Education, youth and Islam: the growing popularity of private religious lessons in Dushanbe, Tajikistan

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This article attempts to explain the growing popularity of private religious lessons in urban Tajikistan from a cross-generational perspective. By instilling discipline and good ‘morals’, religious lessons serve as a powerful tool to socialize adolescent and morally vulnerable urban youth into the established social order. The increasing demand for religious instruction on the part of Muslim parents not only reflects the growing importance of Islam in Tajikistan, but also highlights the weaknesses of state education and the constraints on family upbringing in neo-local urban households. By attending religious classes, male and female youth have found a space for negotiating religious identities and for realizing their own abilities and ambitions. Given the socio-economic hardships of everyday life in the post-Soviet city, a turn to Islam can promote integration, recognition and social mobility, and offer an alternative route for urban youth to become ‘adults’.

Keywords: Islam; youth; education; adolescence; maturity; morality; veiling; Muslimness; secular state; public Islam

Introduction

Attendance at private religious lessons (sabaq) is a key element of Sunni Muslim religious practice in Dushanbe, the capital of the small, mountainous Central Asian Republic of Tajikistan. Conducted in private rooms of urban households or in new or reopened neighbourhood mosques (masjadi panjvaqt), these lessons currently enjoy considerable popularity in Dushanbe. The vast number of religious specialists (mullo, bibikhalifa) offering elementary religious instruction for boys and girls between the ages of 7 and 16 is evidence of a rapidly increasing religious service sector, which accommodates the growing interest of the Muslim urban population in the basic principles of Islam, supports parents in achieving their educational tasks and enables young Muslims to participate in public life and to express their religious identity. This applies not only to the old Dushanbe quarters (mahalla) with their traditional mud-brick buildings, which have proved largely impervious to the recent processes of migration and social disintegration in the capital, but also to the Soviet style (mikrorayon) apartment blocks far removed from the city centre, most of which are occupied by poor migrants from rural areas and internally displaced people (IDPs) (gureza).

This article explores why private religious lessons are in such demand in Dushanbe. The reasons why parents send their adolescent sons and daughters to religious lessons in the neighbourhood provide insights into the close interrelationship between religion and education, and shed light on local concepts of youth, puberty and adolescence. Private religious lessons are also favoured by Muslim adolescents in Dushanbe, who have their own opinions and experience the lessons in their own distinctive way. Therefore, the article will also examine their motives for attendance. The generational disaggregated approach to the practice of elementary religious

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instruction allows for insights into what it means to be young and to practise religion in the Tajik capital of Dushanbe today. In a broader sense, it demonstrates that the practices under review constitute – in the words of Bourdieu (2000) – a ‘religious field’, where local concepts of Islam and Muslimness are articulated and renegotiated by old and young. These multi-vocal religious debates are a constitutive part of the emerging public Islam in Tajikistan’s capital Dushanbe.

Dushanbe was chosen because like all post-socialist cities, it is a place where change and crises condense, and socio-cultural and religious dynamics are at their most visible (Humphrey 2002, Alexander and Buchli 2007, Tokhtakhodzhaeva 2007).

Youth, education and religion in post-Soviet Dushanbe

For Muslims in Dushanbe ‘youth’ (Tajik javony) represents a stage of transition between childhood and adulthood. They see it as a time when young people attempt ‘to find their way in life’ and to learn ‘what life is about’. Therefore, adolescence is first and foremost a time of learning. The position of adolescents in society is one of beginners and newcomers being guided by the older generation to a social order exclusively defined by the values, norms and principles of the latter. Hence, the teenage years are not perceived in Tajikistan as a distinctive life stage. They underlie an extrinsic attribution defined by adults and essentially serve to prepare for the future roles of adulthood (mother/father, wife/husband), family relations and professional careers (Zinnecker 1991, p. 10, Hunner-Kreisel 2008).

Education plays a major role at this stage of the life cycle. In accordance with the vernacular term tarbiya (‘upbringing’, ‘rearing’, ‘education’), it has the explicit aim of guiding adolescents ‘towards the straight and narrow’ or ‘showing them the right path (rohi rost)’. These local ideas highlight education as a web of relations based on the authority and power of grown-ups over the young, which, as Clifford Geertz (1993, p. 52) states, implies a childlike subordination to ‘the guidance of cultural patterns, historically created systems of meaning in terms of which give form, order, point, and direction to lives’. Hence, education serves to consolidate the regulatory systems of the social group and the concomitant social hierarchies and relations of power (Straube 2002, p. 14).

Education in this sense is of crucial importance in times of change, upheaval and crisis. In Dushanbe, as in the rest of Tajikistan, post-socialist transformation processes have left their imprint in the daily lives of Muslims and in their perception of the world. This is especially true of youth, which as a sizeable social group, constitutes a driving force behind the social, religious and economic changes that have taken place in the country since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Easier access to mass media and new communication technologies, access to private educational institutions, labour and educational migration to European and Islamic countries, as well as new job opportunities in the domestic IT sector, allows young Muslims to come into contact with transnational cultural goods (values, ideas, life styles and consumer goods). In turn, this prompts critical reflection about, or even rejection, of existing local values, cultural traditions and identities (see Kirmse 2010, Ibold 2010, DeYoung 2010).

