

THE “TATAR WAY” OF UNDERSTANDING AND PRACTISING ISLAM IN ESTONIA

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This article gives a brief overview of the narratives used by Estonian Tatars, describing their religious identity and changes in the Estonian Muslim community during the past few decades. The Tatars are the founders of the Estonian Islamic Congregation in Tallinn, an organization which has been the main representative of Islamic faith in Estonia for more than half a century. Recently the Tatars and the congregation are being challenged by newcomers with other views on Islam. For instance, the “Tatar way” of defining religious identity within a family context differs from the way in which Estonian converts and more recent Muslim immigrants see their own religiosity. The changes in the Estonian Muslim community and the Estonian Islamic Congregation have influenced the Tatars in several ways, especially their religious and cultural self-concept. Examples are given of how Tatars evaluate and come to terms with the differences and the challenges.

MUSLIMS IN ESTONIA

The Islamic community in Estonia consists of more than fifty nationalities, but the Muslims are a small minority compared with the Lutheran or Orthodox congregations in the country, according to the national census conducted in 2011. The Muslim population in Estonia is mainly concentrated in the capital Tallinn. The biggest single group among the Muslims has traditionally been the Tatars, the founders and until recently the only representatives of the Islamic community in Estonia. In 2011 they had become a minority: 604 out of a total of 1,508 Muslims (Census 2011). The figures, however, tell little about the important role of the Tatars in the Estonian Muslim community and in the Estonian Islamic Congregation, the first Islamic organization officially registered in post-Soviet Estonia.

An overview will be provided here about how Estonian Tatars today see themselves as Muslims, how they describe and explain the changes in their religiousness and how they see the present situation and transformation of Islam in Estonia. This article is based on archive documents concerning the re-establishment of the congregation in 1989 and the statutes of the Estonian Islamic Congregation, as well as 45 semi-structured interviews with members of the congregation and the Estonian Islamic Centre. Ten of the interviewed persons are Tatars. The interviews were the principal source for my doctoral dissertation on the same subject and they were conducted with members of the Muslim community during the years 2015–2018. The dissertation was published in 2019 (Lepa 2019).

The principal research question – what has changed in the Estonian Islamic community during the three decades since the end of the Soviet Union and why did these changes occur – is divided into three research areas:

1) Narratives of *self* as Muslim and changes in the interpretations among the three main groups: A) “the Tatars” (all Russian-speaking members of the Islamic community); B) “the Estonians” (Estonians who have converted to Islam during recent years); and C) “the Arabs” (so-called newcomers, usually immigrants arriving to Estonia as students, businessmen or refugees, who often use English as an intermediary language).

2) Narratives of personal religious practice and changes in this practice.

3) Narratives of *us* as Muslims or interpretations of what the Estonian Islamic community is and how this community has changed during recent years.

Using thematic analysis, a cluster of characteristic subnarratives was distinguished for each group and for every research area, which gave the opportunity to compare different narratives of change and outline the dynamics of the community, as seen by the different groups of the Muslim community. In the following, some subnarratives characteristic of the Tatar narrative of *self* as a Muslim (for instance family-centred religious life, impact of the Soviet past, networks) and the narrative of *us* as a Muslim community (predominantly Tatar congregation becoming multicultural, growing public interest in Estonian Muslims, Estonian Islamic Congregation as an institutional stronghold for preserving traditions) will be discussed.

BACKGROUND

The first noteworthy Tatar settlement appeared in Tallinn after the Great Northern War (1700–1721) between Sweden and Russia. Tatar soldiers stayed and purchased land in Tallinn. A street was called *Tatarenstraße* (Tatar Street) and an Islamic prayer hall was established at the beginning of the nineteenth century (Abiline 2008: 60). In the second half of the century, Tatar traders predominantly from the Nizhny Novgorod province settled in Tallinn and Narva. By the beginning of the twentieth century, Islamic prayer halls existed in both towns. Local Tatar communities owned separate territories at the cemeteries in Tallinn, Narva and Rakvere (Abiline 2008: 68–70).

