

## Introduction

---

*Renat Bekkin*

In recent years, the concept of traditional Islam has attracted attention of researchers both in Russia and beyond. Individual and collective articles, including conference proceedings were published on this topic. A serious drawback of some of the works is excessive politicization of discourse, as well as that authors seem to have only superficial acquaintance with sources both in the languages of the so-called Muslim peoples of Russia and in Russian. The first problem is inherent mainly in the works of Russian authors, the second one in publications by authors from the West.

Nevertheless, even those works that do not fully meet the scholarly criteria or fail to be based on reliable sources are important per se as they indicate public interest in such a complex and multifaceted phenomenon as traditional Islam. Thanks to a number of objective and subjective factors the concept of traditional Islam, albeit an artificial construct, has become an important element, without which it is difficult to imagine the portrait of Islam in modern Russia.

A few years ago, I came up with an idea to put together a book that would examine both the theoretical aspects of traditional Islam and individual cases from different regions of Russia with a significant Muslim population. Eventually, with the assistance from the Center for Advanced Studies in Sarajevo, an edited volume “The concept of ‘Traditional Islam’ in modern Islamic discourse in Russia” was prepared, which is due to be published soon.

This issue of Context journal presents selected articles from the edited volume. Before giving a brief description of the articles included in the issue, a few words should be said about the authors who collaborated in this work.

The authors are representatives of various Russian schools of historical and Oriental studies. While sociologists and representatives of other social sciences have had a significant influence on research by Western historians and Orientalists for

more than a decade, this is not the case for Russian scholars (except some staff at certain research centres in Moscow and St. Petersburg). I am not inclined to give this circumstance either a positive or a negative evaluation but do consider it my duty to note it and its significance for the reader. My experience working on the edited volume has shown that the collaboration of authors from different academic backgrounds can be positive both for a book as a whole and for the individual articles in the journal.

Another important point to note is that the authors of some of the articles are involved in the subject matter discussed in this issue of *Context* in various ways. Some are both students and subjects of the discourses in question at the same time, which is to say they are both professional researchers of and active participants in Islamic discourse in Russia.

These significant differences between the authors are not, in my opinion, a disadvantage. In fact, they have turned out to be a significant advantage for this special issue of the journal.

The journal opens with an article by Leila Almazova and Azat Akhunov on “In Search of ‘Traditional Islam’ in Tatarstan: Between National Project and Universalist Theories”. It contains a comprehensive analysis of the concept of ‘traditional Islam’. The authors attempted to consider the phenomenon of traditional Islam and analyse sources that flesh out the concept. In investigating the question of the origins of the concept of ‘traditional Islam’, the authors turn to the history of theological thought in the Volga-Ural region. They consider the etymology of the Arabic word *taqlid* in the context of Tatar theological discourse in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, concluding that ‘traditional Islam’ and similar concepts were unfamiliar to Muslim theologians in pre-revolutionary Russia.

It is a merit of their article that the authors use not only Russian-language sources, but also texts and oral sources in Tatar, which are inaccessible to the reader outside the Republic of Tatarstan. The work also contains a detailed historiographical essay on the literature on the problem of traditional Islam. Almazova and Akhunov trace the evolution of the concept over recent decades. As the authors note, there are multiple understandings and interpretations of traditional Islam in Tatarstan that differ significantly from the instrumentalised concept of ‘traditional Islam’ that appeared in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The article by Moscow-based religious scholar Sofya Ragozina “Official Discourse on Islam and Islamic Discourse in Contemporary Russia” focuses on all-Russian aspects of the problem and includes a look at the official discourse on Islam, by which the author understands “the discourse transmitted by various government institutions and statesmen”. Ragozina considers Islamic official discourse to be part of this discourse, as it “includes statements by Russia’s muftiates,

the largest religious organizations representing the country's Muslim community". "The rhetoric of the leaders of Russia's muftiates", Ragozina writes, "is characterized by a high level of intertextuality that indicates close semantic connections with governmental discourse (not just about Islam). Their rhetoric abounds in conceptual metaphors indicating loyalty to the ruling elite. Official Islamic discourse also offers us a better understanding of the use of the 'good' vs. 'bad' Islam dichotomy in Russia."

Competition between the muftiates means that simply declaring that one belongs amongst the followers of traditional Islam no longer provides sufficient competitive advantage in the struggle to obtain resources from the state. In the opinion of Russian Islamologist Renat Bekkin, author of the article on "The Renovationist Movement in Contemporary Russian Islam", this has caused Islamic religious leaders to search for an ideology that is attractive both to the state and a significant portion of believers. One such ideology is the so-called 'Renovationism' propagated by a number of religious figures who have held or continue to occupy senior posts at the Russian muftiates. "The renovationists' administrative status as officials in Muslim religious organisations", Bekkin writes, "influences how their opinion pieces become part of official discourse". The author also notes that "Judging on the basis of the available data, the renovationist movement in modern Russian Islam does not seem to have been instigated by the government, but the renovationists may over time become useful to government officials with responsibility for the formation and adoption of official religious policy in the Russian Federation."

Participation of the Russian muftiates in the formation of the discourse on traditional Islam is also discussed in the article "'Traditional Islam' in the discourse of religious associations, ethnic organizations and government structures in Bashkortostan" by ethnographer from Ufa, Zilya Khabibullina.

Particular attention in this article is given to the role of Sufism and pseudo-Sufism in the discourse on traditional Islam. The author analyses the role of Sufi *tariqas* in the formation of Bashkir identity in modern Bashkortostan. According to Khabibullina, one of the most effective tools for the formation of this identity is the *Haqqaniyya tariqa's* vigorous activity to create "new places of worship, accompanied by sacralisation and mythmaking". She says that studying practices related to pilgrimage and the creation and functioning of holy places will help to understand the phenomenon of traditional Islam in Bashkortostan better, "There has been practically no public discussion in the press on the issue of 'traditional Islam' that covers current problems or attempt to discover the truth whether in the spiritual administrations or the unofficial Islamic movements. It is more evident in the ethnographic material. The question of traditional Islam has

a very prominent place in the attitudes of the Muslim ummah of Bashkortostan to local holy places and related rites.”

The tendency to equate the concepts of “traditional” and “legal” has developed in other regions, particularly Crimea. This issue is the subject of the article on “‘Traditional Islam’ in Crimean Tatar discourse and politics” by Elmira Muratova, a religious scholar from Crimea.

I decided to include an article on Crimea in a collection devoted to traditional Islam in modern Russia, because Russian laws and the confessional policy pursued by Moscow are being implemented there. Accordingly, the concept of ‘traditional Islam’ has been utilized in modern Crimea to combat the uncontrolled religious activity of Muslims there.

At the same time, as noted by Muratova, even after its introduction into official Islamic discourse, the concept of ‘traditional Islam’ did not become part of the official doctrine of the two muftiates operating in Crimea, the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Crimea (DUMK) and the Spiritual Centre of Muslims of Crimea (DTsMK). These structures interpret the content of the notion of ‘traditional Islam’ differently, however, “despite a certain similarity in their discourses of ‘traditional Islam’ and their appeals to traditions and the legacy of ancestors, there remain several substantial differences between the supporters of DUMK and DTsMK. The first is the significant influence of Sufism on DTsMK ideology, which explains its emphasis on the revival of Sufi practices, once quite widespread in Crimea. A return to such practices, which were no longer popular with Crimean Tatars by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, seems like an attempt to artificially re-traditionalise and archaicise religious life. Compared to such attempts, DUMK looks like an organisation propagating a more ‘modern’ project of Islam, designed to combine Crimean Tatar religiosity with their secular lifestyle.”

This example of the two Crimean muftiates thus illustrates the tendency highlighted in Renat Bekkin’s article on “The Renovationist Movement in Contemporary Russian Islam” for modernist and traditionalist concepts, accompanied by declarations of loyalty to the political regime in Russia, to act as instruments in the struggle for leadership among Muslim religious organizations.