At the same time, Muslim youth has been hit hardest by the country’s poor economic performance. Unemployment, lack of career prospects and poor educational opportunities as a result of low standards in national schools and universities accelerates their demoralization and susceptibility to crime, violence and drug consumption, rendering them – particularly in the congested areas of the urban centres – a ‘lost generation’ (ICG 2003b, pp. 25–34). In response to these developments, the older generation portrays the young as breaking away from the traditional influence of the family and the local community, and destabilizing the existing social order. As a result, political, religious and cultural actors now compete in the
public domain in Dushanbe for hegemony in matters of education with the aim of tightening their control over the young. The parental generation must decide in this context what set of values education should be based on and which approach should be adopted. The proliferation of lifestyle options and cultural and religious identities that characterizes post-Soviet modernity, particularly in the urban centres, seriously challenges the existing world views, identities and moral standards of local Muslims.

Under these circumstances, religion plays a vital role in the upbringing of Muslim youth as a normative and moral guideline. The close association between Islam and education can be traced back to the impact of Persian cultural tradition, the Hanafi school of Islam, and Sufism on what is now the region of Tajikistan (Niyazi 1994, Epkenhans 2010). Axioms such as ‘religion (din) is education (tarbiya)’ or ‘Islam teaches us morality, modesty and good manners (odob)’ are shared by representatives from all social groups in Dushanbe. Ingrained in local notions of Muslimness, they stand for a tradition, a consensus over the role of Islam as the normative frame and moral standard for social action.

The growing recourse to Islam and Islamic symbols, apparent in the current debate on education in the Dushanbe public sphere, attests to a deprivatization of what Tamara Dragadze (1993) called ‘domesticated’ Soviet Islam in Tajikistan and bears witness to the return of Islam in a public domain, which is mostly dominated by secular forces. Here, religious actors and organizations re-appropriate common goods such as education, which were previously controlled by Communist-atheist state power and its institutions as a result of the Soviet secularization of Central Asia. As I will argue later, this new development is fostered by the Tajik state, which is either unable or unwilling to fill the gaps in the ailing system of education, particularly in the cities, left by the collapse of the smoothly run Soviet educational and youth institutions (Stephan 2010). Consequently, the burden of upbringing today lies first and foremost with the family, which in the Muslim world is generally seen as the stronghold of primary socialization (Fernea 1995). However, battered by the socio-economic crisis in post-Soviet Tajikistan, and particularly in the aftermath of the bloody civil war from 1992 until 1997 (Akbarzadeh 1996, Dudoignon 1998a, 1998b, Niyazi 1999), numerous Muslim families in Dushanbe fall back on religious authorities and institutions with regard to the upbringing of their offspring. Traditional practices, such as receiving religious instruction under the guidance of an authorized person, perceptibly weakened in the Soviet past, are experiencing a boom in the process.

Adult perspectives: religious lessons as institutions of education and discipline

Private religious lessons (Tajik sabaq, dars: ‘tuition’, ‘lesson’ but also ‘indoctrination’, ‘instruction’) have a long tradition in Tajikistan. Their historical forerunner, the maktab, formed the backbone of traditional religious learning in the pre-modern Muslim societies of Central Asia. They provided an elementary Islamic education, with the aim of turning young boys and girls into genuine believers and good Muslims (Landau 1986, p. 567, Shorish 1986, Khalid 1998). As a result of their connection to the local mosque, their proximity to the households and the local background of the teaching staff, the maktab were embedded in urban and rural neighbourhoods, and guaranteed the reproduction of local knowledge and local religious authority (Medlin et al. 1971, pp. 30, 33, Shorish 1986, p. 325).

As in the case of their historical counterparts, private religious lessons in Dushanbe play a significant role in the socializing of urban youth in the Muslim community. In single-gender classes based on a fixed repertoire of canonical texts, which includes Chahor kitob,6 Haftyak6 and works by representatives of classic Persian literature such as Saady, Bedil or Hofiz,7 young Muslims are introduced to the chief principles of Islam and instructed in the ritual practices of praying (namoz) and fasting (ruza), and the ritual ablution (ghuzl, tahorat). As in the
historical maktab, the transmission of religious knowledge (ta’lim) in these private lessons is inextricably bound up with moral instruction and discipline (tarbiya). Entrenched in a religious world view and equipped with divine legitimacy, moral instruction has the purpose of familiarizing young Muslims with the social principles, social habits and behavioural standards of the Muslim community, which enables them to practice odob in specific social contexts, i.e. good morality, modesty and manners. In their endeavour to educate their adolescent sons and daughters, Muslim parents in Dushanbe readily have recourse to these religious lessons precisely because of their disciplinary and moralizing function.

