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# “Sovereign” Islam and Tatar “Aqīdah”: normative religious narratives and grassroots criticism amongst Tatarstan’s Muslims

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## Abstract

“Traditional Islam” has emerged in the post-Soviet Republic of Tatarstan (Russian Federation) as a powerful if contentious discursive trope. In this paper, I look at traditional Islam and its conceptual twin, “non-traditional Islam”, as normative governmental tools aimed at defining acceptable or unwelcome form of religious commitment in an environment in which the rapid success of Sunni piety trends after socialism’s end has exacerbated the anxieties of both state institutions and a predominantly secular public. Traditional Islam’s multiple facets are explored, with particular attention given to the aspects of heritage-making, at the local (republican) level, and loyalty-fostering at the national (all-Russian) level. The concept’s genealogy, spanning different phases of Soviet and post-Soviet history, is analysed in detail. In addition, I focus on the reception of the traditional/non-traditional Islam discourse amongst grassroots pious Muslims, highlighting instances of criticism, lampooning, rejection, but also qualified acceptance. The concluding sections of my paper touch on “theological” traditional Islam’s potential and limitations for expanding civil society and harnessing grassroots enthusiasm.

**Keywords** Post-soviet Tatarstan · Islam in Russia · Traditional Islam · State-Muslim relations in Russia · Grassroots criticism · Civil society after socialism

## Introduction

After the collapse of the USSR in 1991, Russia’s Tatarstan Republic witnessed the resounding success of a number of transnational Sunni piety trends, in particular amongst the region’s middle-class youth of Tatar background. Tatarstan, a multi-

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ethnic federal subject lying in the middle Volga region and home to a great concentration of predominantly Muslim Volga Tatars (a Turkic-speaking ethnic group), is now a main hub for what I call Russia's "halal movement." This is a loose network of religionists defined by self-chosen adherence to strict Islamic precepts and virtues, a rigorist attitude towards ritual, and the individualised pursuit of religious knowledge.

As a socio-ethical phenomenon, the halal movement has gained special traction, over the past two decades, amongst businesspeople, students, professionals, and young, ambitious people attracted to new and "alternative" forms of post-Soviet subjectivity. The halal movement is particularly strong in Tatarstan's urban areas, although exceptions exist – most noticeably in town-sized, affluent Tatar rural settlements in the western Volga region (Sagitova 2012, 2014). Despite making inroads predominantly amongst Tatars, the movement is markedly cosmopolitan and capable of trespassing ethnic lines.

Different visions and schools of thought converged within this Muslim milieu, with individuals and communities moving within a multi-centric, cosmopolitan intellectual-spiritual landscape. Transnational quietist Salafism (Sheik al-Albani's school) has come to play a particularly prominent role in setting the halal movement's overall theological orientation (Shagaviev and Khisamova 2015). This implies that even religionists who do not necessarily identify as Salafists may be exposed to, interpellated by, and selectively appropriate, teachings derived from that current. Salafism, however, is by no means the sole source of inspiration feeding into this multifaceted milieu. Other theological trends innervating the halal movement include education- and dialogue-oriented moderate conservatism (Fethullah Gülen's Hizmet movement, still quietly influential despite being outlawed in 2008), rigorist Hanafi Sunnism, transnational Sufi confraternities,<sup>1</sup> inter-madhab surfing, and, to a lesser extent, organised forms of Sunni missionary revivalism (Jamaat Tabligh) and fringe Islamist groups (Hizb ut-Tahrir). The latter were swiftly pushed underground by Moscow's clampdown on transnational religious organisations.

While theology-derived qualifiers, such as Salafi, Sufi, Gülenist and the like may retain etic analytical usefulness, many of my informants do not emically use them to identify themselves. Theological labels are of little heuristic import in a context like the Volga region, where halal movement participants create their own trajectories amidst competing claims of theological superiority made by various scripturalist trends. In my work, I choose to prioritise the idea of a broad "halal" movement – a terminology consistent with that of some actors in the movement itself (Rus. *khalyal'noe dvizhenie*, Tat. *xäläl xäräkäte*)<sup>2</sup> – in order to foreground this milieu's shared commitment to an Islamic ethical project and the porosity of theological divides between its segments. Regardless of their theological orientation, halal movement members share a strong ethic of conviction paired with self-reflective virtuous conduct and, in most cases, a remarkable degree of engagement with Sunnism's scriptural sources.

<sup>1</sup> Sufi brotherhoods active in Russia include Sheik Nazim's Naqshbandi branch, Zulfiqar Ahmad's Naqshbandi branch, and al-Ahbash. It is important to note that indigenous Sufism was almost completely annihilated by the Soviets in the Volga region (Bustanov 2016): new brotherhoods, therefore, are likely to be offshoots of transnational organisations. By contrast, indigenous Sufism is still strong in Northern Caucasus – which some informants have defined as a "barony of Sufi brotherhoods" (*tarikatskaya vochina*).

<sup>2</sup> This terminology is used, amongst others, by members of Tatarstan's Halal Standard Committee.

In addition, nearly all segments of the halal movement have experienced, with varying degrees of intensity, an uneasy relationship with the state marked by the risk of being branded “non-traditional” (*netraditsionnie*) Muslims, a label that in the political parlance of post-Soviet Russia typically implies treacherousness, foreignness, and potential dangerousness (Dannreuther and March 2010). Relatedly, most halal movement members have developed a troubled relationship with a closely related political concept, that of “traditional Islam.” Within the halal movement’s broad spectrum of tendencies, different attitudes exist towards the “traditional Islam” trope, ranging from absolute rejection, to scepticism, to qualified/cautious acceptance. In almost all cases (sometimes including those who accept and even promote this concept), a certain ironical detachment is observable. This relationship, and the circumstances behind its formation, constitute the topic of this paper, based on sixteen months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the Volga region between 2015 and 2017.<sup>3</sup> This article looks at Russia’s traditional Islam and its conceptual “dark twin”, non-traditional Islam, as *normative discursive tools* promoted by state actors and routinely used by members of the public to define desirable and undesirable form of religious commitment.

## The halal movement between “traditional” and “non-traditional” Islam

As the term “halal movement” suggests, participants in this ethical trend – “ethical,” here, has the Foucauldian meaning of reflexive self-cultivation (Laidlaw 2014) – share a profound concern with ritual accuracy, doctrinal correctness, and spiritual purity. The Arabic word “halal” identifies whatever is fit for Muslims’ use and consumption and is opposed to “haram,” which denotes anything forbidden by God and therefore spiritually contaminating. Halal movement members painstakingly apply a great deal of care to the avoidance of all things haram in a range of areas of life, from foodstuffs, to clothing, finances, the use of spaces, and social relationships. Ritual exactness is equally important to halal movement participants, who endeavour to be consistent and rigorous in their ritual practice – simultaneously a binding cosmological obligation, a chance to build an individual relationship with God, and a technique of self-cultivation –, amid heated debates between the movement’s several theological currents about the correct ways to carry out acts of worship.

Within this milieu, strict spiritual discipline is connected to urbanity, glamour, cosmopolitanism, and a will to pursue healthy lifestyles. In a classical Weberian scenario, the halal ethical project is particularly attractive to the region’s emerging bourgeoisie and promotes a remarkably capitalism-friendly ideal of material successfulness, mitigated by forms of puritanical sobriety and worldly asceticism (Weber 2002; Boltanski and Chiapello 2007; compare with Rudnyckij 2010; Tobin 2016). Despite its success, however, the halal movement remains for the moment a minority phenomenon.

<sup>3</sup> During my fieldwork, I interviewed over fifty representatives of the Volga region’s Muslim population, including members of the Islamic officialdom, preachers, scholars, activists, halal entrepreneurs, committed religionists, mosque-goers, and secular “ethnic” Muslims. In addition, I had countless conversations with people of different ideological and age backgrounds, collected a wealth of printed material (pamphlets, theology books, etc.), and conducted participant observation at religious gathering, business meetings, and in household settings.