In the independent Estonian Republic (1918), first in Narva (1928) and then in Tallinn (1940), Islamic congregations – in Estonian, *Muhamedi kogudus* – were registered (Au & Ringvee 2007: 122). Until the end of the pre-war Estonian independence period, which was interrupted by Soviet occupation in 1940, the local Islamic community consisted solely of Tatars. Fearing the Soviet regime, like many other Estonian residents, Tatars fled to Finland and Sweden in 1940. As a minority, the Tatars did not have many intermarriages with Estonians but mainly business and cultural contacts with locals (Abiline 2007: 32). On the other hand, connections with the Tatars in Finland were vital and consistent, as remembered in an interview:

We got along nicely. In 1939 they [Tatars from Finland and Estonia] still held big festivities together in Narva in the summer, a joint celebration. And then the next year it was supposed to take place in Helsinki and then in '39 the war started and military bases [appeared] and the war... and all was broken up. (Interview with T.S-n 2015)

While the Tatar minority in Estonia before World War II consisted merely of a few hundred bilingual persons with similar origins and Sunni Muslim faith, circumstances changed decisively after the war. The Soviet immigration policy brought to Estonia new migrants from different

parts of the Soviet Union, including Tatars, but also people from Central Asian and Caucasian republics. Shia Muslims appeared in Estonia as well. The official Tatar population in Soviet Estonia grew: in 1959 they were 1,535; in 1970 already 2,205; in 1979 they amounted to 3,195; and in 1989 the Tatars totalled 4,058 (Loog 2014: 34).

The difference between the “original” or “pristine” Tatars (Estonian *põlistatarlased*) and the Tatars of “Soviet background” or “Soviet Tatars” (*nõukogudeaegsed tatarlased*) was brought up in several of the analysed interviews, as this difference was tangible in terms of language, culture and regional and interpersonal aspects. Due to the atheist policy of the Soviet Union, Muslims were forced to confine religion to homes and private forms of worship. Because of the relatively bigger Tatar numbers compared to immigrant Azeri, Kazakh, Uzbek and other Muslims, Islam in Estonia – although suppressed – was still mainly represented by the Tatar community.

In the late 1980s, the Estonian independence movement reactivated religious organizations among general and ethnic minorities in particular. In 1989, the Tatar Cultural Society and the Estonian Islamic Congregation were established in Tallinn. This wave of new freedom brought together hundreds of Tatars, who began holding communal Friday prayers and celebrating religious festivities. They also reconfirmed their previous ties with Tatars outside Estonia, delegating a student to study at the Islamic religious school (*madrassa*) in Ufa (Bashkortostan) and seeking support from the Tatar community in Finland. During its first year of existence, the congregation had nearly 300 members, held 54 communal prayers, conducted 50 funerals and held two cemetery prayers with allegedly 400 participants (The Annual report 1989). In 1994, the Estonian Islamic Congregation was re-registered with the Ministry of Interior according to the laws of the Estonian Republic; it became the representative of all Estonian Islamic groups. According to the national census in 2000, 1,387 respondents stated their religion as Islam: 754 of those were Tatar, 83 Estonian and 79 Russian (Census 2000).

The next national census brought some change to the statistics: of 1,508 Muslims, 604 were Tatar, 299 Azeri, 148 Estonian and 107 Russian (Census 2011). By this time, the Estonian Islamic Congregation had, with the help of a Saudi sponsor, acquired spacious premises near Tallinn Airport. A ceremony was led by the young head *imam* Ildar Muhhamedšin, a graduate from the Islamic University of Medina in Saudi Arabia. The congregation witnessed the conversion of a couple of hundred mainly young Estonian females. The Estonian Muslim community has in recent years changed significantly because of the growing numbers of exchange students, resident businessmen and immigrants from the Middle East who are mostly residing in the capital Tallinn.

“A MUSLIM – WHO AM I?”

Conducting the first interviews for this research, I was repeatedly given a rough sketch or simplified picture of the Estonian Islamic community by the interviewees, independently of their background. The three main groups of Muslims emerging in conversations were “the Tatars”, or the group consisting of all Russian-speaking members of the community, “the converts” or “the Estonians”, Estonians and Russians who have converted to Islam during recent years, and “the Arabs”, a group consisting of so-called newcomers, not necessarily Arabs, more often using English for communication, mainly immigrants arriving in Estonia as students, businessmen or refugees.

Although none of the groups consist of people who possess common or even similar characteristics, a closer look reveals that the terms habitually used by the members of the community – “the Tatars”, “the Converts”, “the Arabs” – still indicate different backgrounds and language use and a

diverse understanding of religious life. The addition of new groups of converts and newcomers in the Islamic community during a relatively short period of time has given the founders the chance to reflect on, evaluate and crystallize their own understanding and practice of Islam.