Times of crisis, instability and change are not only caused by socio-political upheaval; they also determine transition stages in the individual’s life cycle. The onset of maturity (baloqhat) marks the end of childhood and the dawning of youth. The phrase ‘he/she has reached maturity’ (ba baloghat rasidagy) refers to the beginning of puberty and, in addition to sexual maturity, entails intellectual and moral coming of age. The development of intellectual capacities (aql), awareness (shuur, fahmish), the power of moral judgement and the perception of one’s own sexuality also bring a fundamental change of status. From that time onwards young Muslims are increasingly held accountable for what they do and thus affect their own reputation and that of their kinship group (oila, khesh). This raises the expectations of their social environment that they must observe existing social norms and gender rules of conduct, and behave in a manner conducive to morality. Of major importance is the display of hurmat (‘respect’, ‘deference’). As a key point of reference, hurmat determines all matters related to the social, religious and political lives of the Muslims in the region, reinforces the authority and power of the older generation over the young, and defines the relationship between believers and God or the supernatural, as well as gender relations (Pfluger-Schindlbeck 1989, Tapper 1990, Straube 2002).

Entry into the stage of maturity overlaps with, but also precedes, the transition of adolescents to religious maturity (gunohdory). Whereas physical and mental maturity depend on the individual development cycle of the young body, the time frame for entry into religious maturity is clearly defined by local Islamic tradition. Following the ‘rules’ (qoida), girls reach this stage at 9 years of age, boys at the age of 12. The behaviour of adolescents from this point on not only has immediate social consequences but also affects the hereafter. Hence, religious maturity marks a turning point in the educational endeavours of parents who aspire to educate their sons and daughters in the ‘religious way’ (ba rohi din). Religious instruction must take place at this point at the latest if young Muslims are to acquire a solid foundation in morally correct conduct.

Budding maturity signals the passage to social and religious responsibility. From the adult perspective, however, adolescence is a phase of ‘wild’, ‘unrestrained’ and ‘crazy’ (shūkh or devona budan) behaviour that poses a threat to the adolescents themselves and their environment, as well as to the existing social order. Hence, youth at this stage need more guidance and restraint from adults to safeguard their good moral standing.

Religion, in the form of private religious lessons, is a suitable educational tool to discipline uncontrolled adolescents and ‘lead them onto the right path’. Education (tarbiya) in these lessons varies. Instructions and teachings (amr ma’ruf) are devoted to the religious duties, principles and rules of Islamic ethics (harom-halol), and aim to inspire pupils with a certain inner disposition or morality that will guide their social behaviour and their relationship to God. At the heart of this learning is the obligatory prayer (namoz). Inoyat, a religious teacher (mullo) and the imam of a small neighbourhood mosque (masjidi mahalla) in the centre of Dushanbe, underlines its educational dimension:

The lads learn decency and good manners (odob) here [in his lessons]. The best way to educate them is with namoz. If someone prays for even five minutes, they interrupt their bad thoughts and deeds for that amount of time. They become a better person. Prayer has a purifying effect.
Education in these lessons is also an implicit learning process, working through the authoritative pupil-teacher relationship or the appropriate study of sacred texts (flawless memorizing, good diction, careful handling of books etc.). The latter has a particularly disciplining effect on body and soul, which fosters the development of a specific ‘habitus’ in the Bourdieuan sense, of a certain type of morality described by Khalid (1998, p. 21) as ‘mimetic practice’, and expressed in emotional and physical self-control, humility, clemency, endurance and obedience. In this way pupils show reverence and respect (hurmat) for the authority of the teachers, the sacred word – and consequently to God himself.

These learning processes also inculcate gender-specific aspects of morality. The prevailing ideas on female morality (odobi zanagy) in the urban Muslim population of Dushanbe condense into the concept of female respectability or shame (sharmu hayo). Linked to these are attributes such as shyness, modesty and virtue. At the same time, the semantic equation of the term sharmu hayo with ‘humiliation’ or ‘disgrace’ makes it patently clear that non-compliance with these virtues in Tajik society, which like other Muslim societies is based on conformity to community norms, not only jeopardizes the woman’s own reputation but also that of her relatives (Harris 2004). Consequently, parents are keen for their daughters to display modesty once maturity sets in. This includes observance of the dress code (head covering, long loose clothing), proper behaviour with the opposite sex, reserve in appearance and speech, as well as the performance of household duties such as cooking, sewing and embroidery skills. In view of their meagre future educational prospects, these female skills are vital for young people in Tajikistan. For many Muslim parents in Dushanbe, preparing their daughters for their future lives as capable, skilled housewives and mothers has priority over the acquisition of secular knowledge.

Several female religious specialists follow the tradition of the pre-modern girls’ schools in Central Asia (atun bibi schools) (Shorish 1986, p. 325, Krämer 2002, pp. 46, 49) and, apart from reading various texts, instruct young girls and women in domestic arts and female skills. Sayora, a 38-year-old Bibikhalifa from Dushanbe, involves her 14 and 16-year-old pupils in housework:

When we prepare food in the kitchen or do the washing, I talk to them like a mother. I explain everything they need to know if they’re getting married. In this way I show them the right path (rohi rost).

Female morality calls for the curbing of young girls’ sexuality in the interests of their future lives as decent housewives and mothers (Dracklé 1996, p. 21). Male morality makes it necessary to restrain the tempestuousness of boys in preparation for their future role as family breadwinners, household heads and eventually carers of their own ageing parents. High hopes are placed in the moral advancement of sons, particularly against the backdrop of economic deprivation that exists in Tajikistan today. Decency and morality (odob) in combination with a good education are considered a guarantee for successful marriage arrangements and a financial safeguard for parents’ in old age.

When adolescent sons go ‘wild’ (shākh) and behave like ‘rowdies’ or ‘hooligans’ (khuligan), these expectations are threatened. During this period they are particularly susceptible to bad influences in their social environment and need to be ‘disciplined’ (orom kardan). Contrary to their female counterparts, the latitude for movement of adolescent boys increases as they grow older. They spend more time outside the home, on the ‘street’ (kučha), and escape parental control to some extent (see Kirmse 2010). Hence, many Muslim parents in Dushanbe see religious instructions offered by local religious specialists as an appropriate step in their endeavour to control their sons’ behaviour and give them guidance.

Devotion to religion is not associated with discipline alone but also perceived as a meaningful leisure activity. The lessons given by 50-year-old Mullah Inoyat demonstrate that the
neighbourhood mosque is instrumental in exerting control and offering protection against negative influences from ‘outside’ (berun), i.e. the space beyond the immediate neighbourhood which itself is understood as belonging to the ‘inside’ (darun).

Inoyat gives daily lessons to 16 boys between 12 and 16 years of age in rooms at the neighbourhood mosque. His lessons take place in the late afternoon, allowing pupils to participate in the evening communal prayer (shom) with male adults, and to help out in the mosque (prepare tea, clean rooms etc.). In this sense the lessons provide an alternative to unsupervised leisure time on the ‘street’ – a public space in Dushanbe with negative moral connotations for older Muslims, perceived by them as a setting for alcohol and drug consumption, crime, prostitution and violence. Inoyat declares the objective of his lessons in the local mosque:

It’s a good thing that the boys come [to me]. It’s better for them to spend their time here than outside (berun), on the street. No one there can protect them from evil. They steal, they lie and stray from the right path. Many of the boys grow up like this today. . . . Their upbringing at home is not great. The parents have no time, and the fathers and older brothers are working in Russia. The children are on their own all day. It’s better if they come [here]. They learn how to behave properly here, how to pray . . .

At the same time, the protective aspect of religious lessons compensates for the lack of capacity in many urban families to educate their offspring, as is evident from the above quotation. Urban households in particular are threatened by poverty and unemployment, forcing both parents to work. In addition, an increasing number of families in Dushanbe are affected by the constant increase in the labour migration of young men and women to countries such as Russia, and have to compensate for the temporary absence of one or more members of their household. As a result, they are completely overburdened with the responsibility for their teenage sons. This applies specifically to neo-local households in Dushanbe. Once celebrated as an achievement of Soviet modernity, this household model is proving difficult for the economic and social survival of a great many urban households today. Dislocated and without the support of their relatives or other social networks to ease their parental responsibilities with regard to education, urban migrants see religious lessons in the neighbourhood as a coping mechanism for bringing up their sons and daughters.

As private religious lessons are believed to instil discipline and a moral disposition into adolescent and morally vulnerable urban youth, they are also promoted, albeit indirectly, by the representatives of the state. Despite their long history in Tajikistan, sabaq lessons were not integrated into the official system of Islamic education by the post-Soviet, secular power holders. The spread of religious knowledge among children and adolescents is seen as a private matter and is hampered by numerous restrictions and requests for permission. The government’s distrustful attitude toward sabaq is undoubtedly a response to regional and trans-regional debates on Islam as a political threat (Tazmini 2001, McBrien 2006). Thus, sabaq has been framed by the government as an institution that not only undermines the official, secularized interpretation of Islam as Tajik cultural heritage, but also brings Tajik youth under the influence of extremist groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir (ICG 2003a, Stephan 2010, pp. 140–146, 160–163). At the same time, the ban on mosque attendance for schoolchildren during school hours reveals the state’s anxiety that religious authorities could erode the secular educational agenda (Forum 18 News Service 2005).

However, lived realities point to another picture. Many youngsters in Dushanbe spend their spare time on religious studies in the neighbourhood mosque. This is particularly true for school holidays, when school buildings and sport fields are closed and Muslim parents and their male offspring seek alternatives to ‘hanging around’. State officials tolerate the increasing interest in private religious instruction. As a member of the Tajik ministry of religious affairs (kumitai diny) explained:
We tolerate the Mullahs’ activities, even if they teach without official registration. We would make a big mistake if we would ban sabaq in Dushanbe. Look at our schools and teachers. What can they offer our youth apart from bad conditions? Our government doesn’t have the money to supervise our youth adequately. That’s why we should be glad that the mosques take care of them and protect them from alcohol, drugs, delinquency and all the other bad things that happen on streets at the moment.

