

## Reflections on the Contemporary Tatar Muslim Culture: A Study of the Attitudes

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The Volga-Ural region, encompassing in broad terms, the middle Volga river valley, the middle and lower Koma valley and the southern Ural Mountains, has been the habitat of Muslims since the early 10<sup>th</sup> century<sup>1</sup>. Islam reached Caucasus region in the middle of 7<sup>th</sup> century as part of the Arab conquest of the Iranian-Sasanid Empire. The archeological evidence points to the existence of links between the people of Bashkorstastan, located in the contemporary Russia's Ural mountainous region, and the Islamic world dating back to the 8<sup>th</sup> century A.D.<sup>2</sup> But Islam officially reached the Volga-Ural region in 922 A.D. when the Bulgar king Almash bin Yaltwar accepted Islam at the hands of Ibn Fadlan, the ambassador of Caliph Muqtadir Billah, making thereby the Kingdom of Bulgars as an integral part of Abbasid Caliphate<sup>3</sup>. This proved a turning point in the history of contemporary Eurasia. With the acceptance of Islam, the present day Tatarstan became one of the most influential independent states in Eastern Europe resulting in the development of great cities of Muslim culture and scholarship. The spectacular and the most remarkable instance of this phenomenon is that the Tatars were the first to have impressed the Mongols and attracted them to embrace Islam<sup>4</sup>.

Tatars are the northernmost Muslims on the planet — within hailing distance of the Arctic and the Polar Ice-cap — all a far cry from the desert sands and searing heat of the Arabian Peninsula. In this way, technically speaking, Islam is the older religion in the lands of modern Russian Federation than Christianity. In the words of S. M. Solovev: "*the Russian Slav had not yet begun to built Christian churches on the Oka, when she did not occupy these places in the name of European citizenship, the Bulgars (ancestors of Tatars) were already listening to the Qur'an on*

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*the banks of Volga and Kama*".<sup>5</sup> Thanks to the efforts of Tatars as missionaries of Islam who not only extended and popularized the faith among the Mongols but also disseminated it in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Siberia and even Japan.

Contrary to the Western Europe, the Muslim population of Tatarstan is indigenous. They are not modern migrants from outside — as they are in Britain, France and Germany but a historical Muslim community who embraced Islam as their primary religion during the early years of its expansion beyond the Arab world.

The study of Islam in Eurasia has been neglected as an area of scholarly interest for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The post World-War I geopolitical adjustments led Islamic Studies in Europe and North America to narrow its focus to a small segment of the Muslim world — the Arabic speaking lands, Iran, Turkey and (sometimes) South Asia. The Muslim lands of erstwhile USSR and present day Russia were largely forgotten as an area on which an independent study could be undertaken. Within the Soviet Union, conditions were hardly propitious for the scholarly study of Islam. With the result one is left with no choice but to content oneself in so far as the study of Islam and religious life of Muslims in this region is concerned with little more than vague and sometimes unsophisticated understanding. As a consequence of this approach the cultural history of the vast majority of the region's Muslim population, which retained older and more established conceptions of identity and community rooted in centuries-old inner Asian and Islamic traditions, was neglected.

Although the religious history of the region remained unmasked for a long period due to the political conveniences and inconveniences, yet the post-Cold War scholarship has unearthed some fresh facts about the history of this region in general and that of Volga-Ural and Tatarstan in particular. In addition to possessing a vibrant oral tradition, the region produced a substantial literary tradition that included genres such as sacred history, historiography, genealogy, hagiography, biographical dictionaries and shrine catalogues that survive in several large holdings (the largest collections in Tashkent, Kazan and St. Petersburg)<sup>6</sup>.

The present discourse is a reflection of the author's recent visit to Tatarstan — one of the most important cultural and strategic<sup>7</sup> regions that

has a glorious past of shared heritage and is emerging as a successful model of Pluralistic experience on the comprehensive social profile and the contemporary world.

The cultural history of Tatarstan is a story of co-existence, tolerance, assimilation and accommodation. It withstood the imperial menace right since 1552 A.D. and especially after the revolution of 1917 when the militant atheism engulfed the whole of Tatarstan as a result of which Islam became increasingly suppressed; thousands of mosques were destroyed, *Mullahs* were forbidden to preach and thousands of them were executed or exiled. But thanks to the revival of democracy in the erstwhile USSR and the increasing concern of its policy makers to strengthen the institution of religious liberty, Tatarstan, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has successfully emerged on the map of Eurasia as a prosperous state both materially and spiritually.

With 3.8 million inhabitants it is also Russia's 8<sup>th</sup> largest region with no foreign borders and in spite of being part of Russian Federation it is an independent Republic. Majority of the population are Muslims followed by Orthodox Christians. Tatarstan has a highly developed economy and is one of Russia's main industrial centres. Besides the biggest automobile industry, it has a large-scale chemical and petroleum industry owing to the large oil and gas fields in the Republic.