When Tatar interviewees were asked about the role of religion in their life, they usually gave several examples of their regular religious practices and indicated their role in organizing activities for the congregation. At the same time, they were very often doubtful about their own religious competence. The question “Are you a Muslim?” was never asked, considering that all the Tatars interviewed were re-founders, active members or leaders of the congregation. Repetitive narratives seldom emerged and the person’s own religious identity was seen as apart from his or her role or actual merits in the congregation. For example, they stated: “I am not such a... deeply religious person, this is rather a tradition” (Interview with T.S-n 2017). “I analyse what and who I am. I am rather an agnostic” (Interview with I.A. 2017). Occasionally the Tatars compared themselves to some religious standard which they did not measure up to:

“I am not the way the *imam* is, Ildar... they pray five times a day. It’s not that way, I’m not that person, not that competent. (Interview with F.H. 2017)

Many people declare that they are religious inside, but I will not start praying five times [per day]. I will not do that. This is laziness. Yet I would not say that it is laziness... It is rather a principle, it [the prayer] is not very important. But at the same time it means that I am not a Muslim. Whoever follows that [principle is a Muslim], but [in that case] I am not a Muslim, I’m afraid. (Interview with I.A. 2017)

In order to bring out the personal religious identity in a positive, confirming way, the background of comparison could be chosen quite differently:

We are and we have lived as normal Estonian people in the Estonian society – we just don’t eat pork. [...] I am born here. I am a Muslim (Interview with T.S. 2015).

For the Tatars, it was also important to clarify what form of religiousness is reasonable, even if that form is not the “correct” one:

Me with my Islam – I am not aggressive or intrusive towards you. If I start to be cumbersome or a nuisance in the street – nobody needs that, right? No one goes around like this in Tataria [Estonian: Tatarimaa; the argument was about women not wearing full Islamic dress in Tatarstan]. (Interview with T.S-n 2017)

The meaning of the *Qur’ān* or Islam is... that I am... I trust, I obey... I give myself. I give myself over. I think about the essence of the *Fatiha* [the opening chapter of the *Qur’ān*] – how it helps me somehow, how I am not the maker of all my own destiny. (Interview with I.A. 2017)

If any common narrative – reflecting alternative religiousness in comparison to the “competent”, “praying-five-times-a-day-religiousness” – occurred among the Tatars interviewed, then it had something to do with the inner religiousness (acknowledging and accepting the Islamic teaching, while practising Islam in everyday life selectively), fitting into society and not causing trouble or attracting unnecessary attention to one’s family or group in general.

PRE-SOVIET AND SOVIET-ERA TATARS

The majority of the interviewed Tatars and some of the other groups brought out cultural and religious differences between the “layers” or “waves” inside the Tatar group in Estonia. The difference could be stated as a fact:

They came here in the 1980s and undoubtedly we are totally different. There is nothing we can do about it. We are just different (Interview with T.S-n 2015).

The main distinction was made between the “pre-Soviet Tatars” and the “Soviet-era Tatars”. The reasons for this difference were explained with historical, regional and even family (or “tribal”) contradictions, but more often with different attitudes to the cultural inheritance:

This [pre-Soviet] generation still preserves its religion, its language; many keep their Tatar language alive. The new generation, who came to Estonia during the Soviet era – their children do not speak the Tatar language any more. (Interview with F.H. 2017)

Representatives of the Soviet-era Tatars, seeing the Soviet reality with its immigration and language policy as a normal part of their lives, perceived the difference between the layers as not broadly cultural, but more specifically religious and because of that easier to overcome:

The Tatars who came here in the 1950s, I have heard... not much good came out of trying to communicate with the local [earlier] Tatars, because they thought that those who came from Russia were Communists or God knows what... but then they got to know them and learned that they are religious, too, and they also perform *namaz* [the word used for prayer among Tatars; “the Arabs” and “the Estonians” use “the prayer” or “the *salaat*”]. (Interview with Muhhamedsin 2017a)

The most prominent and repetitive narrative defining Tatar religiosity, independently of gender or age group, is the story of the religious example of grandparents or placing first religious experiences within a family context. In nearly all interviews, descriptions of a grandfather performing or teaching prayers and a grandmother praying or reciting the *Qurʾān* were present. Religiousness of parents and grandparents is relevant on both personal and communal levels. On the personal level, family tradition was the reason for preserving some religious practices:

