Halal Headaches: Post-Cultural Islam in Tatarstan

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The post-Soviet "boom" in halal goods, services, and discourses in Russia's multi-confessional Tatarstan republic suggests a picture tense with contradictions. On the one hand, *a)* a critical number of Volga Tatars today—we shall call them pious Muslims—want to ensure that the goods they consume, the activities they perform, and so on conform to Islamic ethical injunctions. On the other hand, *b)* the fact that the question of halalness arises is in itself indicative of a widespread concern about *whether or not* such conformity can be taken for granted. Indeed, *c)* this concern is justified: most goods and activities in post-Soviet Tatarstan *do not*, by default, conform to Islamic ethics, which poses some challenges to pietists. This is because *d)* not all Tatars share the same priorities and orientations as pious Muslims, and certainly not with the same intensity: although growing in number, pietists are still a minority. The social, cultural, and moral world around them is not based on the truth upon which they organize their lives. What does this picture tell us about "Islam" and "culture" among the Tatars? This contribution attempts to briefly address this question.

As I have discussed in detail elsewhere,[67] the fast and remarkable spread of a physical *and discursive* halal infrastructure in post-Soviet Tatarstan is a historical novelty. According to many respondents, for example, halal meat was not widely called "halal meat" (Rus. *khalial'noe miaso*) until the post-Soviet period. Earlier, it was referred to by means of Tatar-language circumlocutions such as "meat [from animals] slaughtered uttering *bismillah"* (*bismilla aytep chalgan ite*). Or consider the body of new halal-related additions to Tatarstan's Islamic discursive regime: latter-day Russo-Arabo-English jargon expressions such as *khalial'nyi biznes* (halal business), *khalial'-shoping* (shopping), *khalial'-fitnes* (fitness), *khalial' brend* (brand), or *khalial'naia moda* (fashion) only acquired their current discursive pre-eminence with the post-perestroika dual expansion of Islamic piety and capitalism-fueled "globalized" lifestyles.

This is not to say that the concept of halal was ignored in the past. To my knowledge, a systematic history of halal in the pre-revolutionary Volga region has yet to be produced, but it is

[67] Matteo Benussi, "Living Halal in the Volga Region: Lifestyle and Civil Society Opportunities," in *Rethinking Halal: Genealogy, Current Trends, and New Interpretations*, ed. Louis-Léon Christians and Ayang Utriza Yakin (Leiden: Brill, 2021).

certain that religious scholars and learned men wrote on the subject of the permissible and the forbidden. However, the halal concept seemingly enjoyed limited currency. Its use appears to have been largely confined to the specialized realm of theological/juridical debate, and its regular and competent use was a prerogative of the religiously literate elite, which issued top-down guidance to rank-and-file Muslims (the reception of which remains to be investigated). This stands in stark contrast to the post-Soviet picture, in which halal is discursively omnipresent and the حلال logo can be found at many corners of Tatarstan's big cities. This contemporary framing of halal is premised on an unprecedented degree of mass theological literacy, with thousands of pious Tatar Muslims making juridically competent, autonomous judgements and deliberations in a range of quotidian micro-contexts—bodily care, shopping, business, etc.—on a daily basis without delegating this to the customary moral authorities. Indeed, such authorities no longer exist: the village mullahs, wandering Sufis, and Qadimist literati of yore have all but disappeared, along with the relatively coherent, Islam-infused cultural ecosystem that buffered the faithful existences of pre-revolutionary Volga Muslims.

The Soviet experience ushered millions of Tatars into so-called "secular modernity," meaning that individuals are now left to fend for themselves in terms of spiritual and moral choices, and find themselves endowed with an unparalleled amount of individual freedom in a world confusingly saturated with material abundance. The sudden popularity of halal can thus be linked to a contradictory development: an increase in available theological knowledge and doctrinally informed behaviors, on the one hand, and the appearance of a host of new ethical anxieties (or "headaches"), on the other.