In Tatarstan Islam adopts to new currents. In 19<sup>th</sup> century the reformation of Islam became a form of Tatar ethnos survival in new conditions. Jadidism gave a dynamism to all social processes among the Tatars. The Reform Islam in Tatarstan does not stand in the way of present-day European norms and values. It permits traditional Tatar and Islamic values to be organically united with the ideas of liberalism and democracy. The Tatar variant of Islam is very pragmatic and it cannot be called superficial. Like other states of erstwhile Soviet Union here too the Islamic revival has gained enormous momentum after 1991. The exploration of the cultural legacy is an outstanding feature of the revival.

Tatarstan's capital has one of the most outstanding Universities in Russia and now boasts Russia's first Islamic University. Tatar's openness of the social system, direct relations with the various countries of the world, and direct access both to the East and to the West are the main

reasons for the emergence of the Jadidi Movement among them. This was an original movement in Islam which is presently interpreted in the terms of Euro-Islam.

The pragmatism of Tatar Islam brings it closer to European mentality. The general opinion is that the Tatars are an Eastern people. Religion, trade routes and cultural ties all bring the Tatars closer to the East. But the last century has brought many changes to their way of life. The system of education, the developed economy and norms of behaviour make the Tatars much closer to Europe than to the East. Only markets for the sale of their goods tie them to Central or South-East Asia. Again the need for investments, modern technologies and scientific research compel Tatarstan to co-operate actively with Europe.

Tatars pride themselves in remaining at the forefront of reform in Islam, long after it ended in the Arab world and for this two main reasons are considered to be relevant. First the emerging democracy, and liberalism that allowed all confessions to develop freely and second the struggle for sovereignty. Movements and parties that wanted Tatarstan to become independent among whom the Tatar Public Centre T.P.C. and *ittifaq* devoted particular attention to Islam. The resultant example of efforts of these movements was that Islamic events are now often staged in unconventional forms: stage readings of prayers in Central Stadium in Kazan, in Sports complexes or Syembeke Tower are observed to mark Islamic holidays where thousands of people participate. Tatar Nationalists consider Islam to be the core of Tatar national consciousness, for them, it is what enabled the Tatars to remain Tatars.

Numerous findings show an enormous increase in the number of Muslims in the Republic. Although 80% of the ethnic Tatar population considers themselves Muslim, less than 5% attend the mosque regularly. Before Perestroika, only a few elderly people turned to religion: nowadays some young people are also espousing an Islamic life style. Thus 25% of young Tatars perform Islamic rituals though only 1/7<sup>th</sup> of them (mainly in the countryside and small towns) strictly observe all the rules. Another 38% of young people identify with Islam but do not perform the Islamic rites; and 7% perform only those rituals that are seen as having a social significance or being part of popular tradition.

Following the Soviet propaganda Islamic traditions were almost extirpated. They were mainly preserved by the older generations especially in the countryside who mainly passed the tradition on to their children in simplified form as everyday rituals, short prayers and celebrations of Islamic holidays.

For marriage (*nikah*) ceremonies and funerals, it is common to invite the *Imam* and recite the prayers. Although comparatively few people fast *Ramadan*, most Tatar families invite guests to celebrate the occasion and recite *surahs* from Qur'ân. Same is true of the *nahr*. Thus for most Tatars who consider themselves highly religious, Islam boils down to visiting the mosque on *Eidayn* (two Eids) or performing the main rites.

Belief in Allah does not prevent many of them from showing interest in horoscopes, magic and fortune forecast. With the opening of the borders, the Tatar Muslims have been able to perform the Hajj. Between the years 2001-2005, one thousand five hundred sixty two (1562) people have visited Makkah for *Hajj* and the number seems to increase each year.

At the onset of the revival, most Tatars knew little about the history and dogmas of Islam. Television and Radio broadcasts, specialized Islamic periodicals and articles in the secular press began to cater to their need for information. Mosques are now offering instruction in the basics of Islam and *Madrassas* providing Islamic secondary and higher education the first of them opened in 1990. By now over a thousand *shakirds* (students) are studying at 8 such institutions in Tatarstan.

However, young Imams who were funded by Middle Eastern foundations to study at Universities in the Arab world brought back "alien traditions and fundamentalist Islam" that stood in contrast to Jadidism. Today the Spiritual Board of Muslims is making efforts to provide students with basic religious training in Tatarstan before sending them abroad. The Russian Islamic University was founded in 1998 to train Imams and Islamic theologians.