I preserve the tradition because I’m used to that, and because my mother did it. Why did my mother preserve the tradition? Because my grandmother and grandfather from my father’s side did so. [...] So my grandparents kept doing this most carefully, my mother kept it alive, and now I also try. (Interview with F.H. 2017)

On the community level, the re-founding of the pre-war congregation was seen as a kind of honorary debt to the ancestors: “Our ancestors, our grandfathers, were the ones who kept this congregation alive even when it [during the Soviet period] was hidden in our homes” (Interview with T.S-n 2015). On several occasions the possibility to perform the *hajj* (the Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca, to be performed at least once in one’s life) was seen as paying off an honorary debt to grandparents and parents, who due to the Soviet restrictions on religion and travelling abroad were unable to go to Mecca themselves.

This narrative in the interviews has a surprising parallel in official documents concerning the permission by Soviet authorities to restore the congregation in Tallinn. One of the reasons for the acceptance of the Estonian Tatars’ request to register the congregation in 1989 in the Soviet Estonia Council of Ministers was the argument of the pre-war existence of an Islamic congregation in Estonia. There was also an official desire to support the claim of the former members or the successors of those members to restore the congregation, despite the general Soviet policy of atheism and the endeavour to eradicate any religious traditions (The Ruling of Council of Ministers 1989).

FAMILY-CENTRED RELIGIOUS LIFE

A prominent narrative in the Tatar interviews was the influence of the Soviet regime on family religiosity. In most cases it consisted of two parts. An introductory part stressed the devastation wrought on religious life by the oppressive anti-religious policy:

My grandfather was very pious man and when – even before the great war [World War II] – all *imams* were destroyed, killed... and all the mosques were demolished, then this one was left and he went to it – my mother told me so – and he opened it, he went early in the morning when no one was there and he heated a stove there alone and prayed. Yes, he was a really religious person and the last one to join the collective farm. (Interview with Muhhamedšin 2017a)

Then followed a description of religious traditions, which were preserved and practised despite hostile circumstances. On several occasions, grandparents’ regular praying was mentioned as the first religious memory. Communal gatherings for praying in private homes and cemeteries, once or twice a year holding an evening with *Qur’ān* reading and inviting the local *imam* to lead the communal prayer and bless the home, were also frequent memories. This was remembered with the comment “although it all was forbidden back then” added to the story. Such communal events were not permitted and therefore the Tatars maintained their religious practice, including traditional festivities, in private or in family circles:

In the Russian [Soviet] times... at the time of *qorban bāyrāme* [Festival of the Sacrifice] we just went from home to home, from apartment to apartment... someone prepared a sheep, somebody else something bigger, whatever they could afford. [...] in Russian [Soviet] times, as a private *akika* [name-giving ceremony for a baby and offering a sacrifice], my baby daughters were on the table [at home], and the imam held the prayer and kissed them on the forehead. (Interview with T.S. 2016)

The answers by the present younger Tatar generation in their 30s and 40s is very similar to the information given by Tatars in their 50s and 60s. In the interviews with younger people, data from other groups with Islamic background from the former Soviet Union are included (Uzbeks, Chechens, Bashkirs and so forth). Similar stories as the Tatars’ were told by them: their grandparents and the interviewees themselves were more religious than the generation of their parents, who grew up during the Soviet period and lived their lives in an atheistic society. The grandchildren modelled their religious identity on the example given by their caring grandparents. Now, as adults, they described their efforts to achieve a “spiritual awakening” or the attempt to encourage their elderly parents to start practising religion more seriously.

My grandmother held Ramadan [fasting] and read *namaz* [the prayer]. My mother didn’t. But recently she has started praying as well. When two years ago I visited my [parents’] home, I said to her, “Mother, you need to start praying now.” I showed her how to do it and we prayed together. That is how she began. (Interview with M.I. 2017)

I started to pray while I was studying in Syria and – *alhamdulillah* [Arabic: ‘praise be to God’] – after that I never stopped. Then later my mother began, *alhamdulillah*, and till her death she prayed and read the *Qur’ān*. And after that – *alhamdulillah* – my father. He was the last one in our family who started [to pray]. (Interview with Muhhamedšin 2017a)

RELIGIOUS IDENTITY AND ORIGINS

The most frequently mentioned narrative in the interviews about religious identity concerns the tight connection with the previous home town or village of the family and frequent or regular visits there. Often the visits were described in connection with some religious activity

and meetings with relatives. The time was chosen, for instance, during Ramadan (the fasting month) or when establishing new family connections (for instance weddings) in the former home region among people with the same language, religion and culture.

