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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/asiacentrale/1527>
ISSN: 2075-5325

Publisher

Éditions De Boccard

Printed version

Date of publication: 12 December 2011
Number of pages: 485-493
ISBN: 978-2-84743-041-7
ISSN: 1270-9247

Electronic reference

Henrik Ohlsson, « Islam and Secular State in Uzbekistan: State Control of Religion and its Implications for the Understanding of Secularity », *Cahiers d'Asie centrale* [Online], 19-20 | 2011, Online since 01 January 2012, connection on 30 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/asiacentrale/1527>

Islam and Secular State in Uzbekistan: State Control of Religion and its Implications for the Understanding of Secularity

Henrik OHLSSON

Since independence, religion, particularly Islam, has taken on an altogether new role in the nation-building process in Uzbekistan. The government now embraces Islam as a national heritage and a moral guideline. This has meant an upsurge in Islamic activity, but also, after a few years of tumult in the early 1990s, a tightening of government control of religious education and practice.

Islamic societies have historically, for the most part, lacked central canonizing bodies. But with the political developments of the last century, along with the emergence of radical revivalist currents in Islam, governments in Muslim countries have begun to feel a need for a more stringent central control of religion. As the title indicates, the aim of my study is to examine the official structures that control religion in contemporary Uzbekistan, and what this control means for an understanding of secularism. My central question can be put as follows: has a new form of canonization in Islam begun to take shape within the framework of the nation-state? And, more specifically, are the state institutions in Uzbekistan to be considered religious, and thus canonizing bodies, or are they part of the secular state structure? In this paper, I will present some of the basic problems one has to face in attempting to understand secularity in a post-Soviet society with a predominantly Muslim population, along with a brief account of the religious situation in present day Uzbekistan and the official structure that controls religion in the country.

Defining secularity

First of all one has to define the basic meaning of the word *secular*. Initially, the simplest and widest possible definition will have to suffice; the word secular implies some degree of separation between political and religious authority. The definition of religion and state, and the exact delimitation of the two spheres are of course complicated questions which I will have to leave aside in this paper. Secondly, I want to distinguish between 1) *secularity*, that is, the quality, in a society, of being secular, 2) *secularization*, that is, the social process that makes a society increasingly secular, and 3) *secularism*, that is, the ideas that inspire the process of secularization.

The concept of secularity, as well as most of the theoretical treatment of the subject, is built on historical developments in predominantly Christian societies, and to simply assume that the same theories and

models are automatically applicable to a society with a Muslim majority may be misleading. One of the problems is that Christianity usually takes the shape of tangible organizations, either as a central body, comprising (or with the ambition to comprise) society as a whole, or as denominations with a clearly specified membership. Islam has, for most of its history, lacked a central canonizing body and the different currents of thought which have emerged in Islam have rarely taken the shape of tangible organizations or denominations. Of course, the Sufi orders could be seen as tangible organizations or denominations, but only as long as the analysis is limited to those individuals involved in an active master-pupil relationship with a Sufi teacher. The much looser affiliation of a whole local society to a certain Sufi order, which has been a common scenario not least in Central Asia, does not comfortably fit into the same pattern. In most Islamic societies, religious authority has traditionally been localized, centred on charismatic individuals such as scholars of Islamic law, mullahs or Sufi masters.

One of the prominent scholars of the field, David Martin, has based his general theory of secularization solely on the historical experience of Christian Europe and the United States. The secularization process he describes and interprets has its roots in the European Enlightenment, but has developed quite differently in different countries depending on the religious situation. In Catholic countries, where the church has historically had something of a religious monopoly, the forces of secularization tend to find themselves in a direct confrontation with the church and to develop a strong antireligious sentiment. Religion *as such* becomes a matter of dispute. In Protestant countries some degree of pluralism of religion has often developed in parallel with the forces of secularization. The denominations in a Protestant society may be associated with different social classes and form alliances with different political forces. In this way the confrontation does not become as strong and religion *as such* never becomes a matter of serious dispute. The Russian historical experience is, in Martin's understanding, quite similar to that of most Catholic countries: a religious monopoly is confronted violently by revolutionary forces with a strong antireligious sentiment (Martin 1978, pp. 17-23).

The different ways in which the process of secularization has proceeded in different societies have produced a variety of forms in which secularity may appear, as well as different interpretations of the concept of secularism in the policies of different governments. Ahmet T. Kuru has discussed this matter using the terms *passive* and *assertive* secularism. The two categories are described as follows:

Passive secularism implies state neutrality toward various religions and allows the public visibility of religion. Assertive secularism, on the other hand, means that the state favours a secular worldview in the public sphere and aims to confine religion to the private sphere (2006, p. 137).

The prime example of passive secularism in his article is the United States, while Turkey exemplifies the assertive type. Another example of assertive secularism is the French *laïcité*. This ideological and legal construct fits right into Martin's historical model where a religious monopoly has been confronted by an antireligious secularizing force. The French scholar Olivier Roy (2007) characterizes French *laïcité* as assimilationist, as opposed to the multiculturalism that prevails in most Protestant countries. This means that religion, race and ethnicity are expected to be left at home, in the private sphere, while in the public sphere the visibility of religion is minimized. The recent ban on headscarves and other religious symbols in public schools is an example of this ambition. The secularism that, since the 1920s, has been state ideology in Turkey (where the ban on headscarves in universities was recently abolished) is similar to the French *laïcité* in that it asserts the confinement of religion to the private sphere. An important difference from the French model, however, is the state control of religion in Turkey, where a state department regulates religious education and imams are state employees. In fact, in most Muslim countries today there is a degree of state control of religious education. In post-Soviet Central Asia this is most definitely the case. This may be one of the most important differences between Christian and Muslim countries in general. Actually, as a rough generalization, one could say that the Christian world, ever since Reformation, has been moving from a situation of religious monopoly toward greater diversification, while the Islamic world, at least in the last century or so, has been moving in the opposite direction. Of course there are other factors, both external and internal, that have led to a greater diversification in Muslim countries as well, such as the emergence of new religions, the secularization of educated classes, etc. Still, I think this general tendency toward a greater degree of state control of religion in many Muslim countries is worth keeping in mind.

This brings us back to the question whether secularity, as it is generally understood, is a Christian phenomenon. In the contemporary debate the opinion is sometimes voiced that Islam is in essence all-encompassing and thus incompatible with the idea of a partition between state and religion. In Christianity, on the other hand, it is stated already in the Gospel of Matthew: "Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's" (Matt. 22:21). In this passage some have found a theologically based predestination in Christianity leading naturally to a secular form of society. The connection between theology and politics, however, is just not that simple. Olivier Roy, who discusses this problem in his book *Secularism Confronts Islam*, calls this move from the theological level to the political a methodological error and states that:

When the church finally accepted the secular republic, this was not because a commission of theologians had spent years rereading the Gospels but

because the Vatican drew the political lessons from the inescapable advent of the republic and adapted to it (commissions serve only to provide philosophical arguments to justify decisions already made for political reasons) (2007, p. 39).

The question whether the differences that can be observed between Christian and Muslim countries, as regards the relation between state and religion, are due to theological differences between the religions or to differences in political developments unrelated to, or at least not determined by, religion, is thus no simple matter. For one thing, much of the Islamic world has been subject to European colonialism. Obviously this has had a great impact on both the political and religious developments in these countries, not least on the way oppositional religious movements have been formed.

Post-Soviet Central Asia shares some experiences with other colonized Muslim countries, but, having been part of the Soviet Union for seven decades, the region also has some peculiarities that separates it from the rest of the Islamic world. The pre-Soviet situation in Central Asia had some traits in common with the typical protestant society as described by David Martin. First of all, as has been the normal situation in Muslim societies across the world, there was no religious monopoly. Secondly, the forces of reform – most prominently the *jadids* – expressed their vision in religious terms, as did, of course, the conservative *ulama* who opposed them. Religion *as such* was not a matter of dispute, but a certain degree of secularization nevertheless took place as the *jadids* introduced more worldly subjects into the educational system.

After the Russian revolution of 1917, however, the victorious side – the strongly antireligious Bolsheviks – exported, or superimposed, their version of secularism on Central Asia, creating – in many ways – a unique situation in the history of secularization. Soviet secularism was most definitely of the assertive category, even more so than the French or Turkish. The so-called “scientific atheism”, which was part of the Soviet state ideology, was not satisfied with just confining religion to the private sphere or putting it under state control. The ultimate aim was the complete eradication of religion from the minds of people, as religion created, in Marxist-Leninist terminology, a “false consciousness” which constituted an obstacle to socialist progress. Perhaps this should not even be defined as secularism, since the aim is not the separation of state and religion, but the eradication of one of them.

Naturally, even the Soviet state had to make compromises with reality and even though some serious attempts at abolishing religion altogether were made, especially in the first two decades after the revolution, it ultimately had to succumb to forming centralized organs to control it.

Religious revival in Uzbekistan

After independence, the Uzbek government has shown an ambition to resurrect and reconstruct their country's Islamic traditions, but, constitutionally, Uzbekistan remains a secular state. The Uzbek constitution from 1992 provides that religious assemblies should be separated from the state and that the state should not meddle in their affairs.¹ At the same time the country has an elaborate official religious structure. The Spiritual Directorate for Central Asia and Kazakhstan (the SADUM of Soviet times) remains, but has been reformed and renamed the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan (MBU, in Uzbek: *O'zbekiston Musulmonlari Idorasi*).

It is clear that the developments in the post-independence period have forced all the former Soviet republics in Central Asia to rethink their religious policies to some degree. However, different countries have dealt with the emergence of Islamic extremism and the influx of ideas from the Middle East and Pakistan in somewhat different ways. In Tajikistan a civil war broke out in the 1990s, in which the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) played an important part. In the peace treaty that ended the war a power sharing agreement was included which gave some influence in the parliament to the IRPT. Thus, political parties based on religion are now permitted in Tajikistan, while banned in all the other former Soviet Central Asian countries.

After independence, the former Soviet republics of Central Asia had to reinvent themselves as nation states. A process of nationalization had indeed already begun in the Soviet era. In order to avoid a situation where the issue of nationality would stand in the way of socialism, a strategy was formed by the Bolshevik Party under the dictum: "national in form, socialist in content". The national consciousness of the various peoples under the Soviet Union was boosted, but in a controlled way so as to avoid the emergence of aggressive forms of nationalism. One important issue in the Muslim dominated parts of the Soviet Union was probably to counter the emergence of pan-Turkism, which posed a threat to the unity of the Soviet state. According to the scholar Adeeb Khalid this policy was so effective that by the end of the Soviet era the reality was closer to a reversed version of the official dictum: "socialist in form, national in content" (Khalid 2007, pp. 94-95).

Thus, the groundwork for the formation of nation-states was made already long before independence, but with independence the nationalizing process naturally ascended to a new level. New constitutions were adopted, the languages of the titular populations were elevated to the status of official languages, and the religious issue suddenly took on a

¹ § 61, *O'zbekiston Respublikasining Konstitutsiasini*, "O'zbekiston" nashriyot-matb'aa ijodiy uyi 2008.

whole new importance. The latter appears to have come as something of a surprise to the governments of Central Asia, all of whom had just recently been part of the highly secular (or atheist) Soviet political structure. Left with a political map drawn in the 1920s under Stalin, in an area that had been multiethnic for many centuries, the formation of nation states was not without its complications. Although Uzbeks constitute the majority of the population of Uzbekistan there are several larger and smaller minorities, notably Tajiks, Russians and Karakalpaks, the latter of which have been granted a semi-autonomous region in the northwest of the country. There is also a widespread Uzbek-Tajik bilingualism, especially in the old cities of Bukhara and Samarkand. At the same time about 90% of the population in Uzbekistan are Sunni Muslims. Under those circumstances Islam became a natural rallying point for a new collective identity.

