reinvigorate the field by reaching back to Asad, as Liu argues. The larger corpus of work on Islam in Central Asia already provides fine-grain analyses of various aspects of the religious lives, commitments, doubts, and struggles of the Muslims in the region. It is a lively field and the authors contributing to it take the religious lives of their interlocutors seriously and place questions of religion central in their foci. Moreover, Islam already appears in these investigations as an object for investigation, very much in the way Asad described it.

It is worthwhile, however, to examine an at times unarticulated anxiety in the literature. What many Muslims of Central Asia, and the anthropologists who worked with them, were struggling with is the nature of Islam during the Soviet period. Perhaps a better formulation of the question posed by Liu and Boron is whether, when looking at the Soviet period, we can identify Islam as analytical object in the way that Asad defined it.

THE CENTRALITY OF PRACTICE IN ASAD'S ISLAM AS A DISCURSIVE TRADITION

It is the term 'discursive tradition' that has resonated the most from Asad's influential piece. What is often forgotten or insufficiently emphasized, however, is the way Asad understands tradition and the role of practice therein. 'What is a tradition?' Asad asks. 'A tradition,' he explains, 'consists essentially of discourses that seek to instruct practitioners regarding the correct form and purpose of a given practice [...] (Asad 1986:20). Touching on proper practice, Asad is careful to deal with an oft-repeated distinction by anthropologists of Islam, that between 'orthodoxy' and 'orthopraxy', whereby Muslims are seen as primarily concerned with the latter rather than the former. Asad asserts the spuriousness of this distinction, arguing that it 'ignores the centrality of the notion of "the correct model" to which an instituted practice – including ritual – ought to conform' (ibid.:21). In sum, there can be no orthopraxy without orthodoxy. Thus, in Asad's arguments about Islam as discursive tradition, we find, at its core, a notion of correct practice, and the teaching thereof.

This bears out in another place, namely in his conceptualization of the category of 'Muslim'. Many of the works theorizing Islam in Central Asia point to the centrality of belonging in its conceptualization. *Muslimness* is not only at the heart of the academic work on Islam in the region, but a concept which comes from Central Asians themselves. Asad is, at first glance, silent about belonging. While Islam as an analytical category is the object of his inquiry, the notion 'Muslim' is not explicitly interrogated or defined. Yet his idea of an anthropology of Islam rests upon it, for they are the practitioners who are learning, teaching, debating, and contesting correct

practice (in reference to tradition). This may be the closest Asad comes to defining a Muslim. In his understanding of Islam, it is proper practice, in reference to tradition, that seems to make the Muslim: ‘For the anthropologist of Islam the proper theoretical beginning is therefore an instituted practice (set in a particular context and having a particular history) into which Muslims are inducted as Muslims’ (ibid.).

In refusing to define Islam as that which has been called such by an anthropologist’s Muslims interlocutors, the starting point for Asad becomes the instituted practice itself and the one who keeps it: the Muslim. It would seem therefore that this is the crux of the problem for thinking through Asad’s notion in reference to the anthropology of Islam in Central Asia, at least in the Soviet period. If we accept Asad’s definition, then we must examine whether or not Muslims in Soviet Central Asia learnt, kept, and taught instituted practice. We must ask then if the notion of *Muslimness* contains more than just being born into a community, for if it does not, one might argue that there is no Islam to analyse in this case. Asad is careful to point out that it cannot be *anything* which a Muslim does that can be considered as a part of Islam as an analytical category (ibid.: 20). Rather only those things that are a part of understanding, teaching, learning, and performing correct practice, with reference to an Islamic tradition, qualify.

This is where we arrive at the thorniest issue – how do we deal with the centrality of correct performance of practice in Asad’s definition, considering the inability of Muslims in Central Asia in the Soviet period, to keep many of the practices understood as central to so many Muslims across time and place?

BEING A SOVIET CENTRAL ASIAN MUSLIM

Anthropologists researching Islam in Central Asia in the early post-Soviet years, were faced with a lacuna in the historical literature. Scholarship had nearly exclusively focused on the early Soviet period but the years most prescient for the anthropologists – the mid-to-late Soviet era – had yet to be researched. Anthropologists had only the rather ideologically laden texts produced by both sides of the divide during the Cold War to guide them. Much of the anthropological work on Islam in Central Asia therefore leaned heavily on the life-stories of interlocutors to understand the impact Soviet secularism had on religious life. This was comparable to the situation faced by anthropologists working on different religions in other former Soviet republics, which led some to do substantial historical research (e.g., Rogers 2009; Luehrmann 2011).

The oral histories that the anthropologists collected showed that despite the tremendous impact the violent attacks had on Islam during the early anti-religious campaign, Muslims were able to practise Islam during the mid-to-late Soviet period. Notably, this practice was not only or even primarily a mode of resistance. Being Muslim and being Soviet were not incommensurable; some Muslims even sought ways to make Islam and the Soviet project compatible (Abashin 2014; Tasar 2017). Muslimness had become crucially about belonging.⁶ However, it also necessitated a belief in God, the keeping of life-cycle events like circumcision, marriage, and burial, all done according to the traditions they had been taught by kin and which were essentially defined as Muslim, as a part of Islamic tradition (Privratsky 2001; Hilgers 2009). For some, this also included shrine visitation or other rituals intended

to invoke God's protection, fortune, or guidance and home-based rituals (Aitpaeva et al. 2007; Kehl-Bodrogi 2008; Abashin 2014) and religious practice late in life. In the spaces possible, Muslims creatively attempted to understand, live by, and teach Islam; moreover, God and the saints continued to speak to Muslims in the Soviet Union, despite secularism (Kehl-Bodrogi 2006b, 2008; Grant 2011).

Not everything was possible; much religious knowledge, including that of correct practice, was lost, and there were many Islamic practices that were difficult if not impossible for Muslims to keep, to varying degrees, over the long Soviet period. Importantly, both the meanings and practices of Muslimness also transformed in interaction with the social and material processes of the Soviet Union over its long history. But there was a limited space and possibility for practising religion, as the subsequent historical work on the mid-to-late Soviet period has borne out (e.g., Khalid 2007; Dudoignon 2011; Tasar 2017). While many of these practices might indeed be contested by other Muslims as 'not really about Islam at all' (Asad 1986:2), they were not only marked as part of Muslimness and Islamic tradition by many Central Asians towards the end of the twentieth century, but they have been included as part of an Islamic tradition by Muslims across time and space (cf. Khalid 2007).

Returning to Asad, the question is whether, within his definition of Islam as a discursive tradition, religious life in Soviet Central Asia was enough to qualify as 'Islam'? Discourse, and specifically *discursive tradition*, have been the terms most widely used to sum up his articulation of Islam as an object of investigation. But, as argued, a close reading of his work reveals the importance of *instituted practice* in his definition. I have already argued that during the Soviet period, there was room, however limited, for practice that Muslims of Central Asia linked to Islam and proper *Muslimness*. These were things they learned from their kin and their neighbours, in some cases from those locally known as knowledgeable of Islam (*moldo*, *otincha*) and in the carrying-out of the rituals, there was a sense of proper performance. Moreover, though there was an explicit recognition of a lack of Islamic knowledge, there was an idea of Islam, of being part of it, and of one's duty to keep certain practices. Let me again return to Asad's definition:

For the anthropologist of Islam the proper theoretical beginning is therefore an instituted practice (set in a particular context and having a particular history) into which Muslims are inducted as Muslims [...] And I refer here primarily not to the programmatic discourses of 'modernist' and 'fundamentalist' Islamic movements, but to the established practices of *unlettered Muslims*. A practice is Islamic because it is authorized by the discursive traditions of Islam and is so taught to Muslims – whether by an 'alim, a khatib, a Sufi shaykh, or an *untutored parent*.

(Asad 1986:21; emphasis added)

It is here that Asad's definition becomes expansive enough to capture the practice of Islam by many Central Asians during the Soviet and early post-Soviet period. While for many there were few religious scholars from whom they could learn about Islam, there was most certainly kin, friends, classmates, colleagues, and neighbours who did instruct proper performance and who taught many to believe in God. And while this may have not been prayer or fasting for most (though it was for some), it

was nonetheless a practice of Islam in the limited space allowed. Belonging was an important aspect of proper Muslimness, especially given the impact of Soviet secularism, however this was not to the exclusion of, in opposition to, or divorced from, practice or belief.

CONCLUSION

Religious life in contemporary Central Asia is flourishing and so is the research being conducted about it. The field has broken from the frames and foci which constrained investigations in the early post-Soviet years and has built fruitfully upon the rich anthropological research on Islam carried out in other regions of the world, including that of Talal Asad, and his understanding of Islam as a discursive tradition. Asad's definition of Islam as an analytical object proves a fruitful lens for facilitating the study of Islam in Central Asia, just as it has for other regions around the world. Asad neither dissolves the object of investigation altogether nor fixes the tradition to any specific set of social or historical conditions within which it arises. His understanding remains expansive and flexible enough to encompass the kind of practice, contestation, and transformation of the Islamic tradition that has always characterized it, including among 'unlettered Muslims' (Asad 1986:21) like those of Central Asia in the late Soviet and early post-Soviet period who wrestled with the effects of the Soviet atheist campaigns on their idea and practice of Muslimness.

The works reviewed here are, generally, based on research conducted in the first two decades after the collapse of the USSR, when many researchers grappled with the politics of religion in a new political environment. While these questions remain important, much research now investigates religion in and of itself, and seeks to understand its intersection with other areas of life. New works have emerged on transnational religious connections between Central Asia and the Gulf or the Middle East (Bissenova 2005; Stephan-Emmrich 2018a, 2018b), religious education and authority (Bigozhin 2019; Doolotkeldieva 2020), Islamic mediascapes and the intersection of religion and art (Kudaibergenova 2019; Schwab 2019), halal economies (Botoeva 2020), and the continued politics of religion through the region (Bissenova 2016; Nasritdinov and Esenamanova 2017; Gatling 2019; Toktogulova 2020). There are many new fields to explore and many older ones that warrant revisiting.

One of these stems, for example, from recent criticism of work on Islam in the region which points to an overly homogenous portrayal of Islam and argues that the understanding and practice of Islam *and* national identity have been more varied than that described (Artman 2018). This may spur new explorations into the varied ways Uzbeks, Tajiks, or Kazakhs, for example, live, understand, and contest their national identity, their interpretation and practice of Islam, and the ways they do and do not fit together. The exploration of religion's intersection with gender, especially in reference to marriage and the burgeoning feminist movement across the region, is likewise an area that warrants further investigation. Finally, inquiries which investigate the ways in which religion is, or is not, bound with recent nationalist movements or the impact that more than a decade of sustained labour migration has had on religious practice and understanding, and vice versa, are both ripe for enquiry.

It is also time to turn our gaze around and ask what insight research among Muslims in Central Asia has for the rest of anthropology. Unlike in the research conducted in

many other Muslim majority regions of the world, anthropologists researching in Central Asia have been less inclined to reduce Muslims to primarily religious actors, a problem some have argued has plagued the study of Muslim-majority societies elsewhere (Schielke 2010). They have also included a wide breadth of practices of Islam, including movements away from and an ambiguous stance towards it, in their research, and not just the piety movements that some have argued overly dominate the anthropology of Islam (Mittermaier 2010; Osella and Soares 2020). Investigations into the importance of belonging in Central Asian ideas of *Muslimness* have already served to widen notions of what might be included in an idea of Islamic tradition (Fadil 2019b). Contributions like these will continue. The anthropology of Islam in Central Asia is a vibrant field with much to offer the broader subdiscipline, including the way in which we think of Islam as a field of anthropological investigation.

NOTES

- 1 See also, see Rasanayagam 2006; Montgomery 2014, and Liu 2017.
- 2 Though I point to a Turkic term and list only three of the ethno-national communities in Central Asia, the argument is broadly true for most across the region including among Tajiks and Turkmen, for example.
- 3 Privratsky explains that *taza jol* (clean path) is a ‘Kazak rendition of the Quranic definition of Islam as the “straight path”’ (Privratsky 2001:74).
- 4 This phrasing and conceptualization— a political project of secularism – is Asad’s, from his work on secularism (2003).
- 5 While in both the Soviet and Euro-American cases, the state had a dominant mode of religion which it publicly endorsed, there were also regular breaches of this that could be ignored when in the state’s interests. For example, despite the official separation of church and state throughout Europe and North America, most nation-states have tacit, unacknowledged religions which form essential parts of their ‘national culture’ (e.g., Protestant Christianity in the United States, Catholicism in Spain, or Protestantism in the Netherlands).
- 6 Importantly, this occurred not only because of the logics and mechanism of Soviet secularism, but also because of precepts in Islam itself (Khalid 2007; McBrien 2017).

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