The emergence of Sunni piety trends in Tatarstan did not happen in a void, and halal movement members' vocal, sometimes uncompromising claims to “full-fledged” (*polnotsennoe*) Muslimness and “correct” (*pravil'ny*) Islam were met with counter-claims formulated by other sectors of Tatarstan's society. After the Soviet collapse, the republic's titular nationality, the Volga Tatars, obtained a modicum of self-determination and entered a phase of ethno-cultural fervour rife with unprecedented chances to relaunch collective identities under stimulation from nationalistic intellectual and political élites (Graney 2009). To the Tatars, overwhelmingly Sunni by heritage, this implied a collective rediscovery of the nation's Islamic roots, although the vast majority of them kept operating under a secular paradigm. According to most secular Tatars, Islam (not necessarily practiced) is but an element, however important, of an ancestral Tatar national “identity” (*identichnost'*), along with language (not necessarily spoken), traditions (not necessarily followed), and ancestry (not necessarily pure). Muslimness is thus any ethnic Tatar's inalienable trait, owned by right of birth and virtually free from ethical-doctrinal strings attached.

In this scenario, the appearance of the halal movement sparked fears of radicalisation and foreign encroachments in both the broader secular Tatar public and an increasingly assertive and centralist Russian state. As a result, both repressive and ideological state apparatuses (Althusser 2006) intervened – at both the federal and the local level – to combat “extremism”<sup>4</sup> and establish state-approved normative discourses about Islam. Official templates for “adequate” Muslimness were propagated that, in the intentions of their advocates, should have curbed the success of grassroots piety trends (Rasanayagam 2011; Benussi 2017). As we shall see shortly, this type of discursive intervention at the hand of the Russian state rests upon a long political tradition: while attempts to “domesticise” Islam are common in non-predominantly-Muslim countries (Sunier 2012a, b), the Russian state is unique in light of its secular history of governmental interactions with native Muslim populations.

“Tradition” became a particularly charged and contentious term.<sup>5</sup> The concept of “traditional Islam,” given its breadth and flexibility, gained particular prominence in the public space as a powerful and relatively successful discursive tool promoted by state actors (and utilised by members of the Islamic officialdom, the conservative media, policy commentators, and the general public) to challenge, curtail, and in some cases co-opt Islamic piety movements. At the same time, scripturalist Sunnism – in particular, though not exclusively, its Salafi/Athari theological declination – came to become identified as “non-traditional for Russia” (*netraditsionny dlya Rossii*), and, thus, undesirable. Non-traditional Islam is often synonymous with undesirable fanaticism, typically and simplistically glossed as “Wahhabism.” It is portrayed as an obscurantist

<sup>4</sup> It must be noted that, in the early 2000s, a weakened Russian state was fighting a terrible war against Islamist separatist insurgents in Northern Caucasus and dealing with a spate of jihadist terror attacks. At the global level, Western powers had just begun their “war on terror” in the Middle East.

<sup>5</sup> The concept of “tradition” is a slippery one, particularly when it comes to Islam. In Islamic studies, it is sometimes used to describe mainstream madhhab-based Sunnism (Mathiesen 2013), though the Athari theological school underpinning the madhhab-rejecting Salafi movement may be also designed “traditionalist.” Famously, the anthropologist Talal Asad has coined the MacIntyre-derived notion of “discursive tradition” to describe how a plethora of diverse cultural-moral worlds have historically emerged under the varying influence of a relatively stable set of Islamic textual sources (2009). At the same time, after Hobsbawm and Ranger's classic (1992), the notion of tradition itself has become a particularly contentious one in the social sciences. In the Russian context however, unlike all the aforementioned academic trends, the term *traditsionny islam* has an explicitly normative-governmental dimension.

ideology prompting unruly, potentially violent youths to absorb the poisonous influence of foreign countries and cultural worlds and even conspire against the state (Bustanov and Kemper 2013: 818, cf. Montgomery and Heathershaw 2016). Yet this dualistic narrative remains highly contentious amongst the many Muslims who follow autonomous paths to Islamic virtue, trusting doctrinal and ethical sources without the remit of state-approved religious institutions.

## Tatarstan's ethnic Muslims

It is helpful to embark on an exploration of the topic of traditional and non-traditional Islam in Russia by outlining a brief historical contextualisation of the Russian and Soviet state's governmental intervention in the religious life of the Volga region Muslims, and of its consequences. The Volga region (Idel-Ural) was annexed by the Russian state as early as the mid-sixteenth century, significantly earlier than the other Muslim-majority regions that subsequently entered Russia's sphere of influence – Central Asia and the Caucasus (Rorlich 1986; Kappeler 2001; Romaniello 2012). As Russian settlers progressively moved in, the region's Islamic character became diluted and the Volga River ("Idel" in Tatar) itself eventually became a symbol of quintessential "Russianness" (Ely 2003; Moon 2007).

Mature governmentalizing efforts over Idel-Ural Muslims begun as early as 1788, when Catherine II established Orenburg's Mohammedan Spiritual Assembly. The extent to which the Orenburg Assembly acted as a catalyst for the modernization of Russia's Muslims or, as an instrument in the hands of a colonial government, impaired them, remains open to deliberation (Frank 1998: 37; Garipova 2013). It appears certain that, over the course of the nineteenth century, state intervention in Muslim affairs effectively dissolved the authority of local Islamic juridical experts, resulting in the irreversible erosion of the Volga region's Islamic legal traditions (Garipova 2013: 265–316). Historical, demographic, geographic, and governmental factors thus contributed to making Idel-Ural Muslims particularly vulnerable to Soviet-era aggressive secularisation campaigns. Under Stalin's rule, Muslim intellectuals, preachers, rural mullahs, and even Muslim Communists who had initially supported the Bolsheviks were exterminated (Usmanova et al. 2010: 40–45). Sufism, which constituted the backbone of Islam in the former Russian Empire's territory (DeWeese 2014), was effectively uprooted (Bustanov 2016). The Tatar community survived in ethnic terms – in fact, the Soviets engineered the crystallization of a discrete Tatar ethno-linguistic identity under their *korenizatsiya* (indigenisation) project (Schafer 2001) – but its Muslims intellectual classes and its sources of spiritual guidance were severely maimed.

While it would be incorrect to state that the CPSU managed entirely to remove God from the Tatar populace's consciousness, Soviet social engineering did succeed in establishing a thoroughly secular order and public culture amongst Tatarstan's Muslims. During my fieldwork (2014–2015), numerous informants expressed the view that the Tatars are the most "Europeanised" (*evropeizirovannaya*) amongst the world's Muslim nations (cf. Humphrey et al. 2009: 208), culturally distant from "Oriental" (*vostochnye*) regions such as Central Asia and the Caucasus.

Today, the term "ethnic Muslim" has established itself in Tatarstan (as elsewhere in Russia) to describe the majority of people of Tatar descent who do not embrace formal

Islamic doctrines as relevant sources of ethical or spiritual guidance, yet consider themselves Muslims by virtue of an ancestral essence shared by all members of the national community (Dannreuther 2010). This birth-given essence is something jealously bodily, visceral, consubstantial with the “stuff” one’s most intimate self is made of, reminiscent of what Ludek Broz (2009), echoing David Schneider, calls *shared substance* (Benussi 2018; cf. Privratsky 2001; Borbieva 2009). However, it does not bear explicit connections to a coherent body of beliefs, ritual practices, and scriptures. Although some Tatars, especially in rural areas, may be influenced by moral sensitivities associated with religion and expressed in values such as modesty, cleanliness, honour, seniority, and patriarchy, most ethnic Muslims command only a rudimentary, piecemeal Islamic catechism. Even though during my ethnographic observations I noticed that numerous ethnic Muslims, if asked, would declare that they believe in God,<sup>6</sup> the most common way in which ethnic Muslims elaborate their understanding of belief implies the idea of silently carrying faith in one’s heart (*vera v serdtse*) – a formulation consistent with Mikhail Epstein’s famous notion of Soviet “minimal religion” (1999) and that does not impinge on a thoroughly secular way of living.

Such a “minimalist” understanding of Musimness can be observed across a number of former USSR’s Muslim-majority regions (see Privratsky 2001; Borbieva 2009), but is certainly particularly visible in “Europeanised” Tatarstan. It is unsurprising, then, that the republic’s post-Soviet moderate-nationalist ruling elite (supported by a majority of Tatars) has not promoted any Islamisation of the republic’s public life, apart from symbolic measures such as the restoration of historical mosques and the introduction, in 2010, of public holidays on the date of Muslim festivals.<sup>7</sup>

Muslim self-identification is routinely expressed by ethnic Muslims on occasion of important religious or national festivals or, most typically, during life-cycle events like weddings, circumcisions, funerals, and commemorative banquets.<sup>8</sup> Participation in such ritual events testifies to one’s commitment to Tatariness, though rarely to Islam’s religious tenets. In the doctrinally conscious halal movement, some people use the tongue-in-cheek definition “funeral-commemorative Muslims” (*pokhoronno-pominal’nye musul’mane*) to describe ethnic Muslims. The joke draws on folklore studies jargon, in which the standard phrase “funeral-commemorative customs” (*pokhoronno-pominaln’nye obryady*) refers to archaic funerary practices observed most typically amongst elderly villagers (Urazmanova 2013: 139 *ff.*). The phrase “funeral-commemorative Muslims” ironically implies that rare life-cycle circumstances are the only occasions on which ethnic Muslims carry out any religious practices, and normally in some vernacular, scripturally dubious form. As we shall see in later sections, irony and sarcasm are frequently used in the halal milieu at the expense of the secular mainstream, including the “traditional Islam” concept.

Relationships between the halal movement and ethnic Muslims can be tense at times. Life-cycle rituals are not only a source of sardonic amusement, but also a potential point of discord. Funeral wakes, for example, are seen as a cherished time-honoured custom and a binding moral obligation by most ethnic Muslims, and as scripturally unfounded, spiritually harmful innovations by some sectors of the halal

<sup>6</sup> See Musina 2010 for a quantitative analysis of religious belief amongst post-Soviet Volga Tatars in the early post-Soviet era. More up-to-date sociological surveys, featuring fresher data and taking recent developments into account, are much needed at this stage.

<sup>7</sup> In Chechnya, by contrast, political leadership pursues an overtly Islamic moral agenda.

<sup>8</sup> Compare with Orsi’s description of vernacular Italian-American Catholicism in Harlem (2010: lxi).

movement. Since scripturalist approaches to Islam are predominant amongst the youth, this disagreement sometimes generates emotionally fraught intergenerational tensions. As one informant expressed it, “scenes” (*skandaly*) may sometimes erupt over how to properly conduct funeral rites when the elderly relatives of scripturally-oriented halal movement members pass away (here my ethnographic observations coincide with Sagitova 2014: 483). Weddings can be problematic as well. In 2011–2012, a controversy involving secular Tatars and “non-traditional” Muslims allegedly took place in the industrial east of Tatarstan. According to contentious media reports (Suleymanov 2012), that many local actors believe to be biased and inflated, a group of Salafi-oriented (“Wahhabi”) Muslims declared that *nikakhs* (Islamic weddings) between pious, mosque-going women and their non-prayerful (ethnic-Muslim) husbands should be considered void under shari‘a, prompting thus a spate of marital desertions and the subsequent intervention of the authorities.

Despite such rare and controversial cases, however, these two groups peacefully exist side by side and occasionally mingle together. During my stay in the Tatar-majority city of Tübän Kama, for instance, I had the chance to observe how both halal movement members and ethnic Muslims flocked to the mosque for Eid al-Fitr celebrations. Once there, practicing Muslims duly preformed collective *namaz* (prayer), while secular Tatar stood respectfully in little crowds under gazebos at the margins of the open-air prayer area, chatting, nibbling, and, by just being there, celebrating the Tatar nation’s Islamic heritage. Conversely, I have observed Salafi-minded informants half-heartedly take their children to Tatar national summer festival Sabantuy (Urazmanova 2013) – typically rowdy and boozy affairs that have never been loved by local Islamic clergy and certainly do not sit too comfortably with Salafi Muslims – “in order for the kids to have fun” and participate in traditional sporting competitions with their ethnic-Muslim peers.

By and large though, apart from incidental bickering and occasional intermingling, ethnic Muslims and virtuous halal movement members remain, as a local Muslim representative somewhat mournfully put it, “two worlds apart” (Mukhamedov 2011).

## The politics of traditional Islam

Let us now turn to the concept of traditional Islam and its controversial reputation with many halal movement members. At this stage, it is important to dispel a potential misunderstanding: in the context under analysis, traditional Islam does not correspond in any simple way to popular devotion or “Tatar folk Islam.” The traditional Islam narrative has come to partly encompass, but is by no means limited to, village elders’ vernacular religiosity.<sup>9</sup> One informant who, at the time of our interview, worked for the official Islamic bureaucracy and happened to be *one of Tatarstan’s foremost popularisers* of the traditional Islam idea, candidly acknowledged that this concept,

<sup>9</sup> To be sure, as we have seen with regard to funeral wakes, many scripturalist halal movement members do reject, on purely theological grounds, popular devotional practices (these include “pilgrimages” to shrines and sacred springs (Kefeli 2014: 97–103), spiritual healing sessions, and blessing of water). Yet the halal movement’s troubled relationships with the traditional Islam trope unfolds along different, political rather than theological, lines.

as it has developed in the Russian context, is an etic category “extraneous to Muslim culture.” Its use to describe forms of Muslim life is thus far from unproblematic:

‘Traditional Islam’ (*traditsionny Islam*) as a notion is extraneous (*chuzherodny*) to Muslim culture. Not long ago, I watched a TV transmission on a local channel in which secular and religious experts discussed *traditsionny Islam* to the benefit of a non-expert audience. Something struck me. Now, the language used was Tatar of course, and throughout the duration of this transmission, participants used only Tatar – apart from one phrase: *traditsionny Islam*. There was no way to render this expression in Tatar. Which, I guess, demonstrates how foreign this notion is to our original Muslim culture.

Following this lead, in this paper (see also Benussi 2017) I identify Russia’s traditional Islam as a multifaceted governmental project active at different scales and level of governance. Besides being sometimes used by folklorists in relation to (1) vernacular religiosity, the concept of traditional Islam features in a heavily mediated narrative covering three other, more crucial and controversial conceptual areas. At the level of local politics, traditional Islam is understood as (2) Tatar national spiritual heritage. At the state level, as (3) all-Russian “sovereign Islam.” At the intersection between the state and the halal movement, finally, as (4) a civil-society initiative that a well-informed ethnographic source has aptly called “theological traditional Islam.” I will now focus on traditional Islam as “national” and “sovereign” Islam, and shall return to “theological” traditional Islam in the final section of my paper.

At the local level (the Republic of Tatarstan), “national traditional Islam” can be seen as a tool for secular identity politics. As a well-placed informant put it, “Tatar national activists’ chief concern is the conservation, or survival, of the Tatar nation in the future. To them, Islam has to do with nation-building (*natsiyastroitelstvo*).” These secular activists’ goal is that of rescuing ethnic Muslims’ Islam from the intimate sphere of shared substance described above, and reconfiguring it as *collective* heritage (Tat. *miras*. On post-Soviet heritage-making policies amongst Muslims or “Mirasism” see Bustanov and Kemper 2012; Rasanayagam 2011: 96 ff.; for a comparison with religion as “traditional culture” amongst Old Believers see Rogers 2009: 259 ff.).

Halal movement participants tend to be sceptical of these “Islamic heritage” projects. As one pious informant put it, commenting on her father’s militancy in a Tatar nationalist formation: “In the 1990s, Dad and his friend would put crescents on their flags and pamphlets... and roar that we [Tatars] are Muslim. Yet they know nothing about Islam. And even when they learned a bit more, they did nothing to change their ways. He still drinks alcohol, never sets foot in a mosque, and grumbles because I wear a headscarf.” Some scripturally-minded religionists, as we shall see in detail below, openly deride the parochialism of localist Islamic narratives by sarcastically referring to them as “the Tatar creed (*aqīdah*)”, an impossible mixture of ethnicity and theology.

At the state level, *traditsionny islam* is, in the words of a representative of Russia’s official Islamic bureaucracy, “Islam incorporated (*vklyuchen*) within an all-Russian (*rossiiskiy*) [political] project. It bears no relation with dogma or theological matters – it just has to be patriotic and peaceful.” In this sense, traditional Islam specifically refers to the Soviet and post-Soviet practice of co-opting Islam as an ideological support to



extant political order (see below). This practice results in a conglomerate of Islamic religious institutions, groups, and individual figures politically contiguous to the central authorities and supportive of their policies. In a widely read, programmatic 2011 article, the influential tabloid *Komsomolskaya Pravda* defined this conglomerate and co-optation practices as “sovereign Islam” (*suverenny Islam*), linking it to Russia’s imperial past and, implicitly, to the Kremlin’s plans of patriotic restoration and national organicism. In the same article, non-traditional Islam was equated with a virus threatening Russia’s organism (Aslamova 2011).

While some actors and commentators utilise the term “sovereign Islam” to talk about Tatar national Islam (Yusupova 2016), the use of the term I document in this article is connected to the all-Russian “sovereignist” project associated with Vladimir Putin’s rule (see note 9). One young Russian political analyst, whom I met at a workshop on Islam in St Petersburg, noted that “sovereign Islam [is] Islam as you can find it under the ‘power vertical’ (political hierarchy). If you can’t find it, you’ll have to invent it.” During the presentation of her research, this analyst underlined “sovereign” Islam’s positive coverage in Russian media outlets: “That Islam is ‘our own’ (*nash*) Islam, it is ‘good’ (*khoroшы*), ‘soft’ (*myagky*) and ‘light’ (*layt*). Someone could even call it ‘pravoslavnyy Islam’ (Orthodox-Christian Islam). Certainly ‘all-Russian’ (*rossiiskiy*) Islam.”

These two understandings of traditional Islam – ethno-national Islam and all-Russian/sovereign Islam – mutually reinforce each other and merge into a scalar (national Islam being encompassed by sovereign Islam) populist, localistic normative narrative, emphasising continuity with an all-Russian archaic past and loyalty to the multi-ethnic state (Yakupov 2011; Bustanov and Kemper 2013 for a lucid analysis).<sup>10</sup> This project may appropriate vernacular devotional practices (folklorists’ “village” Islam), but does so with an explicitly large-scale governmental purpose.<sup>11</sup> *Traditsionny islam*’s function at both the local and the state level, thus, is to tell people belonging to certain ethnic communities which is the *right* way to be a Muslim within the borders of the Russian Federation. What falls outside the remit of traditional Islam is unwelcome and frowned upon, even liable to repression. The ideological apparatuses deliberating on what constitutes traditional Islam, typically Russia’s Muftiates (see

<sup>10</sup> It must be emphasised that the notion of *sovereign* has been very contentious in Tatarstan, its dominant understanding radically changing over the past few decades. Between the late 1980s and early 1990s, sovereignty (*suverenitet*, Tat. *suverenlik*) became a much-used buzzword in the region (Graney 2009; Derrick 2014), catalysing the republic’s independentist aspirations and even originating a distinct brand of political jokes (Yakupova 2000). After the collapse of the USSR, with Yeltsin urging peripheries to “take as much sovereignty as they can swallow,” Tatarstan’s sovereignty advocates stalled the republic’s accession to the Russian Federation until an agreement was signed in 1994 (formal membership in the Russian Federation was enshrined in the Tatarstani constitution only as late as 2002).

While the Tatars’ sovereignty campaign of the 1990s were (seen as) antithetical to the territorial integrity of the Russian Federation, in the more recent phase of territorial recentralisation overseen by Vladimir Putin, the sovereignty narrative has morphed significantly, no longer applying to Tatarstan as a political-territorial unit, but rather to the all-Russian context. The “sovereign Islam” trope discussed in this article is firmly connected to the latter all-Russian, recentralising sovereignty project of Putin’s Russia. However, as mentioned above, this understanding discursively encompasses the “national” conception of Islam that emerged during Tatarstan’s short-lived autonomist-sovereignist season.

<sup>11</sup> While I am not aware of instances in which the government has *explicitly* commissioned (and influenced) folklore or historical studies to promote its agenda, such studies can be utilised by state-loyal actors, such as members of the Islamic officialdom, to present a quasi-scholarly scaffolding for their normative discourse on what constitutes traditional Islam and what *does not* (e.g. scripturalist approaches or Islamic cosmopolitanism).

below), are hierarchically subordinate to secular state structures. The notion of traditional Islam explored in this section, however contentious within the halal movement, finds resonance among the Tatar secular majority of ethnic Muslims.

Again, “traditional Islam” in this context and understanding is not a neutral descriptor of a community spiritual life, but rather a governmental artefact designed to address the anxieties of a largely secularised society at a time of unsettling religious ferment. As we have seen, a crude social taxonomy places acceptable *traditsionny* Russian Islam in stark opposition to undesirable *netraditsionny* Islam. This fundamental opposition lies at the heart of Russia’s Islamic question. It can be interpreted, as Roland Dannreuther phrases it, as “a recognition, on the one hand, of the rootedness of Islam in Russia and, on the other, of the territorial disembodiment of Islam as a universal religion which necessarily transcends and potentially threatens the Russian state. What is more difficult to articulate in the Russian context is the idea of a pluralistic Islam, where multiple interpretations are both possible and desirable” (2010: 10).

### From history to geography? Genealogy of a governmental tool

This binomial distinction both reproduces and *reverses* Soviet-era conceptualizations of “acceptable” Islam and its role in society. After WWII, the Soviet authorities, in an attempt to accommodate state-led atheist policies to the existence of entrenched Islamic practices and sensitivities at the popular level in several Muslim-majority areas of the USSR, endeavoured to organise a Party-controlled Islamic hierarchy endowed with theological positions amenable to the overarching Soviet paradigm. Party-approved Islam was conceived of as an antidote to disruptive, ideologically incompatible manifestations of grassroots religiosity. Interestingly, Soviet-era official Islam was theologically close to proto-Salafi modernist scripturalism. It opposed popular Sufism (*ishanism*), perceived as riddled with deviant beliefs and practices, and its legal pronouncements were characterised by the use of “fundamentalist” categories such as “harmful innovation” (*bid’ah*), “paganism,” and “deviance” from scriptural correctness (Babadzhanov 2001; Kemper 2009: 15–16; Sartori 2010; Rasanayagam 2011: 82, 127; for the Idel-Ural region, Guseva 2012). While *traditsionny islam* as a stable discursive figure was yet to be coined, Soviet-era official Islam operated under a specific understanding of “Islamic tradition” (*islamskaya traditsiya*), close to the narrow canon of the early Salafi reform movement and the “pure” (*chisty*) Islam of the Prophet’s Companions and early followers, well distinct from national traditions (*goref-gadat*, “customs”). What was deemed ideologically undesirable during Soviet times were exactly those “folk” Islamic practices that in the post-Soviet era would become cherished as the quintessence of “good” Islam – funeral wakes, alms-giving, cult of tombs and sacred springs, and so forth. This reversal is all the more surprising in light of Salafism’s later acquisition of its status as the ideological enemy number one in state-Muslim relationships.

I shall venture a hypothetical explanation for this apparent paradox, with the caveat that only further research into the political culture of the Soviet ideologists who dealt with the Islamic question may confirm it or otherwise. At one, relatively self-evident level, proto-Salafi scripturalism’s opposition to popular Sufism and vernacular religiosity played into the hands of the Soviet authorities. This antagonism was likely to be

seen by Soviet ideologists as tactically compatible with their goals, as the Communist Party considered Sufi leaders to be hostile counterrevolutionary actors commanding excessive respect from the rural populace, and folk religiosity as an expression of atavism and cultural backwardness.<sup>12</sup>

At a subtler level, though, another dimension of this “marriage of convenience” can be explored. The surprising tolerance granted by antireligious Soviet Communists to Islamic modernist scripturalism – which, it should be stressed, remained the prerogative of a small élite – could be explained as a tacit acknowledgement of this form of Islam’s higher degree of “rationality,” in a modernist sense, vis-à-vis “archaic” traditional practices. Besides contingent tactical considerations, thus, I hypothesise that a hidden *family resemblance* might have underpinned the unexpected alliance between the CPSU and the proto-Salafist élite. Following Susan Buck-Morss’s (2000) footsteps, this can be explained by considering that history – rather than (exclusively) geography – was the ideological backdrop of the Communist Party’s political and social engineering. Time, ever-progressing and future-bound, overrode space. Islamic modernism’s emphasis on a crystalline, rational religiosity might have found resonance with a project of bridging the historical gap between “primitive” rural Muslims and the “Soviet man,” vanguard of humankind. With folk religiosity dismissed as an expression of atavism, inimical to progress (DeWeese 2011, Gazimzyanov 2018; *in progress*), Islamic modernism could have been seen as strategically less incompatible with a socialist project and thus enjoyed higher legitimacy. Clearly, the Party’s long-term goal was not that of safeguarding Islam but, rather, “hastening its [expected] atrophy” (Tasar 2012: 166). Yet the result was the emergence of a *sui generis* “fundamentalist” line amongst the official clergy.<sup>13</sup>

This stands in stark contrast to today’s conceptualizations of traditional Islam. The new Russian polity, like its socialist predecessor, has continued to co-opt and contain religious expression within “discrete” and ideologically compliant organisations (Rasanayagam 2011: 131). Yet, as we have seen, post-Soviet state-authorised Islam is hyper-localist and derives its legitimacy from continuity with an archaic past. This is consistent with post-Soviet Russia’s new existential coordinates. The demise of the socialist project ushered Russia into the form of nation-state – a political form whose foundations lie in space/geography rather than time (Malkki 1992), and whose temporal fulcrum gravitates towards the past rather than the future, in particular the distant, mythical past that enshrines the roots of the nation. In Herzfeld’s words, the time of nation-states is a “solidified history” amounting to a “mythological notion of pure origins” (2005: 21, 25, cf. Duara 1995). Ancientness converts history into myth, and ultimately into geography: the ideological rationale behind Islam being listed as one of Russia’s four “traditional faiths” – along with Orthodox Christianity, Buddhism, and Judaism – is indeed essentially geographic. Islam is an unchanging attribute of certain

<sup>12</sup> As Ro’i notes (2000: 338), Sufi figures had played a major role in Central Asia’s anti-Soviet Basmachi revolt (1916–1936) and in a spate of religiously inspired uprisings in the Caucasus (18th–twentieth century). For the PCSU’s attitudes towards popular religiosity and the fight against what the Soviets perceived as feudal obscurantism, see Northrop 2004. See Tasar 2012 for the geopolitical role of Muftiates in Soviet-Islamic world relations.

<sup>13</sup> This remains a hypothesis. Further research into Soviet models of temporality and history would be necessary to ascertain Soviet ideologists’ views on Islamic modernism and its role vis-à-vis socialist modernity.

ethnic groups forming the nation, rather than as a social phenomenon happening amongst living people. The nation, in turn, is a community bounded by geography and shared immemorial customs. Said customs can be tolerated and preserved, yet they are in no case supposed nor allowed to overstep the boundaries of the state's secular public setup.<sup>14</sup>

The foundations of post-Soviet traditional Islam discourse can therefore be summed up as 1) explicit political loyalty to the nation-state, 2) connection to an archaic national past, and 3) subsumption within a secular order. Granted those conditions, the new Russian state is prepared to show no hostility towards ethnic Muslims (with, potentially, the exception of hardline secular Tatar nationalists). To the contrary, state institutions might regard conservative/traditionalist moral systems – including Islam-inspired ones – as compatible with the all-Russian ruling ideology and thus co-optable, inasmuch as the boundaries of loyalty and adherence to a secular order are not trespassed. Indeed, over the past two decades, Islam has consolidated its official role as one of Russia's four legally recognised heritage faiths, along with Orthodoxy, Judaism, and Buddhism.<sup>15</sup>

Since the foundation of the Orenburg Assembly in 1788, the Russian state's governmental intervention in the sphere of Islam has been primarily carried out through ideological apparatuses called Muslim Spiritual Directorates (*dukhovnie upravleniya musul'man*) or Muftiates. These institutions have existed even during the Soviet period: after WWII, the Soviet ummah was divided into four regions, each under the aegis of a different Spiritual Directorate – European Russia and Siberia, Kazakhstan and Central Asia, Northern Caucasus, and Transcaucasia (Benningsen and Lemercier-Quelquejaye 1981: 194–5, Ro'i 2000). After the breakdown of the Soviet order, over fifty local Muftiates – with varying degrees of autonomy – emerged in the Russian Federation, along with two competing all-Russian Spiritual Directorates. Muftiates constitute a possibly unique example of a Christian-majority, secular state endowed with official apparatuses active in the sphere of Muslim affairs, including theology. It is not surprising that the notion of traditional Islam should gain traction in these apparatuses (Bustanov and Kemper 2013). Many major Spiritual Directorates came to align themselves with traditional Islam – including, in the Middle Volga, the influential Muftiate of Tatarstan and the Ufa-based all-Russian Central Spiritual Directorate.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the very term *traditsionny islam* (the authorship of which is difficult to ascertain) is thought by some to originate from one of these two institutions. As we

<sup>14</sup> It should be stressed that the terminology of *traditional* Islam comes across as less “Soviet” than, say, *official* Islam, the latter easily lending itself to identification with Soviet-era state atheism and bureaucratic authoritarianism. The implicit – and as I try to demonstrate in this paper, problematic – claim inherent to the traditional Islam trope is that its normative power over Muslims should stem from within Islam's “tradition”, despite actually corresponding to a secular *raison d'état*.

<sup>15</sup> It would be, thus, problematic to depict the Russian state as downright Muslimophobic. State institutions might even sympathetically regard some Muslim populations' socially conservative morality as compatible with the ruling party's ideology (a *sui generis* case in point being Chechnya). In his survey of Russia's hegemonic discourse on Islam, Roland Dannreuther argues that a shift seems to be occurring from blunt oppositional duality towards a more sophisticated sociological understanding of Islam, both at the domestic level and in its transnational ramifications. This, he argues, is paired by a less confrontational, albeit fraught, attitude towards Muslim citizens on the part of the state (Dannreuther 2010: 17–22).

<sup>16</sup> Certain peripheral Muftiates have been criticised by traditional Islam advocates for maintaining an excessively independent position: see Bustanov and Kemper 2013: 828.

shall see shortly though, Muftiates are not just passive recipients of secularising discourses, and over the past decade moves have been made towards the Islamic grassroots sensitivities embodied by the halal movement through a “Sunnification” of traditional Islam.

Being a cosmopolitan grassroots phenomenon, the halal movement has developed in large part independently from Muftiates, which amplifies the risk of being branded “non-traditional” and thus undesirable. Public displays of piety outside the remit and control of Muftiate may read as signs of radicalism or foreign influences. In 2016, the Yarovaya Law, a draconian anti-missionary bill targeting *unregistered* religious groups and preachers<sup>17</sup> has been seen by many within the halal milieu as yet another manifestation of the authorities’ hostility towards grassroots extra-Muftiate Islam. Although the Yarovaya Law does not target Muslims only (not does it refer explicitly to *netraditsionny* Islam), this perception is not inexplicable. Since the 2000s, bans on transnational religious organisations and censorship of Islamic literature have been used regularly by law makers and enforcers to define the boundary between state-tolerated traditional Islam and allegedly poisonous non-traditional Islam. The list of banned Islamic literature has burgeoned from the year 2002 on, and as of 2016 it included the books of prominent Islamic preachers and theologians such as early twentieth century’s Turkish-Kurdish pedagogue Said Nursi – a scholar whose work was devoted to elaborating forms of religious life compatible with a secular setup. The process of blacklisting appears to be strikingly intricate. According to one source in the Islamic bureaucracy, a special Moscow-based federal commission is in charge of identifying dangerous literature, without Muslim representative having a say in the blacklisting process. Besides this expert board, decisions of local courts in the Russian province may also determine what is included in the federal proscription list. During my fieldwork, I found that even loyal members of the Islamic bureaucracy lamented the whole procedure’s frustrating unpredictability. In addition to literature restrictions, all transnational Islamic organisations outside the control of Muftiates were declared illegal in the 2000s, including the Muslim Brotherhood, Jamaat Tabligh, and the Nursi-inspired transnational Hizmet network,<sup>18</sup> not to mention fringe groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir.

Yet the effectiveness of such measures remains somewhat uncertain, especially in the case of loose, flexible, non-structured movements such as Salafism, the capability of which to influence Russian Muslims appears still substantial.

<sup>17</sup> The Yarovaya Law establishes that missionary activity can only be carried out within religious buildings, explicitly forbidding proselytising in residential areas, and only by authorised members of officially registered organisations. In addition, the law is aimed at facilitating surveillance of individuals and groups, and further expands the power of law enforcement organs.

<sup>18</sup> Hizmet-inspired “Tatar-Turkish lyceums” (*tataro-turetsky litsei*), opened in the 1990s, have provided excellent tuition (including very good teaching of the English language) and set very high standards for Tatarstan’s education system. Tatarstani lyceums have an exclusively secular curriculum, unlike in other regions (see Tee 2016). Co-optation into the religious activities of the organisation happens with the utmost discretion, on a very selective basis, and on pupils’ own initiative. Thanks to their high quality, Tatar-Turkish boarding schools have proved inspirational even for the Tatar secular élite. Despite the clampdown, many Hizmet-influenced Muslims are still discreetly active in Tatarstan, and as of 2015, lyceums remained operative under the aegis of Tatarstan’s government. In the past years, new schools of excellence have been opened in the republic based on the model of the Tatar-Turkish lyceums, sometimes employing the same personnel.

## Laughing at tradition

The traditional Islam trope is so omnipresent in public discourse (though this might be changing, see below) that even the persons and groups it discriminates, i.e. Muslims who fall under the damning “non-traditional” category, may sometimes use it. Yet halal movement participants do not passively accept the exclusionary implications of the tradition/non-tradition trope without criticism. Rather than risking open confrontation, however, criticism may often take the indirect form of lampoon.<sup>19</sup> Unavoidably, the halal movement draws on Russia’s tradition of political irony, which has been memorably analysed by Alexei Yurchak (2005). However, somewhat unlike Soviet-era *anekdoty* (political jokes), ambiguously oscillating between opposition and support without assuming any explicitly oppositional posture (277–279), many of the sneering comments I encountered about traditional Islam and its champions appear to come across as more straightforwardly critical.

In this vein, some Spiritual Directorates (*dukhovnie upravlenia*) may be redubbed *dukhovki*, “ovens,” a pun on the assonance between the Russian words for “spirit” and “oven,” or even “Ministries of Jinns’ Affairs” (*ministerstva po delam dzhinnov*) by Muslims sceptical about these institutions’ ability to represent them and/or teach religious truths.

Let us consider the following episode. Ritual correctness is a disputed matter between the various theological currents that inform the halal movement. During prayer, for instance, Salafi-oriented Muslims make a number of characteristic gestures: they raise their arms three times, rest their hands on their chests<sup>20</sup> while touching their neighbours’ feet with theirs as they stand, move their index fingers as they sit, and chant “amīn” loudly. In order to detect ritual variations that reveal adherence to Salafism, Spiritual Directorates may perform audits in allegedly non-traditional mosques. I happened to be present as one of these Gogolian inspections was carried out at the prevalently, though not uniformly, Salafi-oriented mosque of an East Tatarstani town, and was later told that the “Inspector-General” was unimpressed with the average length of beards (too long) and trousers (too short). Both elements of Salafi dress code, these were clear marks of non-traditional teachings. Predictably, the auditor also had an issue with the way feet, hands, index fingers, and voices refused to conform to the Muftiate-set canon of “traditional” *namaz*, based on Hanafi jurisprudence (see below).

When I interrogated them about this episode, my informants would roll their eyes and dismissingly snort: “Oh, those *Kazanskie* – don’t mind them, they do traditional Islam, but that’s all politicking (*politika*).” While they seemed to accept a distinction between traditional and non-traditional Islam, they rejected the positive meanings

<sup>19</sup> Even if halal movement members are considerably better off than the peasants studied by James C. Scott (1985), Muslims branded as non-traditional remain politically vulnerable in the face of the state. Therefore, it might be appropriate to rubric their sarcastic and ironic treatment of the traditional Islam trope, with Scott, as a “weapon of the weak.”

<sup>20</sup> In 2017, a Tatarstani Muftiate representative urged Tatars to avoid “feminine” Salafi ritual gestures like resting hands on one’s chest, arguing that only Hanafi prayer routine, in which hands are folded over one’s navel, is for “real men” (*muzhiki*). Such attempts by official clergy members to bring normative Russian masculinity discourses to bear on the religious sphere are not unique to Islam: see Bernstein 2013 for comparable dynamics in Buddhist Buryatia.

carried by “sovereign” traditional Islam, stressing its worldly implications instead. The Islamic bureaucracy was characterised, in their eyes, as excessively compromised with the secular state and its “politicking.” In addition, my interlocutors took issue with the expectations attached to “national” traditional Islam. While not worthless (many in this community actively promote knowledge of Tatar history and language), my interlocutors expressed the view that local customs should not interfere with the sphere of worship, to which rigorous textualism applies. As one prominent community member put it, “There is no fanaticism in our mosque. We don’t like extremes: simply, we take Islam as Islam and local traditions as local traditions.”

Halal movement members’ criticism is regularly thrown at the nativistic, parochial, and nationalistic logic behind traditional Islam. Consider the following (anonymous) humoristic analysis of traditional Islam, eagerly shared by halal movement members on social networks:

Tatar creed (*aqīdah*) aka “Traditional Islam:”

- 1) Muslims = Tatars.
- 2) Non-Muslims = all others.
- 3) Devout Muslims = wealthy Tatars.
- 4) Ideal Muslim = Great-grandfather, who was a mullah.
- 5) Erring Muslims = in-laws from the wife’s side.
- 6) Arabs = tiny sect, somewhat related to Muslims (see under: Muslims).
- 7) Pillars of faith:
  - a. Give voluntary alms (*sadaka*);
  - b. Do not bury the dead in coffins;
  - c. Marry a Muslim (see under: Muslims);
  - d. Don’t eat pork during religious festivals;
  - e. Speak Tatar. Broken Tatar will do. Just understanding is enough.
- 8) Halal = horsemeat [Tatar speciality].
- 9) Haram = pork (see under: Pillars of faith).
- 10) Is vodka (*araki*) haram? If you know when to stop drinking, then it is not. Beer definitely is not.
- 11) Jesus Christ = somebody depicted on icons. All in all, not a nice guy.
- 12) The Quran was written in the Tatar language.
- 13) What does *bismillah ar-Rahman ar-Rahim* mean in translation from the Tatar language? It means exactly the same.
- 14) Is there any relationship between *bismillah ar-Rahman ar-Rahim* and the phrase “in the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful?” See under: n. 12 and n. 13.
- 15) Is *zakat* (mandatory religious tax) obligatory? Only Arabs pay *zakat* (see under: Arabs).
- 16) Is fasting during Ramadan obligatory? If you are a Muslim (see under: Muslims), retired, and in good health, then you can fast. But not for long.
- 17) How to tell a good Muslim from a bad Muslim? A good Muslim was born in your village.

At the time of my research, this Tatar “*aqīdah*” joke was not universally known in the Volga region. However, rather than in its mere currency, this piece of mockery’s ethnographic significance lies in the layered and sophisticated way in which it offers an all-round critique of the traditional Islam project. This passage ridicules folklorists’ “vernacular traditional Islam” with its emphasis on customary ritualism (alms-giving and life-cycle rituals), its ignorance of Islamic theology, and its insufficiently rigorous discipline. In addition, it pokes fun at “Tatar national Islam” with its excessive focus on localism, lineage, and obsession with Tatarness. Lastly, it satirizes the “sovereign Islam” idea that theologically informed Islam is something foreign and dangerous, which has to do with “Arab sectarianists.” To a halal movement reader, the reference to the Arabs as a “sect”, echoing Soviet-era official jargon, sounds particularly comical in light of the notion, common within Tatarstan’s Muslim milieu, that Arab societies are relatively unspoiled repositories of Islamic knowledge and morality.

The notion of a “Tatar creed” comes across as particularly comically incongruent in its mixing of the realm of ethnicity and that of theology. The Arabic word *aqīdah*, entailing awareness and conviction about one’s beliefs and theological stances,<sup>21</sup> is used ironically to stress the actual absence of any creed among ethnic Muslims, whose Muslimness-as-essence does not call for any specific self-cultivation endeavour, besides not being based on Islam’s discursive tradition.<sup>22</sup>

One further level of analysis can be added. By exposing the theological impossibility and ethical emptiness of the traditional/non-traditional trope, the merry desecrators who authored the “Tatar creed” joke uncover some uncanny similarities between the traditional Islam concept and the formulaic nature of Soviet political discourse, whose extreme formalism at the expense of content has been described by Yurchak (2005). Although the state’s hegemony over public discourse has diminished since the collapse of the Soviet order, the traditional Islam project bears some striking parallels with Soviet discursive practices – namely, ideological open-endedness and a disjuncture of form (the idea of Islam) and content (Islamic ethics and doctrines). This disjuncture allows state or state-directed actors to reclaim Islam without feeling compelled to adhere to, or even engage intellectually with, Islamic ethics and doctrines. Yet this option proves unnatural and misguided to any virtuous Muslim committed to the halal movement’s path of self-cultivation.

<sup>21</sup> In 1982, Malcom Ruel could write that “no ordinary Muslim” is likely to hold a formal creed. Faith amongst Muslims, he argues, is essentially a relationship based on “keeping faith, having trust. [...] It is less the content of the belief that has become elaborated in Islam than the duties of the relationship” (Ruel 1997). Recent scholarship on global Islamic trends has corrected that view: over the past three decades, long-outdated concerns and debates over orthodox belief have caught on throughout the Muslim world on the wings of emerging Salafi rigorist reformism (Schielke 2015). Contemporary discussions within Islamic milieu worldwide are riddled with creedal questions over what Muslims should believe (Lav 2012: 4). Russia and the Volga region make no exception. In the course of my fieldwork, I witnessed countless instances of creed-related discussions. Having “the right creed” or a “compatible” creed is, in certain sectors of the halal movement, an important element in friendships and marital relationships. To go back to Malcom Ruel, it could be said that a shift is occurring in the global ummah towards what he would call a “Lutheran” understanding of belief/creed as an intimate experience of conviction and sincerity.

<sup>22</sup> As we have seen, when it comes to religious matters, ethnic Muslims tend towards “cognitive” belief – the widespread human tendency, based on normal cognitive processes, to find the supernatural plausible – rather than self-reflexive ethical-spiritual effort based on codified rules (cf. Laidlaw 2007). In the context of scripturalist Islam, by contrast, creed is an ethical position (cf. Ruel 1997).



## Ethnic in form, ethical in content: “Theological” traditional Islam

In the conclusive sections of this paper, I shall explore yet another guise in which the traditional Islam trope is construed and circulated in Tatarstan (alongside afore-analysed vernacular, ethno-national, and sovereign-patriotic traditional Islams). My Muftiate source aptly defined it *teologičeskiy* (“theological”) or *ortodoksal’ny* (“orthodox”) *traditsionny islam*. This iteration of traditional Islam can be considered a specific political project pursued by the most politically perceptive Spiritual Directorates, such as Tatarstan’s Muftiate, in an attempt to create and popularize an Islam that is “ethnic in form, and ethical in content.” By using this formula, I refer to a way of living Islam that can be both acceptable in the eyes of the secular authorities and possessed of theological import and ethical viability in the eyes of Muslims in search of avenues for self-transformation.

Orthodox traditional Islam means knowingly following one of Islam’s theological schools, one of its juridical schools, or a Sufi confraternity. [...] We [the Kazan Muftiate] want to integrate the [state-approved idea of traditional Islam] with a solid theological base. We are undoubtedly part of the Russian (*rossiiskoe*) society and are loyal patriots of our country [→ “sovereign” Islam]. We definitely advocate the survival of the Tatar nation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and beyond [→ “national” Islam], and respect our grandparents, our elders, and all immemorial folk customs of the Tatar people, which by no means contradict shari’a [→ “folk” Islam]. Funeral banquets, exchanging *salaams* after prayer – we know these are forms of vernacular devotion, yet they are good (*dobrie*), harmless practices. However, we also promote sound knowledge of the Hanafi jurisprudence and the serious pursuit of halal lifestyles among our denizens [→ “theological” traditional Islam].

The Spiritual Directorate’s ambitious project of traditional Islam attempts to merge the already mentioned incarnations of traditional Islam – vernacular, national (Tatar), and sovereign (Russian) – with the practiced religiosity of shari’a-abiding halal movement members. To do so, these institutions turn to the Sufism-tinged Maturidi-Hanafi school of theology and jurisprudence.

As other scholars have observed (Bustanov and Kemper 2013: 821; Di Puppò, this issue), supporters of theological traditional Islam describe these as the “most rational,” “tolerant,” “progressive,” and “humanistic” currents within Sunni Islam, hence compatible with the requirements of loyalty to a secular order demanded by the nation-state. At the same time, Maturidism and Hanafism have indeed been dominant trends in the intellectual history of Middle Volga’s Sunnism, conforming thus to the requirement of connection to a geographically defined all-Russian national past. Interestingly, however, advocates of this view do not seem inclined to take into consideration the potentially unsettling fact that these theological and juridical trends (Maturidism, Hanafism) are foundational not only for Tatarstan’s “theological” traditional Islam, but also for an insurgent Islamist group like the Taliban.

Through attempting to bridge the gap with “non-traditional” Muslims, the Spiritual Directorate aims at increasing its legitimacy amongst believers who are attracted to

strict spiritual and ethical discipline (compare with Borbieva 2009: 17–18). Promoters of theological traditional Islam insist on the theological and juridical soundness of this project, which, however, is not explicitly qualified as “theological,” but simply (if at all) advertised as “traditional Islam” in the public arena.

Even without naming their project, promoters of theologically informed traditional Islam appear intent on improving the “Ministries of Jinns’ Affairs” reputation by shifting Muftiates’ priorities from governmentality to promotion of shari‘a-compliant Sunni spirituality and ethics, although remaining within the state’s discursive construction of legitimate religiosity. By engaging with Muslim-as-believers rather than Muslims-as-political-subjects, a space of dialogue can be carved out without the remit of sheer state power. This move remains, of course, political and governmental in nature, but more subtle and inclusive than the mere finger-pointing and ideological trumpeting for which major Muftiates are famed among grassroots Muslim milieus. What is more, such a move is potentially conducive to the emergence of a Muslim civil society in Tatarstan and Russia at large (see below).

It should be stressed that the Spiritual Directorates’ reputation in the eyes of most halal movement members remains dubious. Grassroots perceptions of Russia’s many Muftiates varies locally. Certain charismatic muftis, such as Saratov’s Mukaddas-*hazrat* Bibarsov, an outspoken critic of the discriminatory potential inherent in the simplistic traditional/non-traditional polarity, enjoy a great deal of respect amongst the halal movement nationwide, including its Salafi sectors. Despite being less fiery, Tatarstan’s young mufti Kamil-*hazrat* Samigullin is also regarded with esteem by many practicing Muslims (although his Sufi credential might tarnish his reputation in certain milieus). Other representatives of the Islamic bureaucracy, however, are less sympathetically considered “puppets” or “sell-outs.”

In this uneven scenario, theological traditional Islam may take different hues. Some community leaders may appropriate the soothing tropes of traditional Islam discourse – historical continuity, patriotism, localism – “defensively”, in order to defuse the worries of prejudiced observers while remaining committed to demanding, even niche Islamic ethical projects. For instance, leaders of communities that accept “non-traditional” teachings may explicitly honour the memory of Soviet Muslim soldiers who fell in the war against Nazi Germany, or pepper their public speeches with references to mainstream Tatar intellectual figures of the past. While perfectly “halal” (and thus undertaken in earnest), these actions may strategically send reassuring signals to secular onlookers. Other, more ecumenically inclined, actors might use theological traditional Islam “assertively” to address ethnic Muslims. Through an emphasis on Hanafi-Maturidi Islam’s historical rootedness and “humanistic” credentials, they may reach out to non-practicing Tatars with a view to stimulating a rediscovery of spirituality and cajoling their listeners’ return to the fold of practiced Islam. Used defensively or assertively, the format of theological traditional Islam is thus gaining more and more space at the intersection between the state and the halal movement.

## A civil society project?

Is the traditional/non-traditional conceptual juggernaut too black-and-white, normative, and contiguous to state politics to be safe to use in scholarly contexts? Or should

traditional Islam be seen as a conceptual space that rank-and-file Muslims may enter “from below” to pursue their own interests? According to scholars who work in Islamic milieus affiliated with Muslim Spiritual Directorates (Di Puppò, Schmöller, this issue and personal communication), *traditsionnyi islam* – that is, “theological” traditional Islam – may offer a handy discursive tool to sharī‘a-abiding Muslims who are committed to safeguarding Tatars’ ethnic distinctiveness, helping them to buttress their criticism of rigidly scripturalist Salafi theology through doctrinally sound arguments. This view certainly has its merits, especially considering that the Idel-Ural is a region in which indigenous theological repertoires suitable for rebuffing scripturalist trends were nearly totally eradicated in Soviet times.<sup>23</sup> Under this optimistic light, “theological” traditional Islam reconnects the Volga region to the Hanafi mainstream and contributes to pluralism in Russia’s Islamic landscape. Reasonable though this argument is, such an approach risks falling short of apprehending the hegemonic pretences inherent in the traditional Islam trope, particularly in its “national” and “sovereign” declinations, and the securitarian, potentially discriminatory potential inherent in the traditional/non-traditional dichotomy.

This dilemma can be partly solved by focusing on the civil society-fostering potential of “theological” traditional Islam. By embracing Islamic orthodoxy, as we have seen, elements within the Islamic bureaucracy hope to meet the halal movement halfway. Such a move, I submit, is potentially conducive to the emergence of an idiosyncratic form of Muslim civil society based on state-engineered – through the mediation of the Spiritual Directorates – civic activism combined with a boost in economic liberties. This development would be consistent with a broader, nationwide project of “managed,” state-driven civil society in contemporary Russia. Without fully corresponding to Western liberal models of civil society (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001: 40–44; Hann and Dunn 1996; Mandel 2012), and indeed at least partly contradicting them, this project appears nonetheless capable of harnessing authentic grassroots enthusiasm. Political scientists working on the subject have acknowledged that while “much of the societal participation in Russia is state-driven,” involvement in “state-supported initiatives is often sincere” (Brunaska 2017: 2; see also Hemment 2012: 236; Chebankova 2013; Henderson 2011; Cheskin and March 2015).

The Tatarstani republican regime, characterised by cunning dirigisme, a certain idealism, as well as deep pockets, has accumulated significant experience in harnessing grassroots enthusiasm on the occasion of mega-events such as 2013’s Summer Universiade and 2015’s Water Championship (Brunarska 2017). I would argue that Muftiate-approved initiatives targeting Muslim businessmen, women, youths, or disabled people, fall under the same rubric of “managed” civil society.

Amongst the most fascinating initiatives that can be explained in terms of “orthodox” traditional Islam morphing into civil society projects are the Muslim Youth Union and the Russian Association of Muslim Entrepreneurs (APM). The former group’s ability to catalyse grassroots participation has emerged in events such as 2015’s Republican Iftar, a monumental fast-breaking affair hosted in Tatarstan’s largest stadium and organised with the aid of dozens of young volunteers.

<sup>23</sup> This can be compared with Magnus Marsden’s 2005 account of Chitrali Sunnis countering Salafi doctrinaires on Sunni theological grounds, drawing on local Islamic repertoires, motifs, and sensibilities.

The APM is an even more interesting case. Its goal is connecting and coordinating Russian-speaking Muslim businesspeople, furnishing them with support and advice, and modernizing the economy of Russia's Muslim-majority regions. Founded in Kazan in December 2014, APM has quickly established itself nationwide and its new headquarters are located in a prestigious historical building in Moscow. APM's representatives are operative in Northern Caucasus, Central Asia, the Arabian peninsula, and Western Europe. The APM is an ecumenist institution, working in close synergy with Muftiates and state organs who sponsor traditional Islam. Because of APM's Muftiate-compliant "theological-traditional" positions, some informants of different persuasion have dismissed it as an operation "run by erring (*zabludshchye*) Muslims." One Salafi-inclined informant, for example, decried the laxity of gender segregation during APM meetings, as well as the use of un-Islamic attire (such as ties) by its members, who also indulge in taking pictures of one another, thereby flouting principles of intransigent aniconism that some rigorist Sunnis uphold. This man lamented that the religious commitment of several erstwhile Salafi-oriented Muslims had allegedly decreased after joining APM – something made apparent, in his eyes, by the trimming of their beards. In spite of criticism, many pious entrepreneurs are interested in this organization, which places a great deal of emphasis on sincerity and virtuous conduct, and possesses selective acceptance standards, as one of its cadres made clear to me.

[Muslims] are disciplined people, who enjoy the blessing that faith donates. [One] can compare Muslims with others... Appreciate how more orderly, honest, and clean we are. This is because through Islam we embrace healthy lifestyles, and develop. When [our association] wants to identify sincere brothers (*iskrennykh bratev*) in a new city or district, we begin by investigating about who prays regularly (*kto chitaet namaz*) and embraces a halal way of life (*kto veded razreshenny obraz zhizni*). Then we make contact with them and explain to them who we are. We check out people's businesses and ask them what they might need of us.

As this excerpt illustrates, the APM holds the same high ethical standards as the rest of the halal movement. By engaging *practicing* Muslims as economic actors, active citizens, and good-willed youths, rather than mere subjects, and by taking their ethical positioning seriously, this initiative becomes a platform for the Spiritual Directorate to positively affect the lives of religionists beyond mere hegemony and reproduction of state-approved truths, and assert itself as a credible institution. In fact, counterbalancing a relative scarcity (by Western/liberal standards, though not by Soviet ones) of political rights with a boost in economic liberties seems to be one of the most interesting trends in Russia's recent state-Muslims relations.

Another exemplary case is that of the charity initiative "Yardem" (Tatar for "help") studied by Danis Garaev (2017). Launched in the late 2000s as a grassroots Islamic charity project sponsored by a number of Kazan-based entrepreneurs, Yardem was initially associated with non-traditional Islam and met with some hostility from the Muftiate. In the early 2010s, however, the religious authorities' strategy changed.

Yardem was co-opted by the Spiritual Directorate and “traditionalised,” while maintaining a proudly “orthodox” Islamic character. As a result, not only did grassroots support not dwindle, but the project’s scope and economic means grew spectacularly. Although no longer fully independent, today’s Yardem initiative encompasses a huge new mosque, one of Russia’s most successful rehabilitation centres for disabled people, and an innovative Braille typography.

It is worth mentioning that a move towards economic affirmative action (the APM) might prove particularly astute in the light of the halal movement’s demographic composition, led by an urban, ambitious, and youthful new Muslim bourgeoisie and members of the aspiring, upwardly pushing lower-middle classes. Endowed with a robust “capitalist spirit” and an equally Weberian ethical enthusiasm, these sectors of Tatarstan’s society pursue both spiritual and material self-realisation. It is not surprising that state-approved post-Soviet traditional Islam, with its combination of parochial ethnic solidarities, statism, and idealisation of an archaic national past should fail to resonate with the expectations and needs of this group of dynamic and cosmopolite, predominantly youthful Muslims. Yet projects that promote the pursuit of a “good life” – such as the APM’s promotion of halal entrepreneurship and the other projects’ emphasis on civic virtues – are much more likely to stir such an audience’s interest.

Inasmuch as official Islamic institutions manage to interpret grassroots Muslims’ needs and engage with them, they stand a chance to pitch “orthodox traditional Islam” in the halal movement’s arena. To do so, however, they must leave the comfort zone of state-guaranteed hegemonic discourse, at least to a degree, and come to terms with the inherent plurality of theological and doctrinal voices that make up the halal movement. This might spell the beginning of a new phase of the political life of traditional Islam as a concept, or make it downright redundant: if the concept’s normative power becomes diluted or its conceptual shortcomings increasingly untenable,<sup>24</sup> *traditsionny islam* might gradually fade into irrelevance. According to some informants, the idea of traditional Islam is already losing currency.

For now, Russia/Tatarstan’s managed “Islamic” civil society is still emerging as a creole space between dirigisme and genuine grassroots self-expression, “state orthodoxy” and pluralism. Unlike other observers, however, I remain sceptical as regards any genuine anti-authoritarian potential of traditional Islam. I am ready to concede, with Dannreuther (2010), that any move towards a setup in which the halal movement is offered a legitimate space within Russia’s public sphere is preferable to downright hostility towards that religious minority. Nonetheless, this model may continue to marginalise as “disloyal” those segments of the halal milieu that fail to follow proscribed theological directives or resist the moral and juridical authority of Spiritual Directorates.

<sup>24</sup> In the field of international relations with Islamic countries, for instance, this dichotomy might come across as void of meaning or counterproductive from the point of view of the secular institutions themselves. I thank my friend and colleague Mansur Gazimzyanov for this and many other insightful comments on this paper’s early draft. I also extend my gratitude to two anonymous reviewers for their brilliant and enormously helpful suggestions.

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