Travelling [home] played a role, young men and women met each other and married. Since it was the same country [Soviet Union] anyway, it was easy even then to bring a spouse from there [the home region]. That is why the number of Tatars grew bigger every year, since the young men came here [to Estonia] to marry. (Interview with Muhhamedšin 2017a)

In some interviews, faith was mentioned as the first reason to get a spouse from "home". Only in a few cases was nationality mentioned, but since religion plays an important role in Tatar cultural identity it has some significance when choosing a spouse.

At the heart of the religious autobiographical narratives, the members of the Tatar Islamic community emphasize a strong connection to their family and the past. The understanding that they need to take over the legacy and maintain the traditions from their grandparents is widely spread. At the same time, Estonian Tatars see religion as something confined to the home, an attitude inherited from the Soviet period. They continue some practices, mostly in the case of the older generation, but they doubt their true character as Muslims or "Muslimness".

In comparison, Estonian converts define their religious identity mostly within the context of their individual development. Immigrants from North Africa, the Middle East, North India, Pakistan and Bangladesh see their religiousness as something that depends on the society. Usually their context of exploring religious identity is opened with a statement such as "I was naturally born into it", with "it" being Islam or some other religious environment. In contrast, Tatars and other Islamic groups in the former Soviet Union situate their religious experiences and growth into the family context.

CHANGING COMMUNITY

In my interviews with the Tatars, the term "Estonian Islamic community" in general and the Estonian Islamic Congregation in particular often overlapped and were used as parallels. The reason is probably because the Tatars are the restorers of the Estonian Islamic Congregation in Tallinn. The membership structure of the Estonian Islamic Congregation reflects the Tatar understanding of membership in a religious institution: religion is part of a cultural identity and thus one can become a member of the Estonian Islamic Congregation only through membership in an ethnic minority cultural society (Statute of EIC 2015).

As a consequence, Estonian converts and immigrants are not able to gain access to the congregation and they have no impact on legal or financial matters of congregational life; unless they have formed a registered cultural association. The association must function for three years and only then it can apply for membership from the congregation board, which considers and decides on the acceptance of such an organization.

Until 2015, the prerequisites for membership in the Estonian Islamic Congregation were acceptance of the faith of Islam and keeping the congregation's statutes. Based on these two elements, either the general meeting of the congregation or its directorate would grant membership (Statutes of EIC 1995; 2002; 2004; 2014). Shifting circumstances (growing numbers and different nationalities) in the broader Estonian Islamic community induced consecutive alterations of the statutes. These changes serve the purpose of reacting to the new situation where

newcomers want to have their say, and simultaneously keeping some continuity and control over the congregation by the Tatars.

To the question “What has in your opinion changed in the Estonian Muslim community over the years?”, the answers varied, depending on how long the interviewed person had been a member of the community. In the case of the Tatars, the period was defined as after the restoration of Estonian independence. The most common answer indicated a general growth of the community in numbers, clearly visible in the increase of participants during communal Friday prayers at the Tallinn Islamic Centre (Keevise 9, near the airport in Ülemiste).

The exact numbers are difficult to evaluate, since the data of national censuses (from 1,387 in 2000 to 1,508 in 2011) gives only an estimation based on those respondents who were willing to answer an optional question on religious allegiance. However, the religious leaders of the Estonian Islamic Congregation and regular attendees of weekly Friday prayers stated a noteworthy growth of participants owing to such newcomers as international exchange students, refugees and businessmen.