In the early 1990s scores of foreign Islamic proselytizers flocked to Central Asia in an attempt to seize the opportunity to bring these countries back into the community of Muslim nations, and the Muslim brethren, who had long suffered under an atheist regime, back on the true path. The largest groups of proselytizers came from Turkey and Saudi Arabia.

The Turkish missions included Sufis with the aim of rekindling the Sufi *tariqats*² of Naqshbandiyya and Yasawiyya in the land of their origin, as well as so called *nurçular*, a movement with a moderate Islamist message led by Fethullah Gülen, once a pupil of Said Nursi, from whom the movement has its name. This movement is also inspired by Sufi ideas, but presents them in a modernized package, without the traditional *pir-murid* “master-pupil” relationship. Structurally it is a network of private enterprises ranging from media to trading. They have opened schools and commercial enterprises in all the former Soviet republics of Central Asia, though they were expelled from Uzbekistan after a few years.

The Saudi Arabian missionaries propagated their strict *Wahhabi* interpretation of Islam which would often clash both with local Islamic traditions and with governmental policies. The Saudi mission included members of the ethnically Uzbek community in Saudi Arabia, which originated from two waves of migration from Central Asia in the 1930s and 1970s.

Having realized the importance of Islam in the formation of a new collective identity the Central Asian governments at first welcomed these foreign proselytizers. Soon, however, they became suspicious of the ultimate aims of the proselytizers and concerned about the risk of civil unrest caused by radical religious ideas. The Uzbek government took a particularly firm grip of the situation, urged partially by the disastrous turn of events in neighbouring Tajikistan, but also by certain developments on the home front. In 1992, in the town of Namangan in the Ferghana

² *Tariqat* : Sufi order.

valley, a group of radical Islamist youth took over the local headquarters of the former Communist party. They urged president Karimov to come to Namangan, which he did, and listen to a number of demands, including the establishment of an Islamic state in Uzbekistan and the use of *shari'a* as the only legal system. The militant youth organization *Adolat* "Justice" was formed under the leadership of young underground imam Tahir Yuldashev and former Soviet paratrooper Jumboi Hojiev, later to be known as Juma Namangani after his home town. Some of their members were educated at Islamic universities in Saudi Arabia and their ideology was clearly inspired by Saudi Wahhabism. The Islamist uprising spread all over the Ferghana valley – an area known even in Soviet times to be an Islamic stronghold. The leadership openly challenged the government, hoping the Karimov regime would soon fall. The regime, however, prevailed, and eventually struck down hard on the Islamic militants, many of whom saw fit to leave the country and join Islamist struggles in Tajikistan and Afghanistan. This marked the beginning of an era of strict government control of religious expressions. In 1992 and '93 some fifty Saudi missionaries were expelled from Uzbekistan. In 1994 the newspaper of the Turkish *nurçular* movement, *Zaman*, was banned. In 1999 their schools in Uzbekistan were closed down. The Sufi missionaries too have been forced to end their activities in the country. The official sympathy that the government professes for Sufism, as part of a national tradition, seems to be limited mostly to the intellectual level. The prospect of a re-emergence of actual *tariqat* is probably not particularly appealing to the Uzbek government; as such a structure could turn into a competing power base.

In the last few years the only foreign missionary work carried out in the open in Uzbekistan has been that of various evangelical Christian groups and so-called "new religions". Lately the government has grown suspicious of those groups too, not so much out of fear that their ideas might lead to terrorism as concern that their sometimes quite aggressive proselytizing is upsetting to public morality. These groups are not considered part of the national culture in the same way as other minority religions such as Judaism and Russian Orthodox Christianity. Proselytizing is forbidden according to the "Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations" adopted in 1998.

Uzbekistan's official religious structure

One of the problems I want to look into is whether the secularism of Uzbek governmental policy is to be understood as *passive* or *assertive* in Kuru's terms. The constitution appears to promote state neutrality in religious matters, but since its adoption, other legal tools dealing with religious extremism, such as amendments to the penal code, have been developed. In order to get a firm grip of the religious activities in the country the government of Uzbekistan has built a thorough and, at least officially,

all encompassing structure, partially based on pre-existing structures from Soviet times.

