

Public spaces and inner worlds: Emplaced askesis and architectures of the soul among Tatarstani Muslims

Ethnicities

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Abstract

The emergence of Islamic piety movements in post-Soviet Tatarstan has set afoot two parallel processes: (1) religion has progressively left the narrow sphere to which it was relegated during the Soviet era – old age, the private domain and ethnically connoted rural contexts – through a series of steps including the early appearance of makeshift shops catering to a Muslim clientele, the boom of self-cultivation techniques among the region's youthful Muslim middle class, the subsequent development of a full-blown halal industry and the appearance of a whole range of new places for pietists. The deprivatisation of Islam has thus changed the urban fabric of Tatarstan, making Islamic piety visible in cities and towns. Concomitantly, (2) the 'inner world' – the soul (*nafs*), self or subjectivity – of Muslims has taken centre stage as one of the most (if not the most) central sites of religious life, the main interface for encountering the divine and a 'space' that needs constant maintenance through discipline and ascetical practice (*askesis*) framed in terms of care of one's soul. Thus, the appearance of new 'outside' spaces (halal places) appears to correspond to the configuration of new 'inside' spaces (the subjectivity of religionists). This paper aims to explore this correspondence and to investigate its anthropological implications.

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Introduction

The post-Soviet era has ushered in the flourishing of Islamic piety trends in Inner Russia's Muslim-majority Tatarstan Republic. These trends, which I collectively refer to using terms such as 'halal movement'¹ (Benussi, 2018b) or 'halal milieu', promote an ethicised understanding of religion which is connected to two simultaneous processes of spatial reconfiguration of Islam among the Republic's Muslims.

The first process is the 'deprivatisation' of Islam (Casanova, 1994), which has brought religion to the forefront of public life, resulting in the proliferation of more or less permanent spaces of consumption, sociality and leisure in which Islamic lives are lived in the public eye. The second process is a shift of emphasis toward the self as a site of reflexive discovery and moral restructuring. It has configured the 'inner world' (*vnutrenny mir*) as a space of primary importance for Muslims – not only as the principal locus in which closeness with the divine is experienced, but also as a 'territory' that requires constant tidying up and maintenance.

Although the two trends have generated seemingly incommensurable types of 'spaces' – in one case physical, in the other 'inner' – this paper argues that they are manifestations of the same phenomenon, that is, the success of piety movements that posit Islam not as a figure of the ethno-national moral community, but as a project involving the individual cultivation of virtues, habits and skills on the path of salvation (cf. Asad, 2009). In post-Soviet Tatarstan, this has meant the consolidation of a new 'halal landscape' in which ethical Islamic lives can be pursued, as well as the emergence of interiorising discourses framing religious life primarily in terms of inner discipline and labour over one's 'soul'. As we shall see, the body is the locus in which the interconnectedness of these two facets of Islam's ethicisation is most clearly manifest.

The deprivatisation of Islam*The Soviet period: Islam marginalised and geriatricised*

The first part of this paper delineates the historical trajectory of post-Soviet halal landscapes. In this section, I will set the scene into which Sunni piety movements, with their emphasis on the restructuring of Muslims' inner worlds, irrupted after the sudden collapse of the socialist experiment in Tatarstan.

As Johan Rasanayagam (2011: 71, quoting John and Jean Comaroff) puts it, the Soviets achieved ‘mastery over the mundane’ across the Muslim-majority regions of the Union by the 1970s. Compared to Central Asia and the Caucasus, this is particularly true of Tatarstan as historical, geographical and structural factors contributed to making this region particularly porous to the penetration of Soviet ideological and governmental state apparatuses. State atheism may not have fully colonised the deepest recesses of the citizenry’s souls, but under the Communist Party’s rule, Islam retreated to the margins of the public sphere and into the spheres of the household, rurality and old age. Despite their endeavours in pursuit of an atheistic society, however, the Soviets did not manage to kill God. In retrospective accounts of Islam under late Soviet rule, my senior Tatar informants would simply tell me, ‘in the depths of our hearts, we believed’, a formulation that is consistent with Mikhail Epstein’s notion of Soviet-era ‘minimal religion’ (1999a, 1999b). The conviction that a benign if often unspecific Being was watching over human events was cultivated in the privacy of intimate, family life, and did not hinder participation in a fully secularized public sphere.

If relatively few Soviet citizens with a Muslim background were eager to wholeheartedly embrace atheist materialism, fewer still called themselves Muslims by conviction.² Proverbially unreliable as they are, Soviet-era surveys depict a convincing general picture. The percentage of people who considered themselves believers was invariably higher in rural areas than in towns and cities.³ Even in villages, the regime’s targeting of village mosques ensured that public spaces had few, if any, outwards signs of religious life. The elderly were by far the most religious sector of the Soviet Muslim population. A 1973 survey of a Central Asian region shows that the percentage of believers ‘by conviction’ was 0 among 18- to 42-year-old respondents, rising to 5.9 in the 42–54 age group, and soaring to 31.6 among those over 62 (Bazarbaev, 1973). Contemporary research in the Caucasus reveals that 50% of pensioners were ‘very religious’ and 29% ‘quite religious’ (Makatov, 1974). Tatarstan seems to conform to this model, judging by my interlocutors’ oft-repeated and universally accepted statement that, in the late Soviet era, religion was seen as the monopoly of older people (*babays*). Consider the following interview snippets, recorded during conversations with pious Muslims:

Before the 1990s, people would say, ‘You’re young, what would you want to go to the mosque for? You’ll have plenty of time to pray when you retire!’ Going to the mosque was old people’s business. Only *babays* would attend the mosque. Sometimes the youth would join in for large religious festivals. But discreetly. Only on festivals. It was not a good thing to be there. It was frowned upon. The state would keep an eye out, take note of the attendees, and reprimand them.

My mother used to say that I could wear the headscarf later, when I grew old: ‘There is time later to mull over one’s sins once you’re retired.’ There was this idea that one first gets old, then becomes pious. A lot of people still think that only grannies should

be God-fearing. [...] The idea that young people may don the veil or prey upsets many.

One should be careful not to explain the age-specific dimension of Soviet-era Islam on the grounds that Muslim elders were 'by inertia' predisposed to carry on the beliefs of their ancestors on account of personal attachments and memories of a pre-atheist era. Even less convincing is the theory, favoured by Soviet sociologists, that the embracing of religion among the elderly was simply a matter of opportunistic mimesis or conformism.⁴ My ethnographic data suggest that far from passively regurgitating received, inert knowledge, or merely pursuing utilitarian strategies, Muslim retirees' commitment to Islam was genuine, and entailed an appraisal of past sins and a rethinking (*pereosmishlenie*) of their lives. The following is the sympathetic account of a member of Tübän Kama's mosque leadership who was a teenager in the 1980s:

[Tübän Kama's] central mosque opened in 1996. Before mosques started opening, there were only the elders (*do mecheti, byly babay*). During Perestroika, Gorbachev opened religion's doors, although cautiously... *babays* set up [religious] circles in private apartments. *Babay*s were older men and women who had thoughtfully changed their lives after retirement (*vyshly na pensyu, pereosmistiv svoyu zhizn'*), and became closer to religion.

Retirement amounted to the relinquishment of state-imposed Soviet models of socialist personhood. The Soviet ideal of a laborious, materialist-minded, collective-oriented and implicitly *youthful* citizen-worker applied less stringently past the age threshold of governmentalized productivity. At that stage, the state averted its disciplining gaze, which allowed for the opening up of fresh possibilities. This dynamic was at play among other faith groups as well: in his study of Old Believer communities in the Ural region, Douglas Rogers (2009) has described how after a lifetime of being good, secular Soviet citizens, Old Believer retirees would embrace their new roles as elders and thereby pursue the strictest Christian asceticism. This change gave individuals unprecedented leeway for self-cultivation – and again, Rogers's compelling description of the sincerity and moral depth of Old Believer elders provides an interesting point of comparison.

Perestroika: The elders strike back. Late-Soviet *babays* created fertile ground for the Islamic expansion of the 1990s. Muslim elders would preserve and circulate snippets of Islamic praxis and ethos at the grassroots level. *Babay*s played an important role in introducing their grandchildren to Islam (on the prominent role played by grandparents in Soviet upbringing, see Caldwell, 2004: 67, 116; Merridale, 2001: 246). Today, many young Muslims acknowledge that their first exposure to religion came from their grandparents. Additionally, older religionists would keep themselves busy with a range of spiritual activities and, as soon as the state relaxed its grip on religion, seized the opportunity to organise autonomous religious

networks, prefiguring the establishment of full-blown mosque communities and initiating the deprivatisation of Islam in Tatarstan.

Until Perestroika, official (state-controlled) mosques in Tatarstani towns like Tübän Kama were both socially marginal and few and far between, meaning that the elders' presence in the public sphere was not particularly prominent or visible. Grassroots Islamic networks existed primarily within the private sphere. As the quote from the mosque leader above explains, elderly Muslims would gather in private apartments, normally on the occasion of convivial gatherings 'sanctified' by invocations and the reading of holy writ (*Quran aṣī*). Commemorative meals featuring such sacred elements were often held in remembrance of deceased relatives and neighbours (*pominki*). Many elders also began to regularly perform *namaz* (Islamic contact prayer).

For many of these people, embarking on a new spiritual course implied a change in dietary habits: 'it would have been meaningless for *babays* to take up *namaz* (prayer) and keep eating pork'. While ideas of halal and haram were far from widespread among Muslims in the late Soviet era (Benussi, forthcoming), Tübän Kama's elders were aware that eating the kind of meat available through institutional retailers would have annulled their spiritual strivings. Their younger relatives accepted this. As one witness of this era told me, 'it was *ğadūt* (customary) to serve special food to the elders. Hosts often cooked a separate meal, using separate pots and separate tableware, for visiting *babays*':

Babays demanded that only 'special' meat be served at banquets. These *babays* were the first to remind their fellow Tatars to get their meat from the countryside. Back then [in the 1980s], there was no understanding of halal, but *babays* knew that only village meat could be considered more or less permissible. This is just because the immemorial Muslim [slaughtering] traditions had survived only in Tatar villages, although villagers themselves followed them without any particular theological awareness – that was literally just the only way they knew how to [slaughter animals].

The apartment-based religious networks, confined as they were to the private sphere, simultaneously transcended enclosed domestic spaces and articulated collective social constellations. In a sense, therefore, these networks can retrospectively be seen as embryonic experimentations in public life that prefigured the re-emergence of localised Islamic congregations or *mahallas* (Mukhammetshin, 2016). This potential for publicness found expression during Perestroika. The late 1980s witnessed a transition towards deprivatised religion, ushering in what one interviewee called the 'era of the prefabricated cabins (*vagonchiki*)'. In places like Tübän Kama, pious elderly Tatars obtained permission to set up a handful of prefabricated cabins in a corner of a large public park, where they would gather and perform religious activities – from the study of scripture, to collective prayers, to the vending of 'village meat' in makeshift shops. A few years later, in 1996, Tübän Kama's imposing new mosque was erected on the very portion of land where the elders' prefabricated cabins had once stood – a powerful statement

about Islam's newfound role in the public life of the city and the region more generally. As the imam told me, 'the construction of our mosque reminded many [secular] Tatars that Islam existed, not only in history but as something real, a religion, as a movement, a direction'.

The 'halal boom'. Many in Tübän Kama are (plausibly) convinced that generous donations from the Gulf region played an important role in the realisation of the mosque project. This is indicative of the new global landscape of which Tübän Kama's Muslim community became a part of after the collapse of the two-bloc order. This is not the place to rehearse the argument about the friction between *babays* and the post-Soviet generation of scripturalist, cosmopolitan, theology- and halal-conscious, occasionally maximalist younger Muslims (see also Benussi, 2018a). I shall simply touch on a spatialised aspect of this tension, namely these groups' different approaches to mosques as community spaces.

In Tübän Kama, *babays* and younger Muslims have been at loggerheads over proper mosque attire, with elders only entering mosques in formal clothes, and youngsters dressing casually: '*Babays* say, "t-shirts are disrespectful!" Youths snap back, "ties and suits are haram!" These kinds of things. Youths would walk in barefoot, sock-wearing *babays* glaring at them. Emotions run high.' While my interlocutor explained the issue in terms of the former group's having plenty of free time to dress up and the latter's always being busy with work and family issues, I think another factor was at play here. For the elders, mosques are a somewhat enchanted or at least solemn place, associated with the sacred – in a Durkheimian sense, something special, apart from the quotidian. Their 'respect' is shot through with a certain familiar reverence. For the piety-oriented youths, however, mosques are not inherently sacred or solemn. In a classically Weberian inner-worldly asceticism scenario, the world, including mosques (with the partial exception of Hajj activities, which I cannot discuss here), is understood as a place in which Muslims rationally pursue self-cultivation. There are certain basic rules concerning behaviour in places of worship (such as removing shoes), but mosques are quite simply ad-hoc locales for collective and individual prayer. This activity is understood as an unexceptional everyday practice of self-cultivation, which in principle can be carried out almost anywhere – and during which communion with a transcendental divine is experienced inwardly, if at all. The sacred is not to be encountered in a 'concentrated' form in certain solemn or set-apart locales such as mosques, shrines or sacred springs, which require a reverent attitude. Piety-oriented Muslims' specific conception of the relationship between self, space and the divine will become clearer in the second part of this article.

In spite of a number of important differences between these generations, however, the spatial continuity between *vagonchiki* and mosques, which is emphasised and extolled by the mosque leadership, suggests that the post-Soviet halal boom has a vital link to the late-Soviet civil-society experimentations pioneered by Tatar elders. Attached to Tübän Kama's new mosque is a shop that specialises in halal products and religious paraphernalia. Muslim consumers, however, can now find

suitable products in numerous supermarkets and cafes. Over the past decade, a consciously halal subtext has been woven directly into the fabric of Tübän Kama, Kazan and other Tatarstani cities, as the categories of halal and haram have crystallised, gaining much prominence in Tatarstan's public discourse.

A spate of services and establishments catering to the demands of Muslim customers have sprung up and changed city landscapes, a transformation spear-headed by the new, enterprising generation of mosque-goers and that rapidly superseded the *babays'* networks and *vagonchicki*. Having described this process elsewhere (Benussi, forthcoming), I will not rehearse the details in this article. Suffice it to say that as this transformation transpired, halal and haram became veritable buzzwords among Tatarstan's Muslims. These buzzwords are extremely visible in the public sphere, as is powerfully demonstrated by instances such as a liquor shop in a town near Kazan being renamed 'Haram'. Of course, halal lifestyles generate demands beyond the sphere of stuff: in Tübän Kama, for instance, mosque-coordinated Muslim consumer groups hire out sports facilities and event venues on a regular basis to exercise or gather in shari'a-compliant ways. Across Inner Russia, business ideas involving halal-positive gyms, hotels, hair salons and smartphone apps are increasingly tested.

If the era of halal entrepreneurship has brought Islam to Inner Russia's post-socialist marketplace, making it an economic force to be reckoned with,⁵ since the mid-2000s the deprivatisation of Islam has increasingly involved state institutions as well. In the cautious words of Tübän Kama's mosque leader:

By that time, [young mosque community members] started having kids, so they take their kids to kindergarten, and of course expect halal food to be provided. And they want pedagogues to dress properly, not ostentatiously or provocatively. There was no conflict [with the administration], absolutely, it is just that Muslims wanted something different, something with higher standards. So, [our mosque community] submitted our project to the municipal education board. We based it on the idea of 'spiritual-moral educational groups' (*ädäp-äxlaq törkennäre*). We did not call for shari'a or anything, not at all – we just have our own traditions and values we want to raise our children in. That was only a beginning. It turned out that many parents in town wanted a similar arrangement for their kids. Then what happens? Kids grow and go to school! So, [Islam] has reached schools and kindergartens through agreement [with local institutions]. We do not ask for much – halal food, a bit of sex separation in school activities, and a bit of moral guidance. Some educators wear headscarves, and of course they do not do their work any worse.

The mosque leadership has been careful in its negotiations with the authorities, strategically couching its requests in the state-approved idiom of Tatar 'tradition' rather than the 'Islamic' idiom of shari'a (cf. Benussi, 2018b). The conservative segment of the halal milieu tends to deem this strategy insufficient, with some propounding home schooling and greater self-segregation rather than engagement with institutions. Segments of the Russian and secular Tatar public, on the other

hand, resent the ‘bearded ones’ for their assertiveness. The deprivatisation of Islam in Tatarstan is a fraught process, which has nonetheless had a systemic impact on spaces of consumption, leisure, education, and public life far beyond the mere appearance of new mosques in Tatarstani cities – a halalified Habermasian scenario.

Charles Hirschkind (2006) has noted that ethicised religious movements tend to view public spaces as sites of ethical labour and pedagogical intervention, thus resisting the assumption, dominant in secular arrangements, that the public sphere is by definition ethically neutral and pluralist. Hirschkind defines such movements as ‘counterpublics’. Tatarstan’s halal milieu follows this model in that to its members, all forms of conduct – including consumption, sociality and public life in general – are subject to divine laws. Halal infrastructure in Tatarstan, as elsewhere, serves the purpose of facilitating obedient conduct beyond the private, domestic sphere of pietists. As elsewhere, the emergence of an Islamic counterpublic has greatly alarmed members of the mainstream public and local state apparatuses.

The deprivatisation of Islam in Tatarstan can be seen as a form of counter-secularisation, that is, a rupture with and reaction to this post-socialist region’s pre-existing order (Karpov, 2010). The appearance of ‘faith-related material structures’, including mosques and halal shops, the growing presence of Islam in a range of public spheres (consumption, leisure, etc.), and the partial ‘rapprochement’ between ostensibly secular institutions (such as schools) and segments of the piety movements, can all be read as concomitant (although not necessarily integrated) processes of desecularisation (Karpov, 2010: 250). Such processes, all the more unsettling as they unfold ‘from below’, can be interpreted as a challenge to Tatarstan’s regime, which aspires to keep post-Soviet desecularisation trends within limits established in concert with Moscow. Having explored the halal movement’s relationship with the state in other contributions (Benussi, 2018b), in the second part of this piece I set out to illustrate how dynamics of societal transformation have proceeded hand in hand with changes to the architecture of Muslims’ selves.

New Islamic selfhood

Inner dialogues

Tatarