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Liberal Islamic Theology in Conservative Russia: Taufik Ibragim's "Qur'anic Humanism"

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Abstract

This article studies the work of the Moscow-based Syrian academic scholar Taufik Ibragim. Originally a Marxist historian of Islamic philosophy and *kalām*, after the end of the USSR Ibragim became one of Russia's most authoritative scholars also of the Qur'ān and the Islamic tradition more broadly. Since the mid-2000s, Ibragim has publicly propagated the concept of "Qur'anic humanism", which is meant to demonstrate the tolerance of the Qur'ān and the humanist character of Islam in general, against Islamic extremism and stagnation in Muslim thought. In his opposition to the dominant political "traditionalism" in Russia's Islamic landscape, Ibragim links back to the heritage of the Tatar Muslim educational and religious reformers (Jadids) of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Without reference to any other contemporary Islamic thinker, Ibragim advocates a reform of Islam to adapt it to the conditions of modern Russia. His interpretations appeal to Russia's academic elite, as well as to the Jadid-oriented muftiate of the Russian Federation (DUMRF) in Moscow, which until recently propagated Ibragim's concepts against the vague "traditionalism" that other muftiates in the Russian Federation claim to follow. But his insistence on a rational approach to the Qur'ān and his challenging of the authority of *ḥadīth* have brought Ibragim the enmity of many conservative muftis and Muslim theologians in Russia, and Islamic reformism is under increasing attack.

Keywords

Qurʻānic humanism – Islamic reformism – Russia’s Islam – Jadidism – muftiate – Taufik Ibragim – Qurʻānists

Introduction

Most of Russia’s officially recognized Islamic administrations (muftiates) present themselves as followers of “traditionalism”.¹ Developed in line with the model of the Russian Orthodox Church,² Russia’s state-supported Islamic traditionalism is based on the differentiation between a “nontraditional” Islam that is foreign (imported), unregistered, “dangerous,” and therefore “bad”, on the one hand, and a “traditional” (homegrown), patriotic, officially registered, and therefore “good” Islam, on the other.³ “Traditionalism” is a political paradigm that expresses conservative values and loyalty to the existing authorities. Adherence to it is rewarded by the state, through public funds and recognition, while failure to follow the official line can be punished by marginalization, obstruction, or outright bans.

The first programmatic statements on a specific “Islamic traditionalism” in Russia came from Valiulla Iakupov, a major personality in the muftiate of the Republic of Tatarstan. Iakupov attempted to balance the popular heritage of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Tatar Jadidism – the broad movement of Muslim cultural and educational modernism, with strong elements of Islamic reformism – by calling for a renewed attention to the works of the Ḥanafī *madhhab*, as a defense against what has been labelled “Wahhabism” and radicalism. After Iakupov’s assassination in 2012, other Tatar authors contributed to the further development of the idea that there is a specific “Russian Islam” (in the sense of *rossiiskii islam*, “an Islamic that is specific to the Russian

1 Our sincere gratitude goes to the four peer reviewers, who made very valuable suggestions and corrections.

2 Alexander Agadjanian and Kathy Rousselet, “Globalization and Identity Discourse in Russian Orthodoxy”, in *Eastern Orthodoxy in a Global Age*, ed. Victor Roudometof, Alexander Agadjanian, and Jerry Pankhurst (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 2005), 29–57; Alexander Agadjanian, “Tradition, Morality and Community: Elaborating Orthodox Identity in Putin’s Russia”, *Religion, State & Society* 45:1 (2017), 39–60.

3 Alfrid K. Bustanov and Michael Kemper, “Valiulla Iakupov’s Tatar Islamic Traditionalism”, *Asiatische Studien – Études Asiatiques* 67:3 (2013), 809–35; here 818. Cf. Kristina Kovalskaya, “Nationalism and Religion in the Discourse of Russia’s ‘Critical Experts of Islam’”, *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 28:2 (2017), 141–61.

Federation”); this Islam is supposed to stand closer to the Russian Orthodox heritage than to “foreign” brands of Islam. Yet any attempt to define what “Russia’s Islam” is (and what it is not) is difficult, in particular given the ethnic and religious diversity of Russia’s Muslims, and the transnational Islamic networks in which they have operated since well before the eighteenth century.

Russia’s Islamic establishment is divided over various competing muftiates (state-registered Islamic administrations), the biggest players in the European part of Russia being DUMRF in Moscow, DUMRT in Kazan, and TSDUM in Ufa.⁴ They all try to define the “traditionalism” paradigm by taking the Ḥanafī school of law as their model and publish medieval Ḥanafī textbooks in Russian translation for use at their Islamic universities, colleges, and madrasas.⁵ In the North Caucasus republics of Daghestan and Chechnya, the same is done with textbooks from the Shāfi‘ī tradition. All muftiates in Russia profess adherence to the Māturīdī and Ash‘arī schools of *kalām*, the mainstream of Sunnī theology. However, translating classical Arabic legal and theological literature into Russian or Tatar does not necessarily provide a strong foundation for a “Russian Islam”; in many issues, such translations promote stances and values that are far removed from Russian realities. Besides, several muftiates (especially in the North Caucasus, but also in Kazan) publish Sufi literature of their regional Naqshbandiyya, Shādhiliyya, or Qādiriyya traditions. While these are meant to provide ethical orientation in the fight against extremism,⁶ the exclusivism of

4 DUMRF (*Dukhovnoe upravlenie musul'man Rossiiskoi Federatsii*, “Spiritual Administration of Muslims of the Russian Federation”, previously named “Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of the European Part of Russia”, DUMER) in Moscow has been headed by Mufti Ravil Gainutdin since 1996; TSDUM (*Tsentral'noe Dukhovnoe upravlenie musul'man*, “Central Spiritual Administration of Muslims”) in Ufa has been chaired by Mufti Talgat Tadzhuiddin since 1982. DUMRF (with its Council of Russia’s muftis) and TSDUM understand themselves as competing umbrella organizations with several branches in Russia’s regions; but Russia’s various national republics have their own muftiates, including DUMRT (*Dukhovnoe upravlenie musul'man Respubliki Tatarstan*, the muftiate of the Republic of Tatarstan, since 2013 presided by Mufti Kamil’ Samigullin). In particular the muftiates of Russia’s North Caucasus republics do not affiliate themselves with DUMRF or TSDUM, the two big Tatar organizations in Moscow and Ufa, respectively.

5 E.g., *Kitab al'-Dzhanaza va-l-Istifada min khaza (Kniga o dzhanaza)*. Translated by Abdulbari Muslimov, ed. by Damir Mukhetdinov (Nizhnii Novgorod: Medina, 2007); Abdal'khamid Makhmud Takhmaz, *Khanafitskii fikkh* (in 2 vols), ed. Damir Mukhetdinov (Nizhnii Novgorod: Medina, 2010–2012); Mukhammad Abdullakh bin Muslim al'-Bakhlavi, *Dokazatel'stva khanafitskogo mazhaba* (Kazan: Khuzur, 2010); Abu Dzha'far, *Akyda at-Takhanaviia* (Kazan: Khuzur, 2017).

6 Michael Kemper and Shamil Shikhaliev, “Islam and Political Violence in Post-Soviet Daghestan: Discursive Strategies of the Sufi Masters”, *Princeton Papers: Interdisciplinary Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 17 (2016), 117–54.

the *ṭarīqas* and their strong insistence on the disciple's unquestioning obedience towards his/her master will not convince intellectual Muslims.

It is against this background that we discuss the niche of Muslim reformist thought in contemporary Russia. At the center of our analysis is the Syrian-Russian academic scholar Dr. Taufik Ibragim (Tawfiq Ibrāhīm), whose defense of "Qur'ānic humanism" (*koranicheskkii gumanizm*) challenges many of the dominant tenets of "traditionalism". The present contribution is, to the best of our knowledge, the first comprehensive study of Taufik Ibragim's work in a Western language. In the first part, we trace Ibragim's early publications in Russia, which centered on medieval *kalām*, and which were influenced by Marxist positions. We argue that, in his works on *kalām*, Ibragim already developed the basic conceptual framework that he would later transfer to the study of the Qur'ān. In the following section, we analyze how, in the mid-1990s, Ibragim turned to the study of the Islamic revelation, and we trace the genesis of his "Qur'ānic humanism" concept, which culminated in a book with the same title in 2015.

In the last part, we analyze how Ibragim's ideas were adopted by what is today Russia's most prominent muftiate, the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of the Russian Federation (DUMRF) in Moscow. DUMRF (whose mufti, Ravil Gainutdin, was in the 1990s regarded as being close to Salafi ideas)⁷ is the only major Islamic umbrella that openly makes room for reformist thinking, thereby nuancing the anti-reformist "traditionalism" paradigm. Eventually, a public conflict between adherents of reformism and of "traditionalism" on issues of praying and fasting in 2018 prompted DUMRF to drop references to Ibragim, and led to his disciples being discredited as "sectarians".

Kalām from a Marxist Perspective

Taufik Kamil' Ibragim was born in 1947 in the Syrian coastal town of Jableh (Latakia district). As Ibragim reported himself, his father was a religious man

7 On the split between TSDUM and DUMER/DUMRF see Renat Bekkin, "The Central Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Russia (TSDUM) and Its Strategy of Subordinate Partnership in Dialogue with the Russian Orthodox Church", *Časopis za interdisciplinarnu studiju* 4.2 (2017), 7–28. On Gainutdin's uneasy relations with the Kremlin, see Shireen Hunter, Jeffrey L. Thomas, and Alexander Melikishvili, *Islam in Russia: the Politics of Identity and Security* (Armonk and London: ME Sharpe, 2004), 102–14; Robert Crews, "Putin's Khanate: How Moscow is Trying to Integrate Crimean Muslims", *Foreign Affairs*, 07 April 2014 <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2014-04-07/putins-khanate>; Simone E. Merati, *Muslims in Putin's Russia: Discourse on Identity, Politics, and Security* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 69–98. For allegations against Gainutdin, see Roman Silant'ev, *Sovet muftiev Rossii: istoriia odnoi fitny* (Moscow: RISI, 2015).

of the Shīʿī confession, but the mutual accusations of Sunnīs and Shīʿīs in his town, and their superstitious understanding of Islam, made the young man turn to Sartrean existentialism and Marxism.⁸ In 1966, Ibragim was sent to Moscow, where he graduated in 1973 *cum laude* from the Faculty of Mechanics and Mathematics of Moscow State University (MSU).⁹ During his studies, he developed an interest in philosophy, and, before returning to Syria, he enrolled in an MSU off-site graduate program. While working as a maths teacher in his hometown, he started research on the medieval Islamic speculative theology of *kalām*. Two years later, he returned to the USSR to finish and defend his PhD (*kandidat nauk*) thesis on “*Kalām* Atomism and Its Role in Medieval Arab-Muslim Philosophy” (1978) at MSU, followed by a habilitational (*doktor nauk*) thesis on the “Philosophy of *Kalām*” (1984) at the Institute of Philosophy in Moscow.¹⁰ In those years, Ibragim also worked as a translator for a Moscow publishing house and contributed to several Arabic encyclopedias.

In his work on *kalām*, Taufik Ibragim emphasized the medieval *kalām* scholars’ uncompromising quest for rationality, their allegorical interpretation of the narratives provided by the revelation, and their rejection of religious authority (*taqlīd*).¹¹ By demanding logical arguments for all religious convictions, the *mutakallimūn* challenged the *ḥadīth* scholars, literalists, and jurists, as well as the Islamic mystics (Sufis) whose approach is based on intuition. Ibragim thus contributed to a trend in Soviet academic scholarship that aimed at identifying a tradition of rationalism and enlightenment in Islamic cultural history. Similar programs were developed in other parts of the USSR and Russia with regard to the domestic history of Islamic thinking; in many cases, these

8 Rustam Batyr, “Tataram povezlo, chto est’ tot, kto mozhet pokazat’ mirovoe znachenie nashikh myslitelei’. Rustam Batyr o zhizni Professora, otmetivshego 70-letnii iubilei”, *Biznes-Online*, 29 April 2017. <https://www.business-gazeta.ru/article/344525>; *idem*, “Taufik Ibragim: ‘Vy lish’ prazdnuete iubilei Mardzhani, a ego trudy opublikovat’ ne mozhete’”, *Biznes-Online*, 30 April 2017. <https://www.business-gazeta.ru/article/344590>; Iakov Krotov and Taufik Ibragim, “Kristos i Mukhammad”, *Radio Svoboda*, 2 January 2016. <https://www.svoboda.org/a/27458359.html>. On the importance of Jean-Paul Sartre’s (1905–80) work for the first Arab postcolonial generation that struggled to unite existentialism with Marxism, see Yoav Di-Capua, *No Exit: Arab Existentialism, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Decolonization* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

9 Batyr, “Taufik Ibragim: ‘Vy lish’ prazdnuete iubilei Mardzhani”.

10 Taufik Ibragim’s personal page at the website of the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts of the Russian Academy of Sciences: http://www.orientalstudies.ru/rus/index.php?option=com_personalities&Itemid=74&person=465.

11 Il’shat R. Nasyrov, “Issledovaniia klassicheskoi islamskoi filosofii v Rossii v 1990-kh godakh i nachale XXI veka”, *Ishrak: ezhegodnik islamskoi filosofii* 1 (2010): 536–64, here 544–46; Evgeniia A. Frolova, “Arabskie filosofii-marksisty”, *Istoriia filosofii* 14 (2009): 85–110, here 99–109.

interpretations were based on the equation of *ijtihād* with “enlightenment” and progressive philosophy.¹²

Ibragim singled out the *kalām* debates on atomism to demonstrate how Mu‘tazilī and Ash‘arī *kalām* scholars of the eighth to twelfth centuries built on the heritage of Pythagoras, Plato, Aristotle, and Epicurus. His central argument was that their various conceptions of atoms (as the smallest matter that cannot further be divided) moved the *mutakallimūn* beyond theology into the realm of natural philosophy. With this proposition, he challenged the widespread assumption that Islamic speculative theology simply turned to atomism to identify the core particles that God created, and thereby to preserve the concept of creation from the dimension of infinity (which would contradict the consensus, among theologians, that God’s creation is finite and different from the Creator himself, who is infinite, eternal, and not created).

Ibragim also pointed out that defenders and opponents of atomistic conceptions could be found in both the Mu‘tazila and Ash‘ariyya. With this observation, he tried to reject the widespread assumption that the Ash‘arī school (with its elevation of atomism to the status of theological dogma) must be seen as a conservative reaction to the Mu‘tazila (which produced various conflicting positions on atomism). For Ibragim, the Ash‘arīs were not enemies of the Mu‘tazila but their natural successors, under new historical circumstances that were less favorable to philosophy.¹³ The scholar thereby highlighted the longevity of dialectical and materialistic thinking among the *mutakallimūn*, in defiance of the rise of traditionalists who followed the views of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 855).

While several Western historians of *kalām* came to similar interpretations,¹⁴ Ibragim claimed that Orientalists in the West used references to Muslim defenders of atomism to explain the “stagnation of Muslim society after the tenth century”.¹⁵ More correct would be to argue, he suggested, that those

12 Alfrid K. Bustanov and Michael Kemper, “From Mirasism to Euro-Islam: The Translation of Islamic Legal Debates into Tatar Secular Cultural Heritage”, in *Islamic Authority and the Russian Language: Studies on Texts from European Russia, the North Caucasus and West Siberia*, ed. Alfrid K. Bustanov and Michael Kemper (Amsterdam: Pegasus, 2012), 29–53; Michael Kemper, “*Ijtihad* into Philosophy: Islam as Cultural Heritage in Post-Stalinist Dagestan”, *Central Asian Survey* 33:3 (2014), 390–404.

13 Frolova, “Arabskie filosofiyi-marksisty”, p.106; Taufik Ibragim and Artur Sagadeev, “Kalam”, in *Islam: entsiklopedicheskii slovar’*, ed. Stanislav M. Prozorov et al. (Moscow: Nauka, 1991), 129; *idem*, “Asharity”, in *Islam na evropeiskom vostoke: entsiklopedicheskii slovar’*, ed. by Rinat A. Nabiev (Kazan: Magarif, 2004), 29.

14 Cf. Mustafa Shah, “Trajectories in the Development of Islamic Theological Thought: the Synthesis of *kalām*”, *Religion Compass* 1:4 (2007), 430–54.

15 Taufik Ibragim, “On *Kalām* Atomism and Its Role in Islamic Culture”, in *Russian Oriental Studies: Current Research on Past & Present Asian and African Societies*, ed. Vitaly V. Naumkin (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 245–61, here 245–49.

kalām scholars who did subscribe to atomism *enriched* the ancient Greek theories by adding new ideas, and thereby contributed to the later revival of the atomism tradition in Western Europe.¹⁶ In the thirteenth century, according to Ibragim, Ash‘arī *kalām* even started to unite with the Muslim “Hellenistic” philosophy (*falsafa*).¹⁷ Ibragim thus dissected the atomism debates from theology and rehabilitated *kalām* by drawing it closer to the proponents of *falsafa* whom both Soviet and Western historiography had always regarded as tending towards skepticism and undogmatic “free-thinking”.

Engaging in the Arab *turāth* Debate

Ibragim’s interest in the rationality of classical *kalām* and its Hellenistic fundamentals was inspired by his academic supervisor, Artur Sagadeev (1931–97), a prominent Moscow Arabist who specialized in the reception of Greek philosophy by al-Kindī, al-Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna), and Ibn Rushd (Averroes).¹⁸ Together with Sagadeev, Ibragim wrote and edited several works on classical Islamic philosophy.¹⁹ Perhaps Sagadeev even stimulated Ibragim’s quest for Muslim humanism: in his last years Sagadeev focused on the humanism of medieval Muslim civilization – that is, the Iraqi cosmopolitan culture of *adab* (in the sense of character refinement through education, research, debate, and belles-lettres) that is associated with the names of Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī (d. 1023) and Miskawayh (d. 1030).²⁰ While operating from a Marxist position that linked cultural developments to socioeconomic change, Sagadeev’s understanding of Islam’s medieval humanistic culture was very much in line with Western research of the time, from which he often quoted.²¹ Reportedly,

16 Taufik Ibragim, “O kalame kak ‘ortodoksal’noi filosofii’ islama”, in *Religiia v izmeniaushchemsia mire* (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo RUDN, 1994), 205–12; Frolova, “Arabskie filosofiy-marksisty”, 104.

17 Taufik Ibragim and Artur Sagadeev, “Kalam”; idem, “Asharity”.

18 Sofiiia D. Miliband, *Vostokovedy Rossii. Bibliograficheskii slovar’*, vol. 2 (Moscow: Vostochnaia literatura, 2008), 292–93.

19 Taufik Ibragim and Artur Sagadeev, *Classical Islamic Philosophy* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1990); idem, *al-Falsafa al-‘arabiyya al-islamiyya* (Damascus: Dār al-Takwīn, 2009, first published 2000).

20 For a posthumous English summary of his thought, see Artur Sagadeev, “Humanistic Ideals of the Islamic Middle Ages”, in *Values in Islamic Culture and the Experience of History*, vol. 1, ed. Nur Kirabaev and Yuriy Pochta (Washington, DC: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2002), 165–98.

21 Marco Schöller distinguishes four major uses of the concept of humanism: (1) the literary and philological rediscovery of antiquity’s culture; (2) a specific epoch, often related to the Renaissance; (3) a specific set of values that places the human being at the center; and

Sagadeev's concept of "Muslim humanism" earned him pressure from the Communist Party.²² It is from Sagadeev's idea of a humanistic medieval Muslim civilization that Ibragim began to describe Islam as a tolerant religion that highly valued secular education.²³

Sagadeev also regularly published on contemporary intellectual debates in the Arab world and might equally have inspired Ibragim to engage with the scholarly edifices of Arab intellectuals like Muḥammad 'Amāra, Mohammed Arkoun, Ḥasan Ḥanafī, Muḥammad 'Ābid al-Jābirī, Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd, and Ṭayyib Tizīnī. In the aftermath of the Arab defeat of 1967 and the failure of secularist Nasserism, these philosophers were preoccupied with the recovery of the Islamic *turāth* (historical heritage) and with "proving" the harmony of reason and revelation, often with a heavy dose of Marxism.²⁴ In 1988, Ibragim (using the pseudonym "Tawfiq Sallūm") contributed to this debate by publishing a work in Arabic, entitled "Towards a Marxist Perspective on the Arabic Heritage".²⁵ In this book, he praised the new Marxist philosophers, in particular the Syrian Ṭayyib Tizīnī (1934–2007) and the Lebanese Ḥusayn Muruwwa (1910–87).²⁶ At

(4) a specific type of education. Basing themselves on one or several of these definitions, modern academic scholars of Islam have detected "Islamic humanism" in a whole variety of personalities, epochs, genres, and attitudes. See Marco Schöller, "Zum Begriff des 'islamischen Humanismus'", *ZDMG* 151 (2001), 275–320. Schöller draws attention to the observation that in Europe, humanism defeated scholasticism, while in the Muslim world humanism (*adab*, Hellenistic philosophy) was defeated by scholasticism (Ash'arism) and traditionalism (*hadīthocentrism*). Taufiq Ibrahim's interpretation draws on several of the established approximations to humanism in Islam (including in philosophy and sciences), but puts the chronology on its head by identifying humanism in the origins of Islam (the revelation itself) – thereby reaffirming the paradigm of decline after the revelation, and the need for reform.

22 Interview with the Moscow Arabist and Islamologist Dr. Aleksei Malashenko, 29 September 2017, Bishkek. Malashenko obtained this information in the 1980s from his revered teacher, Liudmila Gordon-Polonskaia (1922–96), a friend of Sagadeev. On Sagadeev's abandoned book project about Muslim humanism, see Taufik Ibragim, "Sagadeev, Artur", in *Islam na evropeiskom vostoke*, 286–87.

23 Taufik Ibragim, "Classical Arab-Islamic Culture in the Context of Dialogue of Civilizations", in *Values in Islamic Culture and the Experience of History*, vol. 1, 199–220.

24 Anke von Kügelgen, *Averroes und die arabische Moderne: Ansätze zu einer Neubegründung des Rationalismus im Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1994); Georges Tamer, "Averroism", in *EI THREE*, ed. Kate Fleet et al (Leiden: Brill). Consulted online on 11 May 2020. http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_24253.

25 Taufiq K. Sallūm, *Nahwa ru'ya mārkisiyya li-l-turāth al-'arabi* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr al-Jadid, 1988).

26 Cf. von Kügelgen, *Averroes und die arabische Moderne*, 250. On Ḥusayn Muruwwa, see Yoav Di-Capua, "Homeward Bound: Ḥusayn Muruwwah's Integrative Quest for Authenticity", *Journal of Arabic Literature* 44 (2013), 21–52.

the same time, he criticized them for their, as he believed, simplistic Marxist straitjacket, which understood Arab cultural history as torn between idealism and materialism, and between reactionary feudal forces and progressive capitalist tendencies. Ibragim rejected the association of religion with feudalism and opposed the widespread leftist interpretation that certain minority movements in Islam (like the Qarmāṭians) were “quasi-socialist”, and therefore progressive in nature and deserving of particular sympathy.²⁷ We understand this line of arguments as an expression of Ibragim’s wish to demonstrate that also the works of the *kalām* thinkers need to be seen as valuable achievements of human intellectual inquiry, and not, from hindsight, as an obscurantist idealism that led to the stultification and enslavement of the masses – which is how many Soviet works treated Islamic “scholasticism”. Ibragim’s line of argumentation is similar when it comes to Sufism. In his opinion, the sophisticated elaborations on the unity of existence (*waḥdat al-wujūd*) in the writings of Ibn ‘Arabī, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Jāmī, and other famous medieval authors belong to philosophy, not to the field of mysticism, which most socialist historians looked upon with disdain. Against Tīzīnī, he argued that Sufi pantheism is an expression not of idealism but of *materialism*: “In the philosophy of Sufism, God [...] is just a symbol for the integrity (*tselostnost*) of the world, for its unity”,²⁸ and thus for the unity of matter and idea.

A Liberal Reformist Reading of the Islamic Revelation

After the end of the USSR, Ibragim emerged as one of Russia’s major experts on medieval Arabic Islamic literature, and he wrote the entries on Islamic theology in the most prominent Russian-language academic encyclopedias.²⁹ Yet by the mid-1990s, he started to go beyond the academic field of *kalām* by also publishing popular and popular-academic books on the central texts of early Islam. This led to a stream of Russian-language monographs and textbooks

27 Frolova, “Arabskie filosofiy-marksisty”, 103. On the early Soviet Marxist views on Islam that linked Islam to feudalism, see also Michael Kemper, “The Soviet Discourse on the Origin and Class Character of Islam, 1923–1933”, *WI* 49:1 (2009), 1–48.

28 Taufik Ibragim, “Filosofskie kontseptsii sufizma (Obzor)”, in *Klassicheskii islam: traditsionnye nauki i filosofiya*, ed. Artur Sagadeev (Moscow: INION, 1988), 85–131, here 89.

29 The pioneering academic encyclopedia *Islam: entsiklopedicheskii slovar*’ of 1991 contains 39 entries signed by Ibragim in co-authorship with Sagadeev. Ibragim also contributed many entries to the 2004 encyclopedia *Islam na evropeiskom vostoke*, as well as to the national academic *Bol’shaia rossiskaia entsiklopediia* (Moscow: BRE, 2004–present) and *Novaia filosofskaia entsiklopediia* (Moscow: Mysl, 2001–2004).

with titles such as *Islamic Sacred History, A Guide to the Qur'ān, The Life of the Prophet Muḥammad*, and *The Sacred History According to the Qur'ān*,³⁰ as well as *Towards Qur'ānic Tolerance* and *Qur'ānic Readings*.³¹ Some of these books appeared in co-authorship with his wife, Natal'ia Efremova, a specialist at the Institute of Philosophy of the Russian Academy of Sciences. The summa of Taufik Ibragim's investigation so far is his 2015 book, "Qur'ānic Humanism: Tolerant and Pluralistic Tenets".³²

In the 1990s, there was a considerable demand for popular literature on Islam, and several Russian specialists dropped their atheist pathos and started to produce overview books also targeting religious readers. Ibragim did not belong to this category. The motivation for writing about Islam came from himself, and the development of his engagement with the primary sources testifies to his seriousness of purpose: he writes not as a mere provider of factual knowledge but with a clear agenda to reveal the "true nature" of Islam to the Russian, predominantly non-Muslim public.

This approach drew him closer to the post-Soviet Islamic establishment in Russia, which was in need of attracting academic expertise. Ibragim started to teach on Islam and Muslim history in various universities, as well as at the Moscow Islamic Institute of DUMRF;³³ his books on the revelation texts might have grown out of his teaching materials.

While now dropping any reference to Marxism, Ibragim preserved the dialectical style of exposition that already characterized his *kalām* works. Yet if in earlier works he used to enter into polemical debates with prominent Western and Muslim colleagues, he now largely refrained from mentioning any opponent by name. In Ibragim's post-Soviet Russian books, the reader is directly confronted with excerpts from the sacred texts, around which the author structures his argumentation. As he once stated, this was a conscious decision. His goal was to take into account the full range of early Islamic sources, to be able to identify, for instance, where the *sīra* (the traditional works on the life of the Prophet) are consistent with *ḥadīth* reports about Muḥammad, and

30 Taufik Ibragim and Natal'ia Efremova, *Musul'manskaia sviashchennaia istoriia: ot Adama do Iisusa* (Moscow: Ladomir, 1996); *idem*, *Putevoditel' po Koranu* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo DUMTSE, 1998); *idem*, *Zhizn' proroka Mukhammada* (in 2 vols.) (Moscow: Ladomir, 2009); *idem*, *Sviashchennaia istoriia soglasno Koranu* (Nizhnii Novgorod: Medina, 2012).

31 Taufik Ibragim, *Na puti k koranicheskoi tolerantnosti* (Nizhnii Novgorod: Medina, 2007); *idem*, *Koranicheskie chteniia* (Nizhnii Novgorod: Medina, 2008).

32 Taufik Ibragim, *Koranicheskiei gumanizm: tolerantno-pluralisticheskie ustanovki* (Nizhnii Novgorod: Medina, 2015).

33 Back then still called DUMER; see above, note 4.

where they provide diverging information.³⁴ Ibragim emphasizes that religious knowledge is no longer a monopoly of *‘ulamā’*, the experts in theology and jurisprudence; rather, every Muslim has the right to read the Qur’ān and to develop a dynamic approach that takes account of the historical contexts of the revelation period and of the present day.³⁵

Ibragim believes that “the negative aspects of tradition can be overcome only with the help of the tradition”,³⁶ and therefore started to quote from Muslim authorities with clear orthodox credentials, including al-Ghazālī and Ibn Taymiyya. In Ibragim’s words: “If you want your words to reach people in whose minds there are wrong interpretations of religion, then you must find quotes and interpretations by those thinkers who are authoritative for them.”³⁷

With this choice to argue from within the Islamic tradition, Ibragim demonstrates that the Prophet was “tolerant” and forgiving, and that “he never fought against people because they were unbelievers, in order to spread Islam”. Muḥammad propagated not fanaticism but a “middle way” (*sredinnost’*) in religious affairs.³⁸ This goal reveals another continuity with Ibragim’s earlier work on *kalām*, namely his insistence on the universality of the Islamic tradition: he points out the commonalities between Islam and the other two monotheistic religions, as well as the internal diversity of early Islam. By debunking the widespread assumption that Islam emerged as a complete set of rules and dogmas to which a believer would simply need to return, Ibragim claims to open up Islamic thinking for further development – that is, for reform.³⁹

What equally remains from his *kalām* studies is Ibragim’s insistence on the place of human reason. In Ibragim’s conviction, Islam brought the monotheistic tradition to a new level by transforming it in ways that emphasized rationality, without any need for miracles. Ibragim argued that, with the advent of Islam, the childhood of monotheism came to an end, and religion became mature. The Qur’ān urged people to “solve their earthly problems with the

34 Taufik Ibragim, Damir Mukhetdinov, and Diliara Akhmetova, “Prorok Mukhammad propovedoval sredinnost’ v religii”, *Musul’mane Rossii*, 6 July 2011. Interview to D. Mukhetdinov and D. Akhmetova. <http://dumrf.ru/islam/theology/1628>.

35 Taufik Ibragim and Valerii Emel’ianov, “Mysl’ rossiiskikh musul’man dolzhna stat’ dostoianiem shirokoi auditorii”, *Rossiiskoe Musul’manstvo* (no date). Interview to V. Emel’ianov. Not available, last accessed 31 October 2017 <https://www.islamrf.org/intervyu-emelyanov>.

36 Batyr, “Taufik Ibragim: ‘Vy lish’ prazduete iubilei Mardzhani’”.

37 Krotov and Ibragim, “Kristos i Mukhammad”.

38 Ibragim, Mukhetdinov, and Akhmetova, “Prorok Mukhammad”.

39 Taufik Ibragim and Asiia Davliatchina, “Nam nuzhna velikaia reforma!”, *Izdatel’skii Dom Medina*, 13 November 2012. Interview to A. Davliatchina. <http://www.idmedina.ru/books/theology/?4958>.

help of their reason".⁴⁰ To be sure, also blind literalism continued in Muslim societies, as did mystical movements; Ibragim now explained these counter-trends to Qur'ānic rationality as remnants of the childhood phase that Islam was supposed to end. What was needed was a continuing reformation of Islam that took account of the general civilizational progress of human society. This insistence on human progress, achieved through reason, remains central in Ibragim's thinking. Russian specialists in the field of philosophy have therefore characterized him as a "liberal",⁴¹ which in the contemporary Russian context means that Ibragim's values and intellectual premises are thoroughly European. Also senior Russian Orientalists who witnessed the development of Ibragim's conversion from an academic philosopher to a theological "enlightener" (*prosvetitel'*) hold him in the highest esteem.

Integrating Tatar Jadidism

Ibragim puts his quest for an Islamic reform into the context of the reformist movements that in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries swept the Arab world as well as India, Indonesia, and Russia. It is not without admiration that he wrote the following about Muḥammad 'Abduh (d. 1905), the influential Egyptian mufti and reformer:

[‘Abduh’s] works were characterized by a liberal and rationalistic spirit. In these books, he insisted on the need to interpret the Qur’ān and the Sunna in congruence with the demands of the time; he rejected *taqlīd* (the uncritical following of authorities), demanding instead the personal creative judgment by *ijtihād*; he substantiated the idea of harmony between revelation and reason, between Islam and science; he offered a critique of fatalism, and defended the freedom of will; he called for a reform of *fiqh*, by emphasizing the principles of *maṣlaḥa* (understood as common will, popular interest) and *talfīq* (the synthesis of judgments from the four schools [of law], *madhhabs*); he emphasized the importance of education for achieving social and political reforms; and he unmasked the despotic rulers, and demanded from them the institutionalization of a *shūrā*, as consultation with the people, in the form of a permanent parliament.⁴²

40 Rustam Batyr, "Taufik Ibragim: 'Musul'manin ne mozhet ne byt' salafitom", *Biznes-Online*, 7 May 2017. <https://www.business-gazeta.ru/article/345232>.

41 Nasyrov, "Issledovaniia klassicheskoi islamskoi filosofii", 546.

42 Taufik Ibragim, "Abdo Mukhammad (1849–1905)", in *Islam na evropeiskom vostoke*, 5.

Ibragim adapted this Islamic reform agenda to Russian realities by linking it to the achievements of the well-known Tatar Muslim modernism (Jadidism) of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Even more, the Syrian Taufik Ibragim claimed that he himself had “returned into the fold of Islam” after having acquainted himself with the works of Russia’s Tatar theologians Shihāb al-Dīn Marjānī (d. 1889), Žiyā Kamālī (Kamalov, d. 1942), Mūsā Jārallāh Bīgī (Bigiev, d. 1949) and Riḍā’ al-Dīn Fakhr al-Dīn (Fakhreddinov, d. 1936) – several of whom were deeply influenced by ‘Abduh and the latter’s mentor, Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (d. 1897). As Ibragim phrased it, after reading the Tatar Jadids, he understood that the Islam he abandoned in his Syrian youth “was not the genuine Islam, not the one formulated in the Qur’ān and the authentic Sunna of the Prophet”.⁴³ Again, it was his supervisor, Artur Sagadeev, who acquainted him with the Tatar theological heritage; himself an ethnic Tatar, Sagadeev had once held a position in the Oriental manuscript section of Kazan State University, and at some point in the 1970s or 1980s he took Ibragim to Kazan to jointly read the works of Tatar Jadids. Ibragim understood that, in the late nineteenth century, the Tatar scholars were in many respects ahead of their time; Marjānī, for instance, “rehabilitated” the Mu‘tazilis a hundred years before Western researchers like Josef van Ess and W. Montgomery Watt dealt with the matter.⁴⁴

Historicizing the Qur’ān

Central to Ibragim’s argumentation is now the idea that Islam makes a clear distinction between the secular and religious realms. He thus confronts the fundamental claim of Islamists who argue that *dīn* and *dunyā* are united in Islam. In his view, neither the Qur’ān nor the Sunna provide arguments for a theocracy or a religious state.⁴⁵ As he argues, Muḥammad saw himself primarily as a prophet, and only circumstances forced him to temporarily take on political functions. Ibragim claims that it is on purpose that the Qur’ān often offers only general guidelines, even when it comes to the five pillars of Islam (for instance, the Qur’ān does not specify a fixed number of daily prayers or detail the scope of the *zakāt* tax). God purposefully limited the number

43 Batyr, “Taufik Ibragim: ‘Vy lish’ prazduete iubilei Mardzhani”.

44 Taufik Ibragim, “O Mardzhani – istorike i reformatore”, paper presented at a conference celebrating the 180th anniversary of Marjānī (Kazan, January 1998). Online: <http://www.idmedina.ru/books/theology/?4957>.

45 Frolova, “Arabskie filosofiy-marksisty”, 107.

of regulations, the scholar asserts, in order to make it easier for the believers to accept and follow Islam; and this “simplification” Ibragim understands as an essential principle of Islam. However, the Medinan Muslims kept asking Muḥammad for more concrete rules, so, after the Prophet’s death, Muslim traditionalists brought thousands of *ḥadīth* traditions into circulation in order to fill what they perceived as gaps in the revelation. But by doing so, they contradicted the original message of the Qur’ān, which was to leave worldly affairs to the discretion of the believers, whom God bestowed with the intellect to find the best solutions for their time.⁴⁶ Ibragim often rejects certain *ḥadīth* reports because they apparently lack a consistent chain of transmitters (which is the principal criterion of *ḥadīth* critique that the traditional ‘*ulamā*’ also apply).⁴⁷ However, he also makes no secret of his conviction that the Sunna, in general, has only relative and historical value, and does not contain absolute and eternal principles.⁴⁸ These are exclusively preserved in the Qur’ān.⁴⁹

At times, Ibragim goes a significant step further. In an interview in 2017, he asserted that the original message is preserved in full and timeless purity only in the Meccan parts of the Qur’ān:

What was sent down in Mecca is the essence of the Qur’ānic message. It was in Mecca that the general human principles were formulated. Bluntly spoken, the Meccan Qur’ān is the Qur’ān for the entire humankind, whereas the Medinan Qur’ān is its application to Medinan circumstances. This is the historical character (*istorichnost’*) [of the Qur’ān] that one has to understand.⁵⁰

46 Batyr, “Taufik Ibragim: ‘Musul’manin ne mozhet ne byt’ salafitom”.

47 Ibragim, *Koranicheskiĭ gumanizm*, 278, 392–98, 477–81, 514.

48 Criticizing Muslim jurists who tend to view the Sunna as a legal document, Ibragim refers to the work of another Syrian thinker (who also graduated from Moscow State University, in 1964), Muḥammad Shahrūr (1938–2019); cf., e.g. Taufik Ibragim, “Nekotorye problemy izucheniia klassicheskogo naslediia”, paper presented at the conference *Islam v sovetskom i postsovetskom prostranstve* (Kazan, May 2003). Online: <http://www.idmedina.ru/books/theology/?4951>. On Shahrūr, see Muhammad Shahrur and Andreas Christmann (eds.), *The Qur’an, Morality and Critical Reason: The Essential Muhammad Shahrur* (Leiden: Brill, 2009).

49 Taufik Ibragim, “Nekotorye problemy izucheniia klassicheskogo naslediia”.

50 Batyr, “Taufik Ibragim: ‘Musul’manin ne mozhet ne byt’ salafitom”. A similar idea was suggested by Sudanese Islamic reform theorist Maḥmūd Muḥammad Ṭāhā (1909–85), and later developed by his disciple, Abdullahi Ahmed an-Na’im (b. 1946). An-Na’im’s *Toward an Islamic Reformation: Civil Liberties, Human Rights and International Law* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1990) was translated into Russian in 1999. On Taha’s standpoints regarding the Meccan/Medinan Qur’ān, see Mohamed A. Mahmoud, *Quest for Divinity: A Critical Examination of the Thought of Mahmud Muhammad Taha* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2007), in particular 142–48.

Ibragim also relativizes the so-called “Constitution of Medina”, a document through which Muḥammad is reported to have regulated his relations with the factions in Medina;⁵¹ many Islamists use this text to justify their struggle for an Islamic state.⁵² Ibragim challenges its authenticity by using arguments from within the Islamic tradition – namely, by stressing that the document itself is not even mentioned in any of the vast canonical *ḥadīth* collections.⁵³ With Muḥammad as a political leader by default only, Islam becomes fully compatible with secularism, thanks to its trust in the rationality of the believers.

Qur’ānic Pluralism and Humanism

Especially with his book *Qur’ānic Humanism* (2015), Ibragim’s declared goal became to reveal the humanistic aspects of the Qur’ān that were “darkened by the medieval interpretations”. Debunking “the widespread stereotypes about the cruelty and intolerance of the Qur’ān” would help to “ideologically disarm rigorists, fanatics and obscurantists” who base their teachings on the Book.⁵⁴ In other words, Ibragim’s work is of an educational nature, addressing both Muslims and non-Muslims.

For Ibragim and other contextualizing scholars, the Qur’ān is primarily a work of ethics, intended as a guide rather than as a rigid law book. In this respect, Ibragim’s ideas echo Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd’s “humanistic hermeneutics of the Qur’ān”. For the Egyptian Abū Zayd (d. 2010), the Qur’ān is not a closed text but “the outcome of dialoguing, debating, augmenting, accepting and rejecting, not only with pre-Islamic norms, practice, and culture but with its own previous assessments, presuppositions, assertions, etc.”⁵⁵ He emphasized the dialogical nature of the Qur’ānic narratives (with not only God but

51 Cf. Michael Lecker, *The “Constitution of Medina”: Muhammad’s First Legal Document* (Princeton, NJ: The Darwin Press, 2004).

52 E.g., Alagha Joseph, “Hizbullah’s Conception of the Islamic State”, in *Les mondes chiïtes et l’Iran*, ed. Sabrina Mervin (Paris: Hommes et sociétés, 2007), 87–112. On the use of the Medinan Constitution in Islamic democracy projects, see the discussion in Muqtedar A.M. Khan, *Islamic Democratic Discourse: Theory, Debates, and Philosophical Perspectives* (Lanham, Md: Lexington Books, 2006), xiii–xiv.

53 Frolova, “Arabskie filosofiy-marksisy”, 107.

54 Ibragim, *Koranicheskiy gumanizm*, p.

55 Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Rethinking the Qur’ān: Towards a Humanistic Hermeneutics* (Utrecht: Humanistics University Press, 2004), 1.

also Muḥammad and various other persons speaking in the first person),⁵⁶ and thus presented the Qurʾān as a protocol of God's unfolding communication with humankind, in which conflicting messages can stand next to each other – another argument that the Qurʾān was not at all presented as a fixed law book.

In a similar fashion, Taufik Ibragim also admonishes Muslims to identify the universal moral values contained in the Qurʾān; these values should then allow Muslims to develop a comprehensive theory of social ethics. “Unlike the Bible”, Ibragim accentuates, “the narrations about the past in the Qurʾān do not pursue a narrative-historiographical purpose, but [they are] didactic and educational on moral values. Such narrations should not be approached in a literal way”, but must be considered as allegories.⁵⁷ The regulations contained in the Qurʾān (and, to a lesser extent, in the Sunna) must be generalized to distill ethical guidelines; and these generalizations, not the particular regulations that the Qurʾān brought to the Arabs of the seventh century, should then be the basis for deriving the concrete rules that we must apply to the contemporary situation.⁵⁸ Ibragim believes that modern times require further development of “the reformist potential” for continuing “the emancipatory tendency” (*emansipiruiushchaia tendentsiia*) that characterizes the Qurʾān and the Sunna.⁵⁹

In this rethinking of the Qurʾān, Ibragim emphasizes individual moral responsibility and rational faculty. For him, God knows about the erring nature of the human being, but “these mistakes and corrections provide a constant approach to the truth”. The Almighty, Ibragim reasons, does not want us to follow instructions blindly, but He created us with the gift of reason, which will eventually bring a Muslim to Paradise.⁶⁰

In a broader context, Ibragim contributes to the discussion on the conceptual compatibility between Islam and the notion of human rights in international legal thought. For him, the “anthropocentricity” of Islam can be derived

56 Ibid. See also Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, “Rethinking the Qurʾan: Towards a Humanistic Hermeneutics”, in *Humanism and Muslim Culture: Historical Heritage and Contemporary Challenges*, ed. Stefan Reichmuth et al. (Goettingen: V&R unipress, 2012), 39–60.

57 Taufik Ibragim, “O soderzhanii sovremenogo religioznogo obrazovaniia”, paper presented at the conference *Religioznoe obrazovanie i tolerantnostʹ* (Kazan, 31 May 2005). Online: <http://www.idmedina.ru/books/theology/?4955>.

58 Thereby Ibragim joins the group of Muslim scholars who suggest innovative hermeneutical models for understanding the Qurʾān in modern times. Cf. Johanna Pink, “Striving for a New Exegesis of the Qurʾān”, in *Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology*, ed. Sabine Schmidtke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 765–92.

59 Ibragim, “O soderzhanii sovremenogo religioznogo obrazovaniia”.

60 Ibragim and Davliatchina, “Nam nuzhna velikaia reforma!”.

from the Qurʾān, which addresses the human being as “the crown of the creation”. The Scripture endorses the humanistic idea that all people are equal, as “slaves of God”.⁶¹ Ibragim supports this concept with a reference to the Cairo Declaration on Human Rights of 1990⁶² – that is, with a Muslim version of the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948).⁶³

In Ibragim’s reading, the Holy Book acknowledges that there is more than one path to God and salvation, and Islam recognizes and confirms the validity of them all. With respect to Q 49:13,⁶⁴ the scholar asserts that plurality is the universal message of indeed all Abrahamic religions. According to this idea, the Other is a positive necessity and not a threat. The Qurʾān embraces the unity of humankind in its diversity: “Universal human unity implies respect for the dignity of all ‘children of Adam’, for the human being as such, regardless of social origin, color, sex, language or belief”.⁶⁵ Therefore, the Qurʾānic revelations warn against attempts to abolish diversity by forcibly uniting people under the banner of one single religion.⁶⁶ In the words of Ibragim: “Confessional exclusivism runs counter to the basic precepts of the Qurʾān and the Sunna”.⁶⁷ This argumentation is based on the claim that, according to the Qurʾān, eternal salvation is available to everyone (Q 2:112, 4:123–24) and that being a Muslim does not mean following the religion of Muḥammad but means instead “believing in God” (based on an inclusive interpretation of Q 3:19, 3:85). There is no coercion in matters of faith (Q 2:256),⁶⁸ and everybody is free to choose his or her path to God (Q 2:62, 5:48, 2:148).⁶⁹

61 Taufik Ibragim, “Osnovnye tsennosti i instituty klassicheskogo islama”, in *Islamskaia tsivilizatsiia v globaliziruiushchiesia mire*, ed. Vladimir G. Khoros (Moscow: IMEMO RAN, 2011), 7–22, here 9.

62 Ibragim, *Koranicheskii gumanizm*, 14, 33.

63 On the merits and deficiencies of the Islamic human rights discourse, see Ann Elizabeth Mayer, *Islam and Human Rights: Tradition and Politics* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2012).

64 Q 49:13: “People, We created you all from a single man and a single woman, and made you into races and tribes so that you should recognize one another. In God’s eyes, the most honoured of you are the ones most mindful of Him: God is all knowing, all aware”. This and other references to the Qurʾān in English are taken from M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qurʾan. A New Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

65 Ibragim, *Koranicheskii gumanizm*, 13.

66 *Idem*, 25.

67 *Idem*, 35.

68 On the Muʿtazilī interpretations of the verse, see Patricia Crone, “No Compulsion in Religion’: Q 2:256 in Mediaeval and Modern Interpretation”, in *Le Shīʿisme Imānite quarante ans après. Hommage à Etan Kohlberg*, ed. Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, Meir M. Bar-Asher, Simon Hopkins (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009), 131–78.

69 Ibragim, *Koranicheskii gumanizm* 38–44.

Ibragim's central witness to Qur'anic tolerance towards other faiths is the Jadid theologian Mūsā Jārallāh Bigiev (d. 1949), who, in a Tatar-language book published in 1911, advanced the thesis of "God's universal mercy".⁷⁰ Bigiev argued that Allah's mercy must entail that, sooner or later, He will forgive all people, believers and nonbelievers alike. Grounding his reasoning in the Qur'ān and adducing certain *ḥadīths*, Bigiev argued that punishment in Hell cannot possibly be eternal, because this would stand in no relation to the short life span during which a person can commit sins, and in which one has the opportunity to comprehend the veracity of Islam; in the end, God will acquit all sinners, including Christians and unbelievers. Bigiev emphasized that the truth must be established not through fear of Hell, but through the rational proof expounded in the Qur'ān.⁷¹ For Ibragim, this soteriological pluralism of the Qur'ān supplements the otherwise "pragmatic" pluralism of Islam – that is, its generous tolerance of non-Muslims living under Muslim rule.⁷² In this context, Ibragim refers to the classical concept of Islamic apologetics that all human beings are born with an intrinsic faculty (*fiṭra*) enabling them to understand and pursue upright moral goals and ideals.

Ibragim's philosophy of pluralism resonates with ideas promoted by other contemporary Islamic reformists, such as the Swiss Muslim intellectual Tariq Ramadan (b. 1962), though Ibragim does not make direct references to him.⁷³ Ramadan argues that since the ethical message of Islam is entirely focused on justice (because of the fundamental dignity of each person by virtue of creation), the democratic nature of Western states – with their protection of human rights and the rule of law – is intrinsically congenial to the Muslim mindset.⁷⁴ And although Ramadan and Ibragim define their goals somewhat

70 Mūsā Jārullāh Bigī, *Raḥmat-i ilāhīyya burhānnari* (Orenburg, 1911).

71 Musa Dzharullakh Bigiev, "Dokazatel'stva bozhestvennogo miloserdiia", in *Izbrannye trudy v dvukh tomakh*, trans. Aidar Khairutdinov, vol. 1 (Kazan: Tatarskoe knizhnoe izdatel'stvo, 2005), 77–130; also Rotraud Wielandt, "Main Trends of Islamic Theological Thought from the Late Nineteenth Century to Present Times", in *Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology*, ed. Sabine Schmidtke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 707–64, here 731.

72 Ibragim, *Koranicheskii gumanizm*, 34.

73 Tariq Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* (London & New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004).

74 David Johnston, "Maqāṣid Al-Shar'ā: Epistemology and Hermeneutics of Muslim Theologies of Human Rights", *WI* 47:2 (2007), 149–87, here 178. On Ramadan, see also Mariella Ourghi, "Tariq Ramadan: From a Mere Co-Existence to an Authentic Contribution of Europe's Muslims", *Journal of Religion in Europe* 3 (2010) 285–309; Nathan Spannaus, "Transformative Islamic Reform: Tariq Ramadan and the Center for Islamic Legislation and Ethics (CILE)", in *Modern Islamic Authority and Social Change. Volume 2: Evolving Debates in the West*, ed. Masooda Bano (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 123–52.

differently, both suggest similar ways of reforming Islam so that it corresponds to today's societies, whether in Europe or elsewhere.

Parallels between Ibragim's and Ramadan's programs can also be found in their interpretation of Islamic law. Alongside the pluralistic ethics of the Qur'ān, Ramadan suggests developing the ethical imperatives in Islamic jurisprudence, which are based on paying "respect to the canonical interpretations of the law in a non-binding manner, while also providing creative interpretations to the sources of the law".⁷⁵ But Ibragim goes further: one gets the impression that he radically reduces the core of Islam to faith in God and belief in retribution (*vozdaianie*) in the afterlife, making all other issues open to allegorical interpretation. Among these secondary issues, he counts not only the items that *kalām* scholars quarreled about (like conceptions of Paradise/Hell and the attributes of God) but also Islam's ritual and legal provisions – that is, the issues that legal scholars (*fuqahā'*) regard as their prerogative. All of these items are, Ibragim insists, subject to change.

For Ibragim, *ḥadīth* reports are nothing more than examples of *ijtihād* – that is, of personal, human interpretation.⁷⁶ Examples would be the death penalty for apostasy or adultery, neither of which is mentioned in the Qur'ān, and both of which, for Ibragim, contradict the spirit of the Holy Book. He categorically rejects capital punishment for apostasy (*irtidād*) and argues that, initially, it came from a provision of the Old Testament that the Qur'ān, in fact, abolished. As the Qur'ān strongly favors freedom of religion and implies that there is no coercion to embrace Islam, no punishment should be imposed for the change of faith. And the "grievous punishment" (mentioned in Q 16:106 for those Muslims who "open their hearts to disbelief") actually means punishment in the afterlife, on the Day of Judgment.⁷⁷

Politics of Islam in Russia

It was at an Islamic conference organized by the muftiate of Nizhnii Novgorod in 2005 that Ibragim, for the first time, formulated his ideas on Qur'ānic

75 Johnston, "*Maqāṣid Al-Sharī'a*", 179.

76 Ibragim, "Osnovnye tsennosti i instituty klassicheskogo islama", 10.

77 Ibragim, *Koranicheskiĭ gumanizm*, 324. Also Frank Griffel argues that the persecution for apostasy was "generally neglected and even disregarded by the early generation of modern Muslim writers" such as Muḥammad 'Abduh and Rashīd Riḍā: "No worldly penalty is prescribed for them [i.e., for apostates] so long as they refrain from rebellion, but harsh punishments await them in the afterlife". Frank Griffel, "Apostasy", in *EI THREE*, ed. Kate Fleet et al. (Leiden: Brill). Consulted online on 11 May 2020. http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_SIM_0044.

tolerance and humanism.⁷⁸ Present at the conference was Professor Dr. Vitalii V. Naumkin, then the head of the Centre for Arabic and Islamic Studies at the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences in Moscow (IVRAN), where Ibragim was working as a researcher. While at that time still in the shadow of Evgenii Primakov (whom he would later succeed as IVRAN director), Naumkin was becoming a protagonist in the political circles that tried to give direction to the organization of Islam and Islamic education in Russia. In those years, the muftiate of Nizhnii Novgorod was a partner in a Kremlin PR project called “Russian Islam” (*Russkii islam*), which had the goal to propagate a non-radical and loyal Islam in which the Tatars would play the lead.⁷⁹ Reportedly, Naumkin encouraged Taufik Ibragim to publish his lectures in the institute’s academic journal, *Vostok (Oriens)*, where they appeared in 2006–07 as a series of articles under the title “Forward! Towards Qur’anic Tolerance”.⁸⁰ Later, these papers were revised and republished in *Minaret*,⁸¹ an Islamic newspaper that has wide electronic distribution and reaches a very different audience – namely, Muslim believers.

Minaret is edited by Damir V. Mukhetdinov (b. 1977), who at that time was assistant to the Nizhnii Novgorod mufti, Umar Idrisov (b. 1954). In 2010, he transferred to the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of the Russian Federation (DUMRF, back then still DUMER) in Moscow, where he quickly attained the position of deputy mufti.⁸² Mukhetdinov’s *Medina* publishing house started to print Ibragim’s books. Under DUMRF mufti Ravil’ Gainutdin, the energetic Mukhetdinov has become the muftiate’s most prominent (albeit controversial) spokesperson. Mukhetdinov is also the driving force behind a series of religious and popular-academic conferences on Islam in Russia.⁸³ While the general direction of DUMRF is to build on the Ḥanafī heritage, Mukhetdinov emphasizes the legacy of the Jadids, the Tatar religious reformist

78 Taufik Ibragim and Sergei Borodai, “Taufik Ibragim: esli rossiiskie musul’mane ne pokazhut velikii gumanisticheskii potentsial islama, ne zhdite ego niotkuda”, *Musul’mane Rossii*, 3 November 2015. Interview to S. Borodai. <http://www.dumrf.ru/common/interview/9940>.

79 Katherine Graney, “‘Russian Islam’ and the Politics of Religious Multiculturalism in Russia”, in *Rebounding Identities: Multicultural Legacies in Russia and Ukraine*, ed. Blair Ruble and Dominique Arel (Washington, DC: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 89–115.

80 Taufik Ibragim, “Vpered, k koranicheskomu islamu!”, *Vostok (Oriens)* 3 (2006), 58–70; 4 (2006), 70–83; 5 (2006), 48–62; 6 (2006), 42–55; 3 (2007), 20–37.

81 *Minaret* 8 (2006), 9 (2006), 11 (2007), 15–16 (2008), 18 (2008). Available online: http://www.idmedina.ru/books/history_culture/?107.

82 Damir Mukhetdinov’s biography at *Halal Ummah*. Consulted online on 11 May 2020. <https://halalummah.me/ru/person/muhetdinov-damir-vai/>.

83 Michael Kemper, “Religious Political Technology: Damir Mukhetdinov’s ‘Russian Islam’”, *Religion, State and Society*, 47:2 (2019), 214–33.

theologians, who struggled against what was then and is still now portrayed as “Ḥanafī traditionalism”.

Mukhetdinov embraced Taufik Ibragim’s “Qur’ānic humanism” as another essential building block for a new Islamic ideology that, in his mind, would enable Russia’s Muslim community to overcome the challenges that it is facing today. As Mukhetdinov argued in 2016, “Qur’ānic humanism” is a way to “revive the national school of Islamic theology”, to galvanize the Islamic tradition that Russia’s Muslims “have carefully preserved and transferred through decades of atheistic persecution of religion”.⁸⁴ As a result, DUMRF promoted the officially ordained Ḥanafī “traditionalism” paradigm but also its critique, in the form of Tatar Jadidism and Taufik Ibragim’s humanist hermeneutics.

As Ibragim’s work is in conformity with the concept of God’s “all-encompassing mercy” that the Tatar Jadid Mūsā Bigiev had designed in the 1910s,⁸⁵ Mukhetdinov could argue that “Qur’ānic humanism” is firmly rooted (*ukorenen*) in Russia’s past. In particular, Mukhetdinov praised the ethics of pluralism as outlined by Ibragim, arguing that “Qur’ānic humanism” has secured the harmonious coexistence of Russia’s various faiths and nationalities over many centuries.⁸⁶

This declared tolerance towards other faiths is, of course, a necessity, since all of Russia’s muftiates are confronted with the powerful Russian Orthodox Church, which enjoys better access to the political elites, resources, and the media. In an effort to embrace the general political zeitgeist, Mukhetdinov also flirts with Eurasianism, and quotes from well-known Russian national-conservative writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁸⁷ In Mukhetdinov’s design, Ibragim’s work clearly has the function to convince Russian readers that Islam poses no threat to the Russian nation; even more, Ibragim’s secular

84 Damir Mukhetdinov, “Koranicheskiĭ gumanizm kak kontseptual’naia osnova islamskogo prosveshcheniia”, *LiveJournal*, 1 June 2016. <http://damir-hazrat.livejournal.com/168440.html>.

85 DUMRF’s promotion of Bigiev comes not only through Ibragim’s cherishing of Bigiev’s concepts. First, Bigiev has also been popular among Tatar scholars in Tatarstan. Second, DUMRF’s public support of Bigiev’s views also fits into DUMRF’s cooperation with Turkey’s *Diyanet* religious ministry; its former chairman, Mehmed Görmez (who was a special guest on a host of DUMRF religious conferences), once wrote a dissertation on Bigiev that also appeared in Russian.

86 Damir Mukhetdinov, “Umma dolzhna dokazat’ i mirovomu soobshchestvu, i marginalam iz terroristicheskikh gruppirovok, chto ona Edina”, *Medina al-Islam* 6:164 (2015). <http://www.idmedina.ru/medina/?6522>.

87 Damir Mukhetdinov, “Rossiiskoe musul’manstvo: sotsiokul’turnaia real’nost’ i kontsept”, *Minaret*, 3 (2015), 45–58; Renat Bekkin, “Russkoe evraziistvo i islam”, *Zvezda* 2017, no. 11, 135–38.

understanding of Islam is employed to reinforce the notion that Tatar Islamic intellectual thought has been influenced by the Russian religio-philosophical heritage in general, which makes Russia's Islam genuinely unique and different from any foreign models of Islam.⁸⁸ Mukhetdinov even surmised that, if carefully applied in Russia (obviously, with the support of the state and the non-Muslim elites), the "Qur'ānic humanism" developed in Russia might become an example for other nations to follow, which would turn Russia's Muslim community into the vanguard of the global *umma*. In 2016 Mukhetdinov claimed that, in cooperation with Ibragim, he was developing "a very concrete reformist project that could become a conceptual alternative to *takfirism* and *jihadism*", and provide a moderate (*umerennyi*) platform for reconciling Islamic principles with modernity.⁸⁹

Opposition to Reformism

After a period of energetic collaboration between DUMRF and Ibragim in 2015–17, in 2018 the "Qur'ānic humanism" notion suddenly completely disappeared from DUMRF's public rhetoric. The reason for silently abandoning Ibragim's conceptual edifice was the unfolding of two scandals around self-proclaimed disciples of Taufik Ibragim, who held positions in DUMRF (Moscow) and DUMRT (in Kazan, Tatarstan), respectively.

The *agents provocateurs* were two young Muslim officials who had studied under Ibragim's supervision (especially at the Moscow Islamic Institute). One of them was Rustam Batyr (Batrov, b. 1978), who presented himself as a candidate for the election of a new mufti of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of the Republic of Tatarstan (DUMRT) in 2013.⁹⁰ In Tatarstan, the mufti is elected by delegates from the mosque communities; however, the leadership of the muftiate – and probably Tatarstan's political leadership in the background – prevented Batyr from being nominated as a candidate, perhaps to avoid a reformist axis between Moscow (DUMRF) and Kazan (DUMRT). Eventually, the congregation elected the young Kamil' Samigullin (b. 1985), a scholar until then associated with the Istanbul-based Ismail-Ağa network of

88 *Idem*, "Rossiiskoe musul'manstvo".

89 *Idem*, "Intellektual'nyi dialog kak sredstvo preodoleniia radikalizma", *IslamRF.ru*, 17 December 2016. <http://islamdumpsb.ru/article/muhtasib-muhetdin-intellektualnyj-dialog-kak-sredstvo-preodoleniya-radikalizma>.

90 Minvaleev, Arslan et al., "Muftii iz 'Mirnogo'", *Biznes-Online*, 5 March 2013. <https://www.business-gazeta.ru/article/76292>.

the Naqshbandiyya-Khālidiyya Sufi brotherhood. Samigullin currently stands for a course that can be described as reviving the classical Ḥanafī and Sufi heritage (in opposition to DUMRF in Moscow). Batyr was made one of Samigullin's deputy muftis.

In February 2017, Batyr published a piece in a prominent Kazan online newspaper, in which he used arguments from Ibragim's recent book to criticize what he called the reigning misconception about the Ḥanafī school. In his opinion, what Russia's Islamic authorities promote is merely "a medieval interpretation of [Abū Ḥanīfa's] teaching", and very different from the flexible approaches of the school's namesake and founder. Batyr argues, for instance, that Abū Ḥanīfa (d. 767) allowed Muslims to perform the regular prayer (*namāz*) in languages other than Qur'ānic Arabic.⁹¹ In Moscow, Mukhetdinov immediately praised Batyr for his courage.⁹² But Batyr's publication caused a public scandal, and Mufti Samigullin seized the opportunity to remove Batyr from his position as first deputy mufti.⁹³

In the subsequent months, Batyr continued to defend his arguments and began to link them strongly to Taufik Ibragim and the Tatar heritage of *ijtihād*. In one internet article, Batyr quoted Ibragim reproaching the Kazan Tatar scholarly elites with the words: "You just celebrate Marjānī's anniversaries, but you are not able to publish his works!"⁹⁴ This provocation has a certain foundation: while Tatar academic and Islamic scholars regard the Kazan theologian Shihāb al-Dīn Marjānī (1818–89) as a founding father of Tatar religious thought and even Tatar identity (the Institute of History of the Tatarstani Academy of Sciences is named after Marjānī), Tatar academic historians and religious scholars so far have edited, studied, and published only Marjānī's Tatar-language historical works,⁹⁵ neglecting most of his many theological and juridical works in Arabic.⁹⁶ The official removal of Batyr from his function in

91 Rustam Batyr, "Uchenie Abu Khanify popalo v DUM RT pod neglasnyi zapret?", *Biznes-Online*, 25 February 2017. <https://www.business-gazeta.ru/article/338218>.

92 El'dar Sabitov, "Islam, Tatarstan i istoricheskoe pereput'e", *Portal-Credo*, 8 March 2017. <https://www.portal-credo.ru/site/?act=fresh&id=1903>.

93 Gleb Postnov, "Muftii Tatarstana ostaetsia bez kliuচেvykh zamestitelei", *Nezavisimaia Gazeta*, 16 February 2017. http://www.ng.ru/regions/2017-02-16/5_6930_tatarstan.html.

94 Batyr, "Taufik Ibragim: 'Vy lish' prazduete iubilei Mardzhani'".

95 E.g. Shihabeddin Märjani, *Möstäfad-el-äxbar fi äxvali Qazan vä Bolgar*, translated into modern Tatar and edited by Änvär Xäyrullin (Kazan: Tatarskoe knizhnoe izdatel'stvo, 1989); Shikhabutdin Mardzhani, *Iz vlechenie vestei o sostoianii Kazani i Bulgara (Mustafad al-akhbar fi akhvali Kazan va Bulgar)*, translated into Russian by Ramil' K. Adygamov (Kazan: Fän, 2005).

96 So far only one of Marjānī's Arabic works, *al-Ḥikma al-bāligha*, has been translated into Russian: Sh. Mardzhani, *Zrelaia mudrost' v raz'iasnenii dogmatov an-Nasafi (al-Khikma*

DUMRT shows that independent statements by Islamic functionaries are punished in particular when they demand flexibility in questions of the Islamic ritual (here, Batyr's suggestion that the prayer can be conducted in Tatar instead of Arabic – a suggestion that, to the best of our knowledge, does not go back to Taufik Ibragim's published works). The conservative ritual, it seems, is still the building block of "Ḥanafī traditionalism", and orthopraxy remains the public symbol for loyalty to the *madhhab*.

A similar case soon unfolded in Moscow around one of DUMRF's second-tier functionaries, Arslan Sadriev (b. 1973), also recognized as Ibragim's disciple.⁹⁷ Sadriev served as DUMRF's mufti of the Central Federal district (*Tsentrāl'nyi Federal'nyi okrug*), a huge chunk of European Russia that includes Moscow area. In an interview with Batyr in 2017, Sadriev argued that the traditional rules for establishing the time slots for the five daily prayers, as well as for the fasting times in Ramadan, had been designed for the Arabs of Muḥammad's time, to whose daily life rhythm they made perfect sense. But for Russia's Muslims, in the northern hemisphere, they bring unreasonable difficulties: Sadriev pointed out that Russia's Muslims often have to conduct several prayers during one and the same night. Similarly, Russia's long summer days make the Ramadan fasting (when eating is allowed only after the advent of darkness) much more difficult than it is the case in the Arab world. Basing himself on the conviction that God's intention was to make Islam "easy", Sadriev suggested leaving the determination of prayer and fasting times to the discretion of the individual believer.⁹⁸ While Sadriev did not refer to Ibragim, it is clear that his argument is in congruence with the latter's insistence on God's intention to make Islam

al-baliga), foreword and Russian translation by Damir Shagaviev (Kazan: Tatarskoe knizhnoe izdatel'stvo, 2008). The Kazan academic scholar Shagaviev has been preparing a translation of Marjānī's other major Arabic work, *Nāzūrat al-ḥaqq*. Cf. Damir A. Shagaviev, "Bogoslovskii traktat Shikhab ad-Dina al-Mardzhani 'Nazurat al-khakk'", *Islam v sovremennom mire*, 12:1 (2016), 41–48. So far, only the first chapter has been published: Shikhabutdin Mardzhani, "Nazurat al-khakk [glava 1]. Vstupleniye (*al-mukaddima*). Perevod s arabskogo iaz., sn. i komment. D. A. Shagavieva", *Islam v sovremennom mire* 12:1 (2016), 49–54.

97 E.g., "Rektor RII ob'iasnil raznitsu mezhdu Taufikom Ibragimom i ego uchenikami – Batrovym i Sadrievym", *IslamNews*, 5 July 2017. <https://islamnews.ru/news-rektor-rii-objasn timeraznicu-mezhdu-tau>.

98 Rustam Batyr, "Arslan Sadriev: Za veka bytovaniia islama namaz iz sredstva prevratilsia v tsel", *Biznes-Online*, 11 June 2017. <https://www.business-gazeta.ru/article/348407>. On modernist interpretations of the fixation of the Ramadan fasting in the North, see Rainer Brunner, "Entre devoir religieux et repère d'identité – quelques observations autour du jeûne dans l'islam moderne", in: *Affamés volontaires. Les monothéismes et le jeûne: austérités religieuses et privations alimentaires dans une perspective comparative*, ed. Sylvio de Franceschi et al. (Limoges: Presses universitaires de Limoges, 2020), 425–41, here 437f.

not overly difficult; and Sadriev's call for individual solutions in the question of the daily prayers comes close to Marjānī's opinion regarding the night prayer (*al-‘ishā*'), about which Marjānī had reasoned that the time of its performance is a matter of *ijtihād*.⁹⁹ With such statements, Sadriev had crossed a red line: on the same day of the publication, his boss, DUMRF Mufti Ravil' Gainutdin, dismissed Sadriev from his position as regional mufti. In Gainutdin's words, Sadriev had given an "illiterate (*negramotnoe*) interpretation of Islamic law" that "attacked the true values of Islam" and that "distorted the teaching of the religious-legal schools-*madhhabs*, which were created by the great imams on the basis of the Qur'ān and the Sunna". Mufti Gainutdin accused Sadriev also for "his attempt to drive a wedge between Muslims" and characterized Sadriev's interpretation as "an obvious heresy (*ochevidnaia eres*)"¹⁰⁰ – using a term that stems from Orthodox theology.

These conflicts drew Ibragim into a dispute among leading co-workers of the Moscow and Tatarstani muftiates and further politicized his work. Ibragim does not conceal his contacts with Sadriev, Batyr, and Mukhetdinov, but he insists on their autonomy as public thinkers. Sharing their positive views of the twentieth-century Jadids' "reformation platform", Ibragim implicitly recognizes their potential to become Muslim "renovationists".¹⁰¹ Curiously, Ibragim refers to the new generation of Islamic reformists by the term *obnovlentsy*, thereby implying commonalities with the Orthodox Christian *obnovlenchestvo* movement¹⁰² that called for religious reforms within the Russian Orthodox Church in the early twentieth century. Ibragim's choice of borrowing a term from the Russian Orthodox lexicon for describing an Islamic phenomenon is apparently part of a broader strategy to draw Islam closer to Russia's dominant religion and to stress the similarities and common origins.¹⁰³

99 Nathan Spannaus, *Preserving Islamic Tradition: Abū Naṣr Qūrṣāwī and the Beginnings of Modern Reformism* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 88–89.

100 "Muftii Sheikh Ravil' Gainutdin lishil dukhovnogo sana Arslana Sadrieva". Official website of the Council of Muftis, 11 June 2017. <https://www.muslim.ru/articles/280/18572/>.

101 Renat Bekkin, "Taufik Ibragim: 'V Rossii, k sozhaleniiu, musul'mane do diskussii eshche ne dorosli'", *Real'noe vremia*, 18 December 2018. <https://realnoevremya.ru/articles/123702-intervyu-s-islamovedom-taufikom-ibragimom>.

102 Cf. Renat Bekkin, "Musul'mane Rossii: mezhdū 'rasulianami' i 'obnovlentsami', *Real'noe vremia*, 29 December 2017. <https://realnoevremya.ru/articles/85357-musulmane-rossii-mezhdū-rasulianami-i-obnovlencami>.

103 The Orthodox *obnovlenchestvo* is remembered above all for flirtations with the Bolsheviks in the 1920s, but seemingly an actualization of this particular memory is not intended by Ibragim. On the various views in Russian historiography regarding this movement, see, e.g., Valerii Lavrinov, "Istoriografiia obnovlencheskogo dvizheniia v Russkoi pravoslavnoi

Over the years, Islamic functionaries from regional muftiates, especially in Russia's highly conservative North Caucasus, have repeatedly identified Taufik Ibragim as their enemy and, at times, have accused him of heresy or even atheism.¹⁰⁴ Now, however, he is increasingly attacked also in Moscow and Kazan. At a public debate at Kazan Federal University in November 2017, Ibragim was cornered by heavyweights such as the Qur'ān translator El'mir Kuliev and the rector of the Islamic Academy in Bolghar, Rafik Mukhametshin;¹⁰⁵ Ibragim's opponents were supported by the moderator of the event, the Muslim journalist Orkhan Dzhemal' (who a year later lost his life during an investigative mission in the Central African Republic).¹⁰⁶ In the months following this debate, several mainstream Russian-speaking Islamic media issued material on the dangers of what now became referred to as "Qur'anists" (Rus. *koranity*), thereby linking Ibragim's teaching to various groups and thinkers in the Muslim world who limit or reject the authority of the Sunna and *ḥadīth*.¹⁰⁷ Thus, DUMRF's "liberal turn" to Ibragim's ideas gave ammunition to its opponents. Under their pressure, also DUMRF issued a *fatwā* in 2018 against the "Qur'anists", identifying them as a heretic sect.¹⁰⁸ To be sure, several Islamic thinkers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, from India to Egypt, have challenged or rejected the authenticity and legal value of the Sunna and have been branded (or understood themselves) as *Qur'āniyyūn*, "Qur'anists". And as Rainer Brunner has

tserkvi v 1920-1940-e gody", *Vestnik ChelGU* 24 (2008), 151–58. For the changing relations between languages and religions in Russia, see now Gulnaz Sibgatullina, *Languages of Islam and Christianity in Post-Soviet Russia* (Leiden: Brill Rodopi, 2020).

- 104 One of these was Kuramukhammad Ramazanov (1956–2007), a senior figure in the Naqshbandiyya-dominated Dagestani muftiate, see his "Komu verit': Taufiku Ibragimu ili Koranu?", *Rodon*, 7 December 2007. <http://www.rodon.org/itk/ova.htm>. Ramazanov stood at the forefront of the fight against extremism and lost his life in a terrorist attack. On Ramazanov's pro-Sufi and "anti-Wahhabi" agenda, see Kemper and Shikhaliyev, "Islam and Political Violence in Post-Soviet Dagestan", 129–33.
- 105 Mukhametshin later invited a Syrian *ḥadīth* expert, Badī' al-Sayyid al-Laḥḥām, to Bolghar to give a lecture on the value of Sunna. Cf. Rustam Batyr, "Zachem Bolgarskoi akademii nuzhny miasniki?", *Business-Online*, 3 February 2018. <https://business-gazeta.ru/article/371567>.
- 106 Rustam Batyr, "Islamskii 'Versus Battl': srednevekov'e protiv modernizatsii", *Business-Online*, 25 November 2017. <https://business-gazeta.ru/article/364948>.
- 107 E.g., Mukhammad Karachai, "Koranizm vs Koran i Sunna", *Alif-TV*, 21 August 2019. <https://alif.tv/koranizm-vs-koran-i-sunna-muhammad-karachaj/>; "Chto zabyli sektanty v Bolgarskoi islamskoi akademii?", *Ansar*, 17 August 2018. <http://www.ansar.ru/analytics/koranity-v-bolgarskoj-akademii>. On contemporary Qur'anism, see Aisha Musa, "The Qur'anists", *Religion Compass* 4 (2010), 12–21.
- 108 "Otritsaiushchie Sunnu vpadaui v neverie", *Ansar*, 15 February 2018. <http://www.ansar.ru/analytics/otricayushhie-sunnu-vpadayut-v-everie>.

demonstrated, for several of them the rejection of the *ḥadīth* body appears as a way to rid society from the increasing power of the orthodox scholars, from patriarchy, misogyny, and repression¹⁰⁹ – goals that Taufik Ibragim would certainly support. But there is no indication that Ibragim or his disciples were in contact with any of the self-proclaimed “Qur’ānists” in the Muslim world or in their various places of exile, or that he would share their interpretation of the Qur’ān as the sole source of Islam.

The 2018 Russian *fatwā* against the “Qur’ānists” did not mention any names (thereby avoiding the *takfir* [“excommunication”] of any living person), but it was evident that the document targeted Ibragim and the group around him. Marietta Stepaniants, Ibragim’s philosopher colleague at the Russian Academy of Sciences, denounced the backlash against the philosopher and his disciples, urging that a safe space be created for Islamic theological debate. Rightfully, she pointed to the two conflicting profiles that contemporary Muslim public figures have to maintain: that of an actor in the political arena, and that of a participant in theological polemics.¹¹⁰ The two dimensions – political and religious – are inherently intertwined in the very “traditionalism” paradigm; therefore, challenging established Islamic rituals (in the case of Ibragim’s disciples, the rules regarding prayer and fasting) becomes as risky as criticizing the Islamic authorities.

Conclusion

In many Muslim-majority countries, reformist scholars of the Qur’ān find themselves under enormous pressure from the state and society. The Egyptian Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd, to take just one prominent example, was declared an apostate and forcibly divorced from his wife; death threats forced him to take refuge in Europe. The case of Taufik Ibragim, a Syrian scholar operating in Muslim-minority Russia, is different. His liberal approach has enjoyed the support not only of Russia’s academic Islamic studies elite but also, for many years, of Russia’s major Islamic establishment in Moscow, DUMRF. Ibragim’s “Qur’ānic humanism” is not just a hermeneutical exercise of Qur’ān interpretation but an educational endeavor against radical Islam, and also a plea for the

109 Rainer Brunner, “Quelques débats récents autour du hadith en Islam sunnite”, in *Controverses sur les écritures canoniques de l’Islam*, ed. Daniel De Smet and Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 2014), 373–428.

110 Marietta Stepaniants, “Na puti preodoleniia stereotipov (Faktozy provokatsii islamofobii)”, *Islam v sovremennom mire* 15:2 (2019), 121–34, here 131.

acceptance of Islam by Russian society. But Russia's political doctrine of "traditionalism" – equally meant to combat radicalization, albeit on the opposite approach to the Islamic heritage – has made Ibragim's work subject to political games.

His conservative opponents criticize Ibragim for embracing the "fundamentalist" method of the Salafis – namely, by rejecting the centuries of *hadīth* studies in favor of direct access to the Qur'ān. In response, and almost jokingly, Ibragim challenges the reigning logic, which portrays "traditionalism" as the only viable alternative to Salafism:

In reality, all reformers were Salafis, in the sense that all called for a return to the original period when the religion was founded [...]. This is the aim of all reform, and the only possible one, the only one that promises success. This is why both Muḥammad 'Abduh and [Jamāl al-Dīn] al-Afghānī were Salafis, but also [the Tatar theologian Shihāb al-Dīn] al-Marjānī. [...] This is why we should not allow the Wahhābīs to usurp this term. What is more, any Muslim has to be a Salafi. What else? Would any normal person who believes in Islam not pay respect to the first Muslims, not follow their path?¹¹¹

Ibragim's thought not only feeds from 'Abduh's reformism but is also firmly rooted in the Russian/Soviet tradition of Orientology. We have argued that the genesis of his ideas needs to be seen in the context of late Soviet scholarly attempts to overcome the anti-Islamic clichés that dominated Stalinist historiography. While Ibragim's intellectual trajectory started with Marxist Arabic philosophy, his "Qur'ānic humanism" also absorbed Tatar Jadid concepts, and can thus also be presented as a home-grown, Russian product.

Taufik Ibragim's shield against open *takfīr* charges is a secular academic institution – namely, the Institute of Oriental Studies, to which he continues to be affiliated. As we have shown, this academic standing goes back to the reputation he earned for his early work on *kalām*. His "Qur'ānic humanism" is difficult to attack directly as long as it is in congruence with Russia's policies against "Islamic radicalism", and as long as it does not directly reject what believers think are fundamental tenets of Islam.

This red line was crossed by his two maverick disciples. Batyr's and Sadriev's assertive reflections on the conditionality of prayer and fasting times led to a public witch hunt against them as "Qur'ānists" – in Russia, a new rhetorical foil to discredit critics of "traditionalism", often with the allegation that Ibragim is their mastermind. The recent vitriolic attacks on reformist voices in Moscow and Kazan are meant to discredit not only Ibragim but also the historical heritage of the Tatar Jadids, many of whom equally advocated a renewed,

111 Batyr, "Taufik Ibragim: 'Musul'manin ne mozhet ne byt' salafitom".

reason-based approach to the Qur'ān, and who have so far been part and parcel of Tatar historical heritage.¹¹² As the pendulum of mainstream Islam swings back from moderate liberalization to denouncing perceived enemies, the public space for religious debate in Russia is being narrowed down.

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¹¹² Coincidentally, this comes at a time when Jadidocentrism is also under heavy attack by Western scholarship, although for completely different reasons. For the general arguments see Devin DeWeese, "It was a Dark and Stagnant Night ('til the Jadids Brought the Light): Clichés, Biases, and False Dichotomies in the Intellectual History of Central Asia", *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 59:1-2 (2016), 37-92.