Fragments of a "Muslim Domain"

Let me delve a bit deeper into the processes of social and moral change that led to the current setup. The notion of "Muslim domain"[68] proposed by Mustafa Tuna may be cautiously used to describe the Muslim social landscape of the Imperial-age Volga region, provided that we envision it as a landscape criss-crossed with disagreements, debates, and different views about/approaches to Muslimness,[69] rather than as a harmonious, homeostatic, insulated world of uniform observance. As my friend Alfrid Bustanov reminded me during the workshop that spawned this publication, it would

[68] Mustafa Tuna, *Imperial Russia's Muslims: Islam, Empire and European Modernity, 1788–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

[69] Agnes Kefeli, *Becoming Muslim in Imperial Russia: Conversion, Apostasy, and Literacy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014); Danielle Ross, *Tatar Empire: Kazan's Muslims and the Making of Imperial Russia* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2020).

be problematic to claim that pre-revolutionary and Soviet-era Volga Muslims were untouched by the complex moral dilemmas involved in seeking to be good believers. That is certainly true. Yet discontinuities must be taken into account as well: after all, moral dilemmas take different forms in different eras and under different conditions. As Wael Hallaq has argued, "non-modern" paradigms of Muslim subject formation, pedagogy, and community self-governance cannot be immediately conflated with contemporary ethical landscapes, which are much less morally integrated.[70] In this sense, the concept of a "Muslim domain" may be interpreted not as a sociological abstraction but as shorthand for a rich and complex moral ecosystem underpinned by a cohesive, capillary moral-pedagogical infrastructure that, to an extent, sheltered Volga Muslims from allogenous moral discourses.

What was the place of halal in this picture? Pre-revolutionary sources suggest that the question of halalness arose among specialists when Volga Muslims were confronted with novelties from beyond the boundaries of custom: Russian recipes, European fashion, and even tea imported from East Asia.[71] This is intriguing because it appears to indicate that the halalness question, in earlier historical periods, was connected to the management of items perceived as culturally innovative and potentially disruptive to the community's folkways. Put otherwise, novel types of objects (chairs, newspapers, suits for men, etc.), foreign goods (tea), and new ideas (party politics, the academic study of geography, etc.), presented pre-revolutionary Volga Muslims with an existential dilemma: can things that *this particular community* (which saw itself as Muslim as opposed to, say, Christian Russians) has never done before be permissible or are they *eo ipso* un-Islamic?

Today, the question of halal is normally posed rather differently: are things that Muslims *can* do, including those that enjoy the blessing of custom, *actually* permissible by universal Islamic standards? Do they stand the test of theology and *fiqh*? Within this framework, cultural novelties can be perfectly permissible—witness the popularity of sushi among Tatarstani Muslims—while time-honored customary traditions such as pilgrimage to local shrines or the consumption of horsemeat become topics of contention (some pietists reject local pilgrimages as "paganism" and "harmful innovation," while horsemeat, though still very popular, has been flagged by some as "unrecommended"—*makruh*—under Hanafi *fiqh*).

[70] Wael Hallaq, *The Impossible State: Islam, Modernity, and Modernity's Moral Predicament* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

[71] Tea being a substance that many Volga Muslims today would associate with quintessentially "Islamic" dietary habits and drinking cultures: Turkey's slender *çay* glasses, Morocco's mint *atay*, Uzbekistan's *choy* rituality, and indeed the very Tatar *sütle*—milky—*çäy*. See Ross, *Tatar Empire,* 74.

This picture is simultaneously simpler and more complex than the pre-revolutionary situation. Simpler because halalness parameters are more directly anchored to a singular, universal, doctrinal matrix. More complex because the community's lifeworld has unfastened itself from a stable, customary moral framework: the contemporary ethical ecosystem, forged through decades of Soviet-led social engineering that dismantled autonomous Islamic moral and administrative institutions, has joined the global whirlwind of capitalist-powered late modernity.

To adopt a neo-Weberian approach,[72] we might frame this social and moral transformation in terms of a progressive differentiation of *"spheres" of value and experience*. To Weber, social systems could be divided into an economic sphere, an aesthetic sphere, an erotic sphere, an intellectual sphere, and a political sphere: under modernizing conditions, these spheres would, so to speak, pull apart from each other and *away from religion*, which in turn becomes more of an autonomous sphere. Although Weber's evolutionary framework is far from unproblematic, the idea of "sphere separation" has echoes in, and is vindicated by, later reflections on secularization, such as Charles Taylor's concept of "post-Durkheimian societies," in which temporal government and spiritual/religious authority are disjoined,[73] and Wael Hallaq's contention that modernization has opened a chasm between morality, on the one hand, and governance and politics, on the other, in Muslim societies.[74]

Needless to say, Islam's exalted status as a universal truth has never been disavowed from "inside" the tradition, but the Volga region has seen the emergence of a broader social order resting upon a relativization of religion within an increasingly privatized and nonbinding, if traditionally venerable, sphere.[75] Therefore, contemporary Tatars—pietists and nonpietists alike, halal-minded or not—are faced with a "post-Durkheimian," fragmented moral landscape, devoid of an overarching, singular, hegemonic religious matrix or source of authority. Post-Soviet Tatars are raised without

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[72] Max Weber, "Religious Rejections of the World and their Directions," in *From Max Weber*: *Essays in Sociology*, ed. Hans Heinrich Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), 323-362; c.f. Joel Robbins, "Between Reproduction and Freedom: Morality, Value, and Radical Cultural Change," *Ethnos* 72, no. 3 (2007): 293-314.

[73] Charles Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

[74] It must be emphasized that "sphere separation" here does *not* mean a smooth "separation of church and state": in fact, the authors cited here can be seen as part of a scholarly trend that opposed such a simplistic view by framing modern secularism as an arrangement—not devoid of paradoxes and awkwardness—under which religion becomes as a site of intervention at the hands of non-religious state authorities. In this paper, however, owing to space constraints, I do not delve into the question of post-Soviet secularism and the relative power dynamics. See also Hallaq, *The Impossible State.*

[75] This manifests in the vast numbers of individuals, aggregates, and institutions that are variously irreligious, non-practicing, little-practicing, uninterested in religion, or *instrumentally* (for instance, the Russian state) interested in religion.

pervasively Islam-infused cultural and pedagogical institutes[76] and move within the deeply secular social landscape of urban Russia, which, for all its publicly trumpeted illiberalism/conservativism, leaves Muslim-background individuals with unprecedently ample leeway for personal choice on matters such as (to return to Weber's spheres) consumption and professional life, taste, eros, knowledge, and even private political convictions. Of course, nonpietists and pietists respond to this situation in very different, even contrasting ways: the former by implicitly accepting this state of things and embracing a "cultural" understanding of Muslimness, the latter by trying, against the grain and of their own volition, to reintegrate their lives under a singular Islamic matrix.

After (Muslim) Culture

And so, to post-Soviet Tatars (*including* pietists, although their actions perpetually try to undo this state of affairs), religion may seem to be a "sphere" apart, privatized and substantially independent from politics, economy, kinship, etc. Arguably, this was never quite the case in earlier historical eras, especially for rank-and-file Volga Muslims: had individuals forsaken Islam—and chances are, such a prospect would have been near-unthinkable to most—that would have undermined a key pillar of their social identity and moral personhood. It is telling that in religious matters, important choices such as conversion and/or adherence to a revival were usually made at the collective (household/village) level or were predicated on profession and social position[77] rather than being a matter of purely individual private judgement.

Today, there is much greater leeway: during my fieldwork, I have met nonpietists who would accept the label of *ethnic* Muslims (i.e., Muslims by ancestry) while knowingly and gleefully flouting norms of Islamic conduct or, indeed, entirely disregarding Islam as a meaningful source of moral guidance. For example, there are ethnic-Muslim Tatars who are atheist, Catholic, Hare Krishna, or neopagan. And while the decision to distance oneself from Islam may be frowned upon in certain quarters, there is no steep social price to pay for choices concerning what most people now regard as one's personal inner life and "conscience."

Things have also changed from the pietist viewpoint, with a newfound awareness and connectedness with a transnational, cosmopolitan community of believers. Of course, Islam is an inherently universalist religion, as the Prophetic notion of an *ummah* composed of different nations

[76] Pietists' children being only a partial exception: devout parents devote much attention to Islamic child-rearing, but this does not occur organically or seamlessly.
[77] Kefeli, *Becoming Muslim in Imperial Russia.*

attests. Yet while early academic observers would marvel at the deep cultural dissimilarities within this nominal community, subdivided into autonomous customary worlds,[78] the late-twentieth-century rise of transnational reform movements in an increasingly globalized ecumene have brought the universal singularity of the *ummah* into sharper relief. The global Muslim community remains diverse, but it is fair to say that its fundamental unity has never been as experientially intense as it is now and its traditional internal cultural boundaries never so porous.

Where does this leave us with respect to the topic of this collection, namely the idea of "Muslim cultures" in Russia? It is evident that the concept of culture cannot be used innocently as a self-explaining category in the case of the Volga Tatars, whether pietists or nonpietists. The classic anthropological definition of culture as a "complex whole" of values, habits, etc., "acquired as members of society"[79] is hardly tenable in the context of late modernity—"complex" should be replaced with "complicated," and there is hardly any "whole" to speak of amid these loose assemblages of disparate elements and registers.

The Tatars' collective experience *as Tatars*—pietists and nonpietists—mirrors a specific socio-historical-ethnic positionality, expressed in national pride, a social identity (which includes "ancestral" Muslimness), a more-or-less shared mythology, the narratives produced by the Tatar intelligentsia, and the looming issue of language preservation. But it is doubtful that this positionality amounts to a "culture" in the classic anthropological sense. Indeed, contemporary Tatars firmly partake in Russia's "cultural" landscape, sharing historical memories and myths (WWII, socialism, the "wild" 1990s), public discourse references (Soviet and post-Soviet film, music, TV), mannerisms of speech and comportment, political aspirations and related cynicism, aesthetic sensitivities, geopolitical anxieties, and overall habitus with their Russian (*rossiiskie*) neighbors. On an even broader scale, Tatars belong to what is awkwardly called "global culture," i.e., the ubiquitous aggregate of a neoliberal frame of mind (self-help, consumerism, middle-classness), familiarity with global pop culture (music, film, TV from Hollywood to Korea), a technological lifeworld (gadgets, platforms), and an overall way of living shared by millions of late-modern urbanites worldwide.

All these elements infuse and animate the various disjoined spheres of value and experience within which the Tatars (pietists and nonpietists) move, combining in immensely variable ways across individual and social niches. The concept of culture may perhaps be stretched and adapted to

[78] Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed: Religious Developments in Morocco and Indonesia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971).
[79] E.B. Tylor, "Religion in Primitive Culture," in *A Reader in the Anthropology of Religion*, ed. Michael Lambek (Malden, MA, and Oxford: Blackwell, 2008 [1871]), 23-33.

this landscape, but questions would arise as to the analytical efficacy of such a catch-all framework. I therefore suggest that we reposition Islam, moving it from the framework of *culture* to that of *ethics*, from a matter of ethnic custom to one of existential quandary.

Of course, Muslimness as a social identity remains an important element—but the post-Soviet halal boom is an index of the growing appeal of active, subjective engagement with *Islam as a living ethical framework* rather than as a national identity or passively acquired custom. The surge of halal awareness in the Volga region has been spearheaded by people who are not content with an ancestral or "cultural" connection with Islam, but want to put Islam into practice in their everyday lives as a source of actionable guidance in myriad quotidian circumstances. However, as we have seen, the Tatars embarking on such an ambitious project are far from a majority: in the absence of an organically religion-infused "Muslim domain," only a sub-section of the Tatar population chooses to embrace a life of piety.

Uphill Halal: Reuniting the "Spheres"

Latter-day discursive and material halal infrastructures can thus be interpreted as an effort by pious Tatars to bring disparate "spheres" within a single overarching framework: that of Islam, here understood here as an *ethical paradigm* rather than as a "culture" or social identity. Let us return to expressions such as *khalial'-biznes*, *khalial'-fitnes*, *khalial'-brend,* and the like: here, halalness is an attribute attachable to a plurality of concepts corresponding to disparate areas of experience: money-making, the care of the self, consumption, leisure, fashion, etc. In this new, eminently late-modern halal terminology, we can almost literally see the effort involved in bringing Islam to bear on areas of life that are not inherently "Islamic" and that are indeed *extraneous* to the Muslim/Islamic domains of the past.

The main point I am trying to make is that halal both provides *and* manifests a matrix capable of re-Islamizing areas of life (finance, leisure, but also education, family life, etc.) no longer pertaining to an organically Muslim "culture." The Volga region's halal boom thus has a paradoxical quality in the sense that it manifests at once the vitality of Islam and Islam's decline as a civilizational whole. If a post-Soviet Islamic "renaissance" can be declared, then this renaissance is "post-Durkheimian," in the sense that it does not resolve the public disconnect between religion and other domains of life, and "post-cultural," in the sense that it blossoms in a void left by Islamicate civilization and its moral institutes.

Furthermore, and crucially, "halal living" (*zhit' po-khalial'nomu*) cannot be done spontaneously and effortlessly, as a result of passive acquisition and conformity to custom: rather, it requires reflexive choice and individual effort, often against the grain: halal-minded pietists make deliberations, ponder options, knowingly choose to spend more for halal-certified items and services, check labels and paperwork, distrust institutions, invest energy to familiarize themselves with theological and *fiqhi* themes, use tools such as apps and websites for Muslims, invent/import/invest in new halal products and services, renounce objects of desire that fail to meet the necessary standards of permissibility, and so forth. In a word, keeping halal requires a lot of work. It is important to highlight that the halalization of life in post-Soviet Tatarstan is not a matter of world-denial but, quite differently, an intense, purposeful *re-engagement* with the various spheres of value and experience that compose reality. The proliferation of "halal solutions," including goods, services, and practices in different domains, illustrates that halal-minded pietists are robustly world-oriented, albeit keen to engage with the world on their own terms. Renunciation (of all things haram) is part of pietist ethics but far from the end of the story. This ethical "conquest" and ordering of spheres of value and experience is a central dimension of halal living in post-Soviet Tatarstan and, arguably, across the Muslim world.

But it is not a simple task. For those who embark on this mission, bringing together disjoined spheres of value and experience under the unitary matrix of Islam presents considerable challenges. Efforts to "halalify" life do not and cannot restore a coherent public moral order: we might imagine the various "value spheres" as resisting, on account of their inherent tendency toward autonomy, any attempt to impose a unitary framework. This resistance brings an element of stubborn difficulty to halal living. In the sphere of business, for example, many of my entrepreneur interlocutors reported the need to compromise on halalness in order to keep the enterprise functional. In leisure, people are often forced to lower the halalness bar to avoid missing out on global pop-culture products, music, TV series, or travel. Even in the sphere of Tatar "ethnic" art/aesthetic, keeping things 100% halal is almost impossible: Tatar theatre performances normally include gender mixing, Tatar visual art include portraits, and so on.

In other words, halal living implies the balancing of contrasting moral forces: on the one hand, the centrifugal separation of value spheres, and on the other, their centripetal reorganization under the single moral matrix of religious scripture and *fiqh*. As a result, dilemmas, compromise, and headaches are not just incidental glitches in the mechanism, but unavoidable characteristics of Muslim ethical life in the present. These headaches are here to stay: the expansion of halal

infrastructure, while covering certain issues, will likely generate more complexity and thus open new fronts of ethical uncertainty.

Michael Lambek perceptively observed that ethics/religion is about "anxieties,"[80] that is, concerns about one's actions—in our case: is this food really halal? Is insurance always contrary to Islamic economic norms? Can I go to a classical music concert? To the swimming pool? Can I trust the state-backed halal certification board? Despite the level of coherence and control over the everyday that pietists manage to achieve, the aspiration to *entirely* re-organize spheres of value/experience under a single matrix is ever-unfulfilled, an uphill road with no summit in sight—at least not in this world.

Conclusion

To recapitulate: a discursive as well as physical infrastructure to disambiguate halal and haram would not have been necessary had the Volga Tatars' cultural world been extensively organized around Islam-derived principles, as tended to be the case in earlier historical periods. If everything around you is infused with Islam, halalness becomes an unmarked feature of your environment that hardly needs to be pointed out in everyday situations. In post-Soviet Tatarstan, however, a marked halal infrastructure is indeed needed to orient pietists in a pluralist and fragmented moral landscape rife with ambiguous novelties (consumption, business, fashion, etc.). Therefore, the emergence of halal as an infrastructure is an index of *both* the ethical thriving of Islam in post-Soviet Tatarstan (such infrastructure is in demand) *and* its civilizational "decline" (such an infrastructure is needed in the first place).

The picture, therefore, is two-pronged: Tatarstan's Muslim pietists operate in a post-Durkheimian world, pursue a post-cultural Islam, and face the Sisyphean ethical challenge of halalizing life amid opposing forces. However, this predicament does not mean that pietists are alienated from the faith. The opposite is true—first, today's halal-seekers have a first-hand, direct relationships with Islamic jurisprudence and theology not filtered through devotionalism, traditional authorities, or the demands of custom; on aggregate, the degree of religious literacy and ethical sophistication today is probably far greater than it ever was in the pre-revolutionary "Muslim domain." Second, and most importantly, it is precisely through the never-ending labor that goes into halalizing a life that constantly resists this effort, and thus constantly presents new challenges, that

[80] Michael Lambek, "Living as If It Mattered," in *Four Lectures on Ethics: Anthropological Perspectives*, ed. Michael Lambek, Veena Das, Didier Fassin, and Webb Keane (Chicago: Hau Books, 2015), 5-52, 23.

observant Muslims prove to themselves, and to God, their determination to spare no effort on the path to salvation.

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