Adolescent perspectives: religious lessons as meaningful leisure activity and islands of freedom

In numerous studies, young people are now portrayed as social agents who produce culture (Amit-Talai and Wulff 1995, Dracklé 1996, pp. 18–19, Brown et al. 2002). More specifically, they compete with the older generation for the interpretation of religious symbols and for control of the institutions that produce and reinforce these symbols (Eickelman and Salvatore 2006, p. 104). In Tajikistan, the private Islamic education sector serves as a powerful tool to socialize urban Muslim youth into the existing social order, and to assert adult authority over local concepts of youth, Islam and ‘being Muslim’. However, Tajik youth are not merely passive recipients of the normative standards and ideas imposed by parents, teachers, religious authorities and other adults. Young Muslims in Dushanbe interpret private religious lessons in their own ways. As the following ethnographic accounts suggest, private religious lessons in Dushanbe not only create a world of experience exclusive to young Muslims, but also provide a public space in which they are free to negotiate their religious attitudes and display morality and virtue.

Given the local understanding that no one should be forced to devote themselves to religion, attendance of religious classes is voluntary. However, families may exert pressure. If parents, older siblings or close relatives are ‘well-educated’ in religion (khondagy) or practising believers (namozkhon), teenagers frequently feel obliged to concern themselves with religion. Prompted by a desire to carry on the religious tradition of the family, they attend religious lessons.

Crucial to the engagement of young urban Muslims with religion, apart from the family or kin influence, is the peer group. Interaction with peers offers valuable resources for adolescents such as companionship, emotional support and provides ‘an arena for experimenting and learning new skills’ (Brown and Larson 2008, pp. 9–10). Many female and male adolescents in Dushanbe first come into contact with religion through people of their own age from around the neighbourhood or in their home village, which they visit during school or university holidays. Others are inspired by classmates (hamsinf) and fellow students (hamkurs).

Dilshod (14) and Ahmad (13) are the sons of poor urban migrants who moved to Dushanbe from its more rural surroundings in the hope of finding work. They now help their families to survive by doing odd jobs in the bazaar or small-scale trading. The boys used to meet after school at the sports field to play football. When Ahmad began attending Mullah Inoyat’s lessons in the mosque nearby (under his father’s orders, who attends the mosque regularly) and gave up football, his friend became curious. Dilshod, who lives in the poor district at the edge of the neighbourhood and rarely leaves it except to go to school or play football (his father does not attend the local mosque), has now also joined the lessons:

Ahmad told me he is now going to the mosque, wears a little white cap (toqy) and is learning Arabic. I was interested and went with him once. I didn’t ask my parents for permission beforehand because it’s not in our street, and because we’re poor. The Mullah liked my behaviour and kept me there. . . . We go to lessons together every day. After school we go straight to the mosque. We do our homework there, pray and prepare for the next lesson. The Mullah sends us home after the evening prayer. “During the school holidays we’re here all day sometimes”, Ahmad says proudly and adds: “We help the men with building, too.”14 We stopped playing football. We’ve no time anymore. Now we read a lot of books. That’s better than gadding around on the streets.
As the above example indicates, some adolescents regard the study of religion as a meaningful activity. Religious lessons structure their daily lives, allow them to assume responsibility and to participate in the public and religious life of their neighbourhood. Hence they are not simply a sensible alternative to the ‘street’. For young dislocated urban migrants who, like Dilshod, live on the periphery and have little or no social contact in the town and as a result of poverty rarely participate in its public life, these lessons provide a clear-cut normative frame, an opportunity to withdraw, and a social support system that affords a sense of belonging, replaces the absence of a kin group and allows for stronger integration in the neighbourhood (ICG 2003b, p. 26, Rahnamo 2004, p. 8).

Simultaneously, the attendance of religious classes also designates a distinctive feature within the peer group. Ahmad and Dilshod’s argument that studying religion is better than ‘hanging around on the street’ contains a clear moral statement. As such, it shows their intention to distance themselves from their former comrades in the neighbourhood. Dilshod and Ahmad represent young Tajik Muslims whose religious self-image combines ideas of a morally sound person with concepts of being Muslim. Socially marginalized, they partly rely on sabaq to gain an honourable standing in the community and increase their chances of social mobility.

Religious lessons also provide scope for development, a place where the young can relax and fulfil their own (secular) educational ambitions. This applies especially to young women, who, as they grow older, are increasingly tied to the domestic arena and its related tasks. For them, religious lessons are an escape from the demands and expectations of the family and the cramped living space of the typical urban household. Mohina (16) has been taking lessons from a Bibikhalifa for the last six months. She herself would like to attend a private school later on and become a translator, but her parents took her out of school to help her sickly mother in the house and look after her younger siblings. Because Mohina’s classmate from the neighbourhood attends the lessons and the Bibikhalifa is a friend of her mother’s, she is allowed to attend the lesson twice a week. She arrives around midday and takes a rest. When her school friend arrives with her exercise books, Mohina copies out the lessons.

I want to learn. But my father decided that I should rather stay home to help my mother. At home I have no time to read books. Here I have the opportunity. I love foreign languages, English, Arabic. I can learn them here.

In other words, to young women in Dushanbe, whose social contacts with peers are often limited to the family or kin group, religious classes may offer a legitimate space in which they can meet with peers and escape household chores and parental expectations.

Controversial forms of religious expression

In societies such as in Tajikistan, adolescents have little scope to develop their own identity, to try out different life styles, in short, to create a youth culture that would demarcate them from the adult world (Wulff 1995, p. 3, Khosravi 2008). Muslim adolescents in Dushanbe are obliged to act within a cultural framework primarily defined by adults. The space they create for themselves by taking part in religious lessons (to do their homework, learn a language, be with friends and classmates, search for meaning, direction and spirituality) is accepted because it can be controlled by adults.

Life becomes more complex once adolescents break free from these rigid structures and go their own way, for example, in order to express their own version of religious identity or understanding of Islam. Apart from the scepticism and rejection they face from the older generation, they also become the focus of a highly moralized debate on Islam and Muslimness, in which prevailing local conventions, patterns of thought and practice are reproduced and consolidated.
An example of this friction becomes apparent when adolescents choose their own religious teachers. In Dushanbe, Muslim parents preferably entrust their offspring to traditional local Mullahs and Bibikhalifas, who acquired their religious knowledge during the Soviet era in religious circles (davra) or in the classic teacher-pupil relationship (ustoz/domullo – shogird). The religious and moral authority with which the old specialists of religious knowledge, called in the vernacular languages peshkhondagy (‘educated in earlier times’ or ‘in the old way’), supervise education, represents an extension of parental authority and creates a continuity and homogeneity between lesson instruction and upbringing at home (Medlin et al. 1971, pp. 28–29, Eickelman 1998, p. 104). Many adolescent Muslims, in contrast, are more interested in lessons given by younger religious teachers (navkhondagy, i.e. ‘educated in the new way’), frequently of their own age group. Educated in several foreign languages, often proficient in the latest communication technology and versed in more recent Islamic literature, they are not merely representatives of a new religious elite. With their forms of religious expression – evident in their dress code and other symbols – they stand for a different understanding of Islam and of being Muslim, and are accepted to a far greater extent by young Muslims in search of meaning, orientation and spirituality than the old religious authorities (Eickelman 1998, 296ff., Dudoignon 2004, p. 142, Rahnamo 2004, p. 8). They are rejected by many older Muslims for their embodiment of a ‘purist’, ‘transnational Islam’ and their challenging of local Islamic tradition with its age-old norms and principles (Stephan 2006). With their public display of ‘Islamist elitism’ (White 2002), expressed in alternative religious practices and dress codes, they deviate from the prevailing consensus of what it means to be Muslim, shaped by the daily life of Muslims in Dushanbe during the Soviet era and particularly by the rejection of public aspects of religious practice (McBrien 2006, p. 52).

Many young women are attracted by same-age female teachers because of their alternative, Islamic dress. Fascinated with the large headscarf (rumoli kalon) and the way in which young teachers veil themselves, they start attending religious lessons in the neighbourhood. The imaginative veiling and its combination with other fashionable ideas (trendsetting material, make-up, painted nails) bears witness to the arrival of an ‘Islamic modernity’ (Navaro-Yashin 2002, Harris 2006, McBrien 2009) in the Tajik capital, which combines aestheticism and fashion with aspects of female morality, beauty and piety.

Fayzimoh (23), a young divorcee, is passionate about the ‘Islamic path’ (rohi islomy): ‘It is intriguing to wear a veil and read the Koran in a pleasant voice.’ Prior to her marriage she had begun to practise namoz and had taken lessons in religion from a Bibikhalifa. Then came the wedding, a husband who forbade her to attend the lessons, and lack of time. After her divorce and her wish became stronger, she has decided ‘to give religion another try’. She envies other young women who wear the veil, not for their strong sense of faith alone but also for the aura of beauty that surrounds them when they wear it:

I am very keen (havas doram) to wear the veil (khudamro mahkam kardan) and to pray. I’ve often tried it. But it’s not easy. You have to pray five times a day and read a lot of books. When you opt for the veil, you have to study religion and keep to what the books say more than other people do. You’re committed (bastagy). That means you take religion seriously (dinro sacht kapidagy). You have to read the Qur’an, cover your body and give your thoughts to God alone. You get into it more and more and become clean, pure (pok). And this Islamic fashion (fasoni islomy) looks just great. It makes you more beautiful (zebo), far more than before, and more beautiful than others.

Fayzimoh directly links religious piety with moral purity and beauty. In doing so, she follows the common idea amongst older Muslims in Dushanbe that personal engagement with religion (observing the obligatory prayer – namoz, fasting, reading the Qur’an and living in accordance with Islamic principles) leads a person into a state of moral purity (poky). The concept of poky also includes notions of female morality (sharmu hayo): for young women, being modest and
beautiful also means to be quiet, inconspicuous and ‘invisible’ in their appearance and behaviour (Stephan 2010, pp. 97–98, 222–232).

Young women like Fayzimoh associate female morality and beauty with veiling. For them, the large headscarf (rumoli kalon) or veil (hijob) symbolize strong religious commitment, moral awareness and modern fashion at the same time. Their interpretations of veiling include ideas of beauty and modesty that differ from existing local concepts because they emphasize the visibility of the veiling women. What makes the symbolic dimension of the veil so powerful is undoubtedly its visibility in the public realm (Göle 2004). In that context, veiling has been described as a form of political protest, a feminist statement or as a strategy to protect female modesty (Watson 1994, Pusch 1999, White 2002). Veiling, however, also promotes recognition, social mobility and enables young women to distinguish themselves from their peers. Like Fayzimoh, a jobless divorcee with little school education who depends on parental support, many young women in Dushanbe do not face a promising future. For them, Islam offers a way of coping with a staunchly patriarchal society, economic hardship and unfilled promises of Western capitalism (ICG 2003b, pp. 20–21). Fayzimoh’s interpretation of the veil/large headscarf accords with what McBrien (2009) describes in the case of Kyrgyzstan as a new female imagination of modernity. In post-Soviet Central Asia, beautiful veils provide an identity concept that enables Muslim women to see themselves as obedient, modest, pious and modern at the same time (McBrien 2009, p. 140).

However, the decision to be a ‘modern’ Muslim woman, to participate in religious classes or pursue the ‘Islamic path’ in other ways is often highly controversial, particularly when young women with no religious family background or parental influence make it independently. The way in which young women display their decision, for example with Islamic dress and head covering, is contested, particularly from a moral point of view.

The large white headscarf (rumoli safed) is traditionally reserved for religious specialists (bibikhalifa), women from religious families (eshon, sayyid) and female pilgrims to Mecca (hojy). It is also a social code, indicating the social and religious status in the female life cycle and an element of religious morality: this accessory is worn preferably by married women on specific religious occasions (janoza, marosim) and by older women who have turned to religion. The fact that young women now wear the large headscarf or veil (hijob), however, is a new phenomenon. A young woman’s decision to cover herself is accepted when she possesses a religious family background or has just married, as this corresponds to the predominant social order. In the absence of such circumstances, Islamic attire on young girls is viewed with suspicion and misgiving. The wearer is suspected of adopting the ‘Islamic path’ as a sign of remorse or of turning over a new leaf in the wake of sinful moral conduct (tavba):

You see lots of young girls on the street today wearing Islamic clothes (islomy fason). They pray and live by the rules (qoida). But who’s to say they are pure (dilashon toza) within as well? People here claim that many of them were ladies of leisure (dukhtari sabuq) before they turned to religion. They cover their dark inner self (darunash) with the white scarf (rumoli safed).

This quote from Fatima, my 42-year-old host mother in Dushanbe, shows that the strong public symbolic power inherent in the act of covering is not confined to the religious arena. Apart from their function as a religious statement, headscarves and veils are an unmistakable attribute of female morality and as such place the sexual reputation (obry, sharmu hayo) of the wearer at the centre of public attention. In this sense the scarf and the veil have an inherent ambiguity. On the one hand, they are a symbol of female virtue and self-restraint, and, on the other hand, represent the moral blemish of possible sexual lapse, which clings to the young wearers like a public stigma, casting a shadow on their piety.
Conclusion

The current boom in private religious lessons in Dushanbe highlights the significance of religion as a stabilizing and enabling force in times of change, crisis and instability. This applies not only to post-socialist upheavals but also refers to key transitions in the life cycle of the young, such as baloghat, the onset of maturity. For older Muslims religion embodies proven and established values. Faced with the instability of the present and uncertainty of the future, it is perceived as a tradition that appears secure. Religion in this sense – institutionalized in the form of lessons – constitutes a sound basis for the restraint and control of unruly adolescents and safeguards the existing social order.

The tradition of private religious lessons is not only a reaction to change but is itself a ‘modality of change’ (Waldman 1986). As the sole elementary educational institution in the Muslim societies of pre-modern Central Asia, their historical precursors were secularized and banished to the realm of the private household. The return of the lessons to the public domain as institutions of education and discipline, and as religious alternatives to the scant provision of leisure activities for Muslim urban youth, is evidence of a religious service sector that mitigates the lack of responsibility assumed by the Tajik state and contributes to the ‘de-secularization’ (Berger 1999) of common goods such as education.

The interpretation of religion, however, is not an adult prerogative. The evident popularity of private religious lessons among urban youth pays tribute to the growing interest of young Muslims in religion, as attested for the Tajik case (ICG 2003b, p. 26, Rahnamo 2004, p. 8, Epkenhans 2010, p. 331). Lesson attendance constitutes a field of experimentation for youth. Perceived by young urban Muslims as meaningful, sabaq provides a small, albeit highly restricted, area of freedom for the pursuit of future plans or the improvement of school performance. In addition, attending religious lessons gives young Muslims in Dushanbe the opportunity to negotiate their religious self-images. Their public religious expressions testify to the impact of both globalization and individualization on Muslim urban adolescents in Tajikistan and force a re-negotiation of local adult concepts of Islam, Muslimness and morality.

Fashionable veiling as a social strategy contains a symbolism that young people and older people interpret in different manners. While young women see Islamic dress as a sign of religious confidence, female modesty, modern fashion and beauty, older women often reject this interpretation. For them, this new interpretation of veiling reveals a moral elitism and exclusive religious identity whose publicity and visibility they view as morally questionable.

The turn to Islam discussed in this article, however, is not a form of revolt or protest by youth against the prevailing social order. For young Muslims in Dushanbe, Islam offers a way to broaden the boundaries for youth imposed by adults and ‘traditions’ without having to confront these directly (Roche 2010, p. 328). At the same time, and in the context of market transition, impoverishment and limited career prospects, Islam offers an ‘honourable’ option for urban youth to increase their social status. Against such a reading of the increased demand for private religious lessons, the state’s distrust of private Islamic instruction seems arbitrary. Religious lessons as described in this article are not necessarily an arena in which young Muslims are tempted into following radical or extremist interpretations of Islam. Instead, the secular power holders demonize a religious tradition that is perceived by youth as apolitical. With its clear moral order and lifestyle options, Islam serves as a frame of reference for youth in their struggle for identity, social recognition and adult status.

Notes

1. This article is part of my dissertation on moral education, Islam and being Muslim in Tajikistan. I carried out research from 2003 to 2008 as an associate member of the Civil Religion group at the
Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle/Saale, Germany. It deals with the tension that arose between secularization and the religious return in Tajikistan following the demise of the Soviet Union. Field research was conducted primarily in Dushanbe and its surrounding rural regions.

2. The majority of the Tajik population adheres to the Sunni Hanafi branch of Islam. They dissociate themselves from the large Shiite Ismailite group, which for the most part lives in the mountain region of Badakhshan in east Tajikistan.

3. Capisani (2000, p. 184) states that in 1997, approx. 42% of the population of Tajikistan was under 14 years of age. In its report, The International Crisis Group (ICG report 2003, p. 1) mentions that the proportion of young people in the Tajiki population in 2003 was over 30% and was likely to double to 3 million by 2025.

4. Beset by grave economic and social problems, Tajikistan was the poorest and least industrialized Soviet republic when it became independent in 1991. Towards the end of the 1980s, Tajikistan had the lowest standard of living in the Soviet Union. In 1989, for example, 59% of the population lived below the fixed income level (78 Rubles per person and month) (Niyazi 1994, p. 168). According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the gross domestic product (GDP) in Tajikistan in 2007 was US$3.67 billion (US$404 per person) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs).

5. The ‘four-part book’, a collection of Persian prose and poetry in four parts by different authors, some of whom are unknown, is one of the standard texts that has for centuries stamped the local Islamic tradition of the Muslim population of Tajikistan. The collection contains central elements of the Islamic faith and hands down rules that organize social relations in the family and the local community.

6. A book of selected passages from the Koran.

7. Together with Chahor kitob, these works have shaped the cultural memory of Muslims in the Central Asian region for centuries (Medlin et al. 1971, p. 35, Shahrani 1991, Olimova 2005, p. 250). They testify to the historical immutability and continuity of the text canon, and confirm the preservative character with which religious lessons contribute to the fostering of local Islamic traditions.

8. Unlike the practice of today’s religious lessons, learning by heart and the flawless recitation of sacred texts in the historical maktab was usually associated with physical punishment. The psychology behind this measure was not merely to ensure positive learning results, but also to instil a sense of respect in the young for teachers and for the divine word and its written form (Eickelman 1978, p. 494, Shorish 1986, p. 328, Khalid 1998, p. 20).

9. In Khalid’s opinion (1998, p. 25) this ‘habitus’ is an explicit expression for the close tie between the physical body and sacred knowledge: ‘Knowledge was to be embodied by the learner so that his or her body could be marked by sacred knowledge.’

10. According to the results of a comprehensive household survey conducted by the Tajik Ministry for Labour and Social Security, over half of the 200–250,000 Tajiks, i.e. 7% of the working population of Tajikistan, employed in Russia or elsewhere between 2001 and 2003 were between 15 and 29 years old, 12% of whom were women (Kuddusov 2004, p. 87).

11. The promotion of the nuclear family as the ideal household model was one aspect of the Soviet modernization project, the aim of which was to remove young families in the cities from the influence of the kinship group and alienate them from local traditions. (Medlin et al. 1971, 63ff.). In addition, the nuclear family was to improve the social status of women (Tokhtakhodzhaeva 2007, p. 112). Neo-locality was primarily achieved by the construction of modern Soviet apartment blocks (mikrorayon). Although for the most part occupied by Russian-speaking urban dwellers, these modern flats (sekziya) were extremely popular with well-educated local urban residents.

12. Islamic education in Tajikistan officially begins with higher Islamic or madrasa schooling, for which an O-Level certificate is required.

13. Paragraph 6 of the religious law Qonuni jumhurii Tojikiston dar borai din va tashkilothoi diny from 1998.

14. A bath for ritual washings (tahoratkhona) was built in the grounds of the mosque during my field research in this neighbourhood. Apart from the men who regularly attended the communal prayer, I saw some of Mullah Inoyat’s pupils (shogird) carrying bricks and building walls.

15. In Dushanbe, the rules of Muslim morality (odobi musulmony) dictate that women over the age of 40, at the latest over 50, cover themselves.

16. The politicization of religious expression is a potent discourse. In the regions of post-socialist Central Asia it takes place in the public domain, which was and still is primarily defined by the rhetoric of the ruling elites. Several authors have described this vividly, taking the example of the term Wahhabism and its usage (Kehl-Bodrogi 2006, McBrien 2006, Rasanayagam 2006, Louw 2007).
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