Directly under the Cabinet of Ministers (the government) has been formed a Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA), consisting of experts in various fields, which oversees all religious activities in the country. Apart from Islam there are 16 officially recognized faiths in Uzbekistan and more than 2000 registered religious organizations³, all of which have to answer to the Committee.

Islam, being the religion of 90% of the population, naturally has a privileged position. All mosques and Islamic education must be affiliated to the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan (MBU). The MBU was based on an old Soviet structure, the Spiritual Directorate for Central Asia and Kazakhstan (SADUM), founded in 1943 in a period of increased tolerance for religion during World War II. With independence SADUM was split into national bodies in all the five Central Asian Republics. The MBU is also responsible for the rebuilding and maintenance of mosques and sacred places such as the tombs and mausoleums of various Muslim saints. The official ideology of the MBU is Sunni Islam of the Hanafi School of Law (though it also encompasses a small minority of Ismaili Shiites). The MBU is headed by a mufti who is nominated by the Muslim Council of Uzbekistan (MCU), a representative body consisting of imams and elders from all regions of the country. The candidate must then be approved by the government.

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Abstract

Secularity appears in a variety of forms shaped by different historical developments as well as political and religious circumstances. The forms of secularity

³ State Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan for Land Resources, Cartography and State Cadastre, Tashkent 2005.

may be divided into categories such as the passive and the assertive. To understand the situation in present day Uzbekistan, or indeed any of the former Soviet republics in Central Asia, however, these categories are not completely sufficient. First of all the quite recent history of the region includes a form of anti-religiosity – the scientific atheism of the Soviet Union – which aimed not just to separate religion from the state, but to eradicate religion altogether and should therefore perhaps not be defined as secularism in the normal sense of the word. Secondly, present day Uzbekistan has traits that fit into both of the aforementioned categories. On the one hand Islam is celebrated as a national heritage and a moral guideline, and politicians are often seen in religious contexts. On the other hand there are laws against for example proselytizing, and thus restrictions on religious expressions in the public sphere. About the more fundamental question of the separation between state and religion, the factor of state control and what it means for religious authority cannot be overlooked. The situation in Uzbekistan appears in some ways as a one-sided entanglement rather than a separation; the state controls religion but religion is not allowed to affect the laws or the political structures of the country.

Résumé

Islam et laïcité en Ouzbékistan

La laïcité revêt des formes variées suivant les contextes historiques, politiques et religieux, qui peuvent être regroupées en deux grandes tendances : laïcité passive et laïcité active. Néanmoins ces catégories ne conviennent pas exactement pour rendre compte de la situation actuelle en Ouzbékistan ni dans les autres républiques ex-soviétiques d'Asie centrale. Premièrement, l'histoire récente de ces pays comprend une forme d'anti-religiosité – l'athéisme scientifique de l'Union soviétique – qui visait non seulement à séparer la religion de l'État, mais aussi à éradiquer celle-là ; aussi ne peut-elle pas être réduite à la seule laïcité. Deuxièmement, l'Ouzbékistan d'aujourd'hui montre des traits qui relèvent de ces deux tendances. D'une part, l'islam est célébré comme un héritage national et un guide moral, les hommes politiques se montrent souvent dans des contextes religieux. D'autre part, des lois interdisent le prosélytisme et plusieurs restrictions limitent l'expression de la religion dans la sphère publique. Or la question du contrôle de la religion par l'État et de ses conséquences pour les autorités religieuses est fondamentale. À certains égards, la situation ouzbèke actuelle apparaît davantage comme une relation à sens unique que comme une séparation : l'État contrôle la religion, mais celle-ci n'est pas autorisée à interférer dans les lois ni dans les structures politiques du pays.

Mots-clés : Ouzbékistan, laïcité.

Keywords: Uzbekistan, secularity.