When further specification was asked, the interviewees stressed the wider range of nationalities or the changed ways of communication in the centre and prayer halls. From the interviews with the newcomers it was obvious that some nationalities have become “more visible”. Interviewees from Pakistan and Bangladesh noted the growth of respective ethnic communities in Tallinn from one or two families to 50–60 persons during the last two or three years; Muslims of Somali background from Helsinki were also regular visitors during Friday prayers in Tallinn. Some answers indicated the general development from a single to a multi-ethnic community:

All is different after the Ülemiste Centre started to become much more multicultural... if earlier during the two big [festive] prayers – *ramazan* and *qorban bāyrāme* [*īd al-Fitr* at the end of the fasting month and *īd al-Adha* or Festival of the Sacrifice] – in the hall all were Tatars, now [...] in this bigger community, there are not so many Tatars any more. (Interview with I.A. 2017)

Earlier in Soviet times and some years after that, it was more like an ethnic Islam. Some Azerbaijanis were present and some [other] people from the Caucasus, but they were few... Practically all were Tatars. Later, [after 1989, new] people came [to the centre], who turned into Muslims just then [“the Converts”], and also some who had become Muslims abroad. For these people there were all sorts of reasons why they converted to Islam, and because of this they need extra attention. (Interview with Muhamedšin 2017b)

The last statement – the need to pay extra attention to converts – reflects the congregation leader’s worry about unknown foreign influences and the fear of possible radicalization abroad.

A second narrative of change, which was mentioned six times in fourteen interviews with Tatars and other Estonian Muslims with a former Soviet Union background, was the urge to explain or confirm the peaceful, harmless character of Muslims and their obedience of the law. Interviewees remembered the “good old times” before 2012, when there was no need to explain, comment or answer journalist inquiries. After that “the troubles” started, as growing public and media interest towards Muslims in general and Estonian Muslims specifically led to many critical articles and an official investigation of the congregation’s financial operations.

PUBLIC INTEREST IN MUSLIMS

According to the Muslims interviewed, public interest became focused on the growing Islamic community through the women, both converts and immigrants, who were wearing “Islamic” clothing: “These scandals started before everything with those clowns. There was this maiden

[...], who used to walk about in a headscarf” (Interview with T.S-n 2017). From the interviews with different nationalities from the former Soviet Union, there emerged a universal attitude regarding the “special Islamic clothing”. The need not to be distinguishable or “intrusive with my Islam” clashed with the converts’ or newcomers’ eagerness to stress their “Muslimness” with special attire.

Another reason for the growing interest in the community’s functions and growth was the news about financial irregularities in the Estonian Islamic Congregation. In 2016, the prosecutor’s office charged the head *imam* with embezzlement and misuse of the congregation’s funds (Kuul 2016). Several incidents concerning obtrusive media interference, driven by the fear of international terrorism and radical Islam, were remembered in the interviews. A telling example shows how a Tatar approach to the issue suddenly appeared in the public limelight:

A journalist from a Russian magazine asked for my comment on Kristiina Ojuland’s [a controversial nationalist and conservative politician] statement, according to which after 20 years the Muslims here will kill people and cut throats in the streets. Are you willing to speak, the journalist asked? I said: Yes. I said: I’m sincerely interested in two things. Rather, I have one question and one recommendation. First: why 20 years? I mean, really, could you ask her why 20, not 21 or 22? And secondly, the recommendation: she [the politician] should maybe ask for some medical or psychiatric help. [...]

The journalist started to laugh and that was all. I mean, why should I start to call names or argue? I answered quite nicely. [...] Then I said: You know, I am 67 years old. I was born here and I am a Muslim. I told him: Until this day I have not heard that any Muslim here has killed somebody or cut any throats, or that anyone had cut some Muslim’s throat, for that matter... Really, what kind of talk is this? (Interview with T.S. 2016)

The narratives of growth in numbers, the community’s mainly Tatar ethnic composition turning multicultural and the discomfort because of unwanted media attention are the leading stories describing the changes in the past decades. In some instances, however, the younger generation’s choice of a more secular way of life was brought up in the interviews. The generation in their 30s and 40s often declare that they are Muslims, but they never pray or eat *halal* (permissible food and drinks according to traditional Islamic law). For the older generation, the decreasing knowledge and use of Tatar language is also a concern. The need and desire to educate children in Tatar language and culture at least during Sunday school lessons were mentioned only in a practical context: the teacher of the Islamic Sunday school at the Tallinn Islamic Centre needed to reschedule her lessons so that they did not overlap with the activities of the Tatar Sunday school (Interview with I.M. 2015).

