

Renat Bekkin (ed.). *The Concept of Traditional Islam in Modern Islamic Discourse in Russia*. Sarajevo: Center for Advanced Studies, 2020. ISBN 978-9926-471-21-7. 291 pp.

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In both politics and science, we often encounter concepts that have an enormous influence yet lack a thorough definition. In Russia this holds true for the concept of “traditional Islam”, which can often be found both in the official declarations and speeches of politicians and in scientific articles, but is mostly used without any definition given. For this reason, Renat Bekkin, a historian and scholar in Islamic studies, who was university professor at Kazan Federal University and has recently defended his PhD in Sweden (Bekkin 2020), invited scholars from various regions of Russia and from Crimea to focus on this blurry concept. It is also worth noting that some of their articles have already been published in 2019 as a kind of pre-release to the present volume (Bekkin 2019).

As Bekkin states in his introduction, the volume that emerged from this project is divided into a theoretical part, which focuses on the concept of traditional Islam and its interpretations in discourses of the Russian state and Islamic theology, and a second part with case studies on Islam in Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Dagestan, and Crimea, respectively. Bekkin stresses that several aspects of the book have to be taken into account: first, it should be noted that all the contributors have received their education in the Soviet and/or post-Soviet educational system, which may explain why certain concepts established in Western scientific discourses might be absent from the contributions. Secondly, Bekkin underlines that at least some of the contributors – he gives the example of Damir Shagaviev – can be regarded as both researchers and participants in the events they are doing research on; for instance, Shagaviev is one of the outstanding Islamic theologians in contemporary Russia.

The first thing that springs to the mind of the reader is that not all the contributions to the book fit into the scheme outlined in the introduction. For instance, only two of the five articles in the first part seem more generally oriented towards the concept of traditional Islam. Leila Almazova and Azat Akhunov’s contribution, “In Search of ‘Traditional Islam’ in Tatarstan: Between National Project and Universalist Theories”, provides a thorough overview of the relevant discussions on this concept among the Tatars since the nineteenth century. Following the view by the Danish scholar Kasper Mathiesen that “traditional Islam” is a Western construct without any roots in Islamic theology, Almazova and Akhunov look at theological and societal discussions throughout the history of the Tatars that theoretically might qualify as forerunners of the present dichotomy between traditional and non-traditional Islam. Their conclusion, however, is that none of these discussions may be regarded as a precursor of the present concept. The authors convincingly show that the concept of *taqlīd* – literally “imitation; copying; blind, unquestioning adoption (of

concepts or ideas); uncritical faith (e.g., in a source's authoritativeness)", but in the plural also "tradition" (Wehr 1980: 786) – common in the discussions of Tatar theologians at the turn of the twentieth century cannot be related to the present concept of traditional Islam. Dwelling on the opinion of leading Tatar theologians on the subject today, Almazova and Akhunov come to the conclusion that "[t]he idea of a search for traditional Islam was introduced primarily by the state" (p. 53) and that the Tatar theologians making use of this concept do not have a common definition of it.

The second article that fully fits into the framework of the first part of the volume is Sofya Ragozina's contribution "Official Discourse on Islam and Islamic in Contemporary Russia: Stereotypes and Intertextuality", in which she argues that the "official Islamic discourse in Russia is a distorted version of the official government discourse on Islam" (p. 116). According to her, the origins of the concept are to be found in the will of the government to create an alternative to "radical Islam" by establishing "traditional Islam" as its opponent, while the official Islamic discourse in Russia tries to create the image of an Islam that is line with these demands of the Russian state.

While the aforementioned articles contribute to the discussion of the concept of traditional Islam, the same cannot be said about the others in the first part of the volume. For instance, it is not quite understandable why Bekkin decided to include here two of his own articles on the Renovationist Movement in contemporary Islam in Russia and on the Faizrakhmanists in the Volga region – or even in the volume at all. While the full title of his contribution on the Faizrakhmanists, "The Faizrakhmanists of the Volga Region as a Religious Community Opposing 'Traditional Islam'", might suggest that he included it because this group is related in some way to this concept, its focus is actually a presentation of the internal dynamics of a group of outsiders. Even despite Bekkin's assertion that "[t]he Faizrakhmanist group is a good illustration of how the artificial construct of 'traditional Islam' not just hinders our understanding of the nature of religious movements but actually creates difficulties for classification" (p. 154), this article does not in fact contribute to the discussions on traditional Islam. This is not to say that Bekkin's analysis of the community is lacking; on the contrary, based on fieldwork observations and a number of primary sources, it offers a thorough interpretation of the group.

The last contribution to the first part of the volume is Damir Shagaviev's analysis of the *Grozny Fatwa*, the final document of an international theological conference held in Grozny, the capital of the Russian Republic of Chechnya, in 2016. Even the first summary sentence of the article makes it clear that it does not fit into a volume on the concept of traditional Islam in Russia: "The author examines whether and to what degree the conclusions of the International Sunni Islam Conference in Grozny in 2016 on defining the term "*Ahl al-Sunnah wa-l-Jama'ah*" conform to definitions contained in the Sunni theological legacy" (p. 57). Once again, this does not mean that the article is of poor quality; for anyone wanting to learn more about the organizers of the conference, the *Tabah Foundation for Research and Consulting* based in the United Arab Emirates, the reaction of Saudi Arabian theologians to the *Grozny Fatwa*, or the relevant passages in the Hadith on the term "*Ahl al-Sunnah wa-l- Jama'ah*", Shagaviev's article is a good reference work. Yet, it still does not become clear why Renat Bekkin decided to include it in a volume with a totally different focus: the reactions of Saudi Arabian theologians on a declaration of an Islamic conference in Russia simply should not be dealt with in a volume on the concept of traditional Islam in contemporary Russia.