Under the new found freedom, religious-minded youth began to express their faith in their choice of clothing. While there is hardly any outward difference between young men and their non-religious contemporaries, you can immediately spot girls with *hijab* from head to toe. Moreover, their garments have become more diverse, indicatively

shops selling fashionable Islamic clothing recently opened in Kazan. Young people are trying to reconcile tradition with broader trends. The revivalist attitude in Tatarstan triggered an interest in the Islamic cultural heritage. Oriental motifs appeared in architecture, painters began using Arabic calligraphy and ornamental drawings. An international festival of Islamic cinema called *Golden Minbar* first took place in Kazan in 2005. An outward symbol of Islamic renaissance, the minarets of newly built mosques rose up in towns and villages across the Republic; thousands of half destroyed mosques were restored. There were only four mosques in the whole of Tatarstan at the dawn of Prestroika; now there are over a thousand. One of the most striking examples of restoration process is the *Kol Sharief* mosque of Kazan inside the Kremlin. The 16<sup>th</sup> century diplomat, scholar and poet, Kul Sharief who headed the mosque also laid down his life defending this part of the town during the Russian invasion of Kazan in 1552 and the mosque was ravaged and burned down. This mosque, that is currently the biggest in Europe, was re-opened in 2005 and the author was present in the opening ceremony. It offers space for 1000 people besides the complex that has a museum and educational center.

Tatarstan Islam is the manifestation of Jadidism to develop a reformist Islam that combines faith with the values of modern society. With its secular and tolerant credentials Tatarstan is fully ready to emerge on its own into the world culture and "Tatar Model" is gaining currency throughout the contemporary world.

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Allan J. Frank, "Islamic Shrine Catalogues and Communal Geography in the Volga-Ural Region", *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 7:2, 1996, p. 265.

<sup>2</sup> Hunter Shirin. T., *Islam in Russia: The Politics of Identity and Security*, New York, 2004, p. 3. Cf. Allan J. Frank, *Islamic Historiography and Bulgar Identity Among the Tatars and Bashkirs of Russia*, Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 1998, p. 32.

<sup>3</sup> For details of the Embassy see the author's article, "Description of Some Central Asian Tribes in Ibn Fadlan's 10<sup>th</sup> Century Account: A Study of Bulgar, Ghuzz, Pacheneg and Bashgard Turks of Volga-Ural Region", *The Journal of Central Asian Studies*, Volume II, 2000, Srinagar, pp. 31-43.

Some sources are of the view that Bulgars were introduced to Islam and a substantial number of their population had already accepted the faith even before the coming of Ibn Fadlan's embassy. One of the purposes of the Baghdadi embassies and especially that of Ibn Fadlan, was the strengthening of Islam, the introduction of Islamic Law, the building of a mosque and a *minbar* and the Islamization of the whole country. (Ibn Fadlan, *Safarnama*, tr. Taba Tabai, Iran, 2535, Yurmah, pp. 20, 81, 98)

*Safarnama*, the 10<sup>th</sup> century account of Ibn Fadlan provides insight into the inhabitants of Bukhara and Khwarzm besides giving a detailed account about the culture, customs and life-styles of Oghuz, Pechneges, Bashkirs, Bulgars, Rus and Khazars. As a representative of the 10<sup>th</sup> century Abbasid Kingdom, Ibn Fadlan was a *Faqih* (Doctor of Law) who spoke and wrote Arabic. This account is "virtually the only eyewitness account of the composition of peoples and forces in the Eurasian Steppe region between the time of Herodotus and the Dominican and Franciscan missions to the Mongols in the thirteenth century (James E. McKeithew, *The Risala of Ibn Fadlan: An Annotated Translation with Introduction*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979, p. 29.

<sup>4</sup> Arnold, T. W., *The Preaching of Islam*, New Delhi, 1984, p. 218ff.

<sup>5</sup> Hunter, *Ibid*

<sup>6</sup> Thousands of Islamic manuscripts collected during the Soviet era in the course of local

archeographical expeditions and housed in archives in the cities of Kazan and Ufa, remain uncatalogued and virtually unexamined. Such manuscripts include regional and village histories, all sharing a primarily religious focus, hagiographies, sufi *silsilas*, village and tribal genealogies (*shajras*) and historical legends. to have some of the genres of historical interest. (Frank, *Ibid*)

<sup>7</sup> Strategic in the sense that :

- Tatars were the first non-Russian, Turkic speaking Muslims whom the Muscovite State incorporated into its confines.
- The Russians found immediate and long-term use for the Tatars in extending contacts with other Turkic and Muslim peoples along the shifting Southern and Eastern frontier of their realm.

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- That this use stimulated the dispersion of significant numbers of Tatars throughout greater Central Asia, and
  - That in the process the Tatars sought and frequently gained advantage from their diaspora circumstances against both Russian and other Central Asian interests (Lazzerini Edward, J., *Central Asia in Historical Perspective*, ed., Beatrice F. Manz, Westview Press, Boulder, San Francisco, Oxford (Vanguard edition), 1996, p. 83.