Explaining their actions, the most common reasoning among Tatars was the argument of willingness to answer to someone else’s request and needs – the community, family or the Islamic congregation. This tendency to put one’s actions in the context of family or the community, seeing the actions as paying off one’s debt to the ancestors or as a preservation of their legacy, resembles the already mentioned narrative of inner motivation to pursue Islamic faith as something constitutive to grandparents or parents:

My mother heard about the possibility to go and study [religion] abroad and she stood up and said: Maybe my son would want to go. We never had discussed this before. And then she came and told me, and I at once said: Let me go and try. (Interview with Muhhamedšin 2017a)

When I came back to Estonia, I met the leadership of the Estonian Islamic Congregation, [...] they wished that I would lead the congregation spiritually, because the former *imam* had passed away some years ago. (Interview with Muhhamedšin 2017b)

In the interviews concerning the development and changes in the Estonian Islamic community, one of the questions addressed the understanding of the individual role within the community. In the case of the Tatars, the persons interviewed were the restorers and religious or administrative leaders of the congregation, contributors to publications of religious literature and leaders of Tatar cultural societies. Their understanding of the way of expressing their role in the community was reserved and discreet.

The serious change in the community – or more specifically in the functioning of the Islamic Centre in Tallinn – stems from the shift in the ethnic balance of the community. The Tatar re-founders of the congregation stated as one of the most important issues for official restitution of the community, besides the possibility to perform communal prayers and celebrate religious and family festivities together, the possibility for elderly Tatars to gather and freely use their own language during gatherings both in religious and purely social functions.

Presently in the Islamic Centre there are two different sets of languages used. On the women’s (third) floor, women listen to the *khutba*, the sermon delivered after the Friday prayer, via a loudspeaker and pray privately. The majority is elderly and uses Tatar or Russian for communication; the minority is younger and uses English since this group consists mainly of exchange students, immigrants and a few converts. On the men’s floor in the big prayer hall, the *lingua franca* is English, although the imam stresses the need to address members of community in their respective languages:

Today the language of communication is English. English, yes! But I try to speak – with different community members – their own language and then – *alhamdulillah* [praise be to God] – people respect me and they come and greet me and say: Thank you for giving the Friday talk [the *khutba*] in many languages. (Interview with Muhamedšin 2017b)

In recent years, the *khutba* at the Islamic Centre in Tallinn has been performed in Arabic and explanations follow in Russian and English or in Turkish and English. A Turkish *khutba* is performed by an *imam* sent by the Turkish government. Estonian translations of the Friday *khutba* has been available since 2017 online at a closed social media group called *Eesti Moslemid* ‘Estonian Muslims’.

CONCLUSIONS

Returning to the starting point, where the rough distinction between the “Tatar”, “Estonian” and “Arab” ways of understanding and practising Islam was drawn, putting religion into the family context and the tendency to consider religion as something belonging to the tradition and distant from the public sphere is coherently representational for Tatars.

The “Estonian” way locates the practice of religion within the context of strictly personal growth which is clearly separated from family religiosity; partly since the conversion to Islam is nearly always an individual adult decision and partly as a reaction to Estonian secular society.

The “Arab” way sees Islam as something which comes naturally from society; as most of the immigrants have lived their lives until recently in societies where every aspect of religion is seen as self-evident, they feel they are born into it. The attitudes can be summarized as follows:

Tatar: *My faith is a matter of my family and my heritage.*

Estonian: *My faith is related to my personal development.*

Immigrant: *My faith is a natural part of me and the surrounding society.*

Within and depending on the interaction of these three different approaches rests the present and the future of the Estonian Islamic community.

The “Tatar” way of understanding and practising Islam today in Estonia is strongly affected by the narratives of the Soviet past and family background. The perception of religion as part of the Tatar cultural heritage rather than personal choice also influences their attitudes towards Islam. The addition of converts and newcomers to the Islamic community in Estonia has challenged the Tatars, the founders of the congregation, to reflect on, evaluate and crystallize their own understanding and practice of Islam.

The Tatars consistently preserve their traditional understanding of the community and congregational life and see the Estonian Islamic Congregation as a bastion against the new and unknown influences of the contemporary world. The membership structure of the Estonian Islamic Congregation – at least as it is constituted in the current statute of the congregation – reflects the Tatar understanding of membership in a religious institution: religion is part of the cultural identity and one can become a member of the congregation only through membership in an ethnic cultural society. A couple of new Islamic organizations have been founded during the recent decade in Tallinn, but still participants from different ethnic backgrounds join the Friday prayers every week in the Islamic Centre. Despite this ethnic, linguistic and administrative transformation of the Islamic community, however, the Tatars still play a major role in the Muslim community in Estonia.

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