Some of the case studies in the second part of the volume have to be assessed in a similar way: they offer insight into their respective subjects, but they are not necessarily related to the present collection. This holds especially true for Rezeda Safiullina-Ibragimova's presentation of Sufism in Tatarstan, "Sufism in Tatarstan: Revival of a Tradition, Export or Expansion?". The author gives a fine synopsis of the diverse landscape of Sufism in this republic of Russia, relying on her own fieldwork on the subject, but it hardly relates to the subject of the volume. Zilya Khabibullina's article, "'Traditional Islam' in the Discourse of Religious Associations, Ethnic Organisations and Government Structures in Bashkortostan", combines both a general presentation of Islam in this republic of the Russian Federation with an analysis of how the concept of "traditional Islam" is received by imams and in the media. However, the focus of her article is clearly too wide, including the presentation of folk Islam, the veneration of Islamic Saints, neo-Sufi movements becoming fashionable, and other similar subjects. Yet, Khabibullina's text does have relevant passages for the subject: her presentation of how the imams of Bashkortostan assess traditional Islam – the result of field research that she carried out in 2005 – is worth reading and relevant not only for her article itself but for the whole volume.

Relying on Eric Hobsbawm's and Terence Ranger's concept of the "invention of traditions", Vladimir Bobrovnikov ("Inventing a New Legal Tradition: The Discourse of 'Traditional Islam' in Post-Communist Dagestan") convincingly argues that "traditional Islam" does not by any means refer to the remains of a traditional practice of Islam in that Caucasus republic, but rather has to be regarded as a new phenomenon, as an invention. However, it does not become clear how the tolerance of Shari'a law by the Soviet power in the early 1920s or the sympathy of Soviet ethnographers for the "Muslim highlanders" and their traditions might, as Bobrovnikov suggests, have been forerunners of the present discussion on traditional Islam. It is the author himself who convincingly shows that a continuation of Islamic traditions in Dagestan simply was not possible.

In her article on "'Traditional Islam' in Crimean Tatar Discourse and Politics", Elmira Muratova shows that for leading representatives of Crimean Tatar Islamic structures, movements like the *Hizb at-Tahrir*, "Wahhabites", or transnational Sufi movements, with their language of communication being Russian rather than Crimean Tatar and their origins being quite "doubtful", have to be seen as opponents of the form of Islam regarded as traditional for their people. Yet, as Muratova indicates, this seemingly old concept of traditional Islam, which resonates with the official state discourse, is itself most likely an import. Her suggestion that leading proponents of this concept of Crimean Tatar Islam may have become acquainted with the concept of Turkish Islam during studies in Turkey – and simply adapted it to Crimean Tatar realities – seems to be quite reasonable.

The fact that some of the included articles (not all!) are outside the stated focus of the volume does not mean that one cannot learn useful things about the concept of traditional Islam as it has been promoted in the last twenty years in Russia. On the contrary, throughout the volume one finds useful statements on this, as demonstrated by an assertion by Renat Bekkin himself in his treatment of the Faizrakhmanists (p. 138):

Russian legislation, academia, and Islamic theology do not share a commonly accepted definition of 'traditional Islam'. The notion is an artificial one and, rather than being a conceptual product of the theological and judicial legacy of Islamic scholars, [...] it is a political construct that government officials have found convenient in determining which religious groups are acceptable as partners for the government authorities.

To give another example of such reasonable judgements, we might refer to Rezeda Safiullina-Ibragimova's article of Sufism in Tatarstan (p. 200):

The Russian state supports traditional Sufism, because it does not see it as a threat. It tries to establish a connection between this form of Islam and the artificial bureaucratic construct of 'traditional Islam'. As my interviews have shown, most followers of Sufism are quite reluctant to take advantage of this situation.

We have to concede that most of the researchers in one or another way relate their work to the subject of the volume, yet the problem is that such statements are often not to be found in the conclusion of the central articles but rather in marginal places (i.e. dispersed throughout the various case studies). The editor might have collected these useful points and presented them in the introduction; this would have also helped to avoid some repetition of general information in some of the articles.

The present volume has to be assessed on different levels. First, it should be noted that the editor had to overcome a structural difficulty, as the volume deals with a state-propagated concept that has been forced upon the Islamic discourses in Russia. Accordingly, investigations on this subject had to ask how different actors (for instance, Islamic theologians in a given region of Russia) have come to terms with it. In principle, the editor's solution to the problem is a logical one: Bekkin has invited colleagues to focus on the question of how the concept is perceived in different regions of Russia with a considerable Muslim population and in Crimea. For instance, it is far from commonplace that Sufism – or, more precisely, some tendencies within Sufism – is regarded by the state as being part of "traditional Islam". If the reader takes the time to read all the articles of volume, they will get a helpful overview of the discussions on traditional Islam in contemporary Russia and in Crimea.

The articles do provide answers to the question of how the concept of traditional Islam is dealt with in various regions of Russia, and the studies on singular aspects of Islam (like Sufism in Tatarstan or the Faizrakhmanist movement) are quite informative, if not necessarily linked with the subject promised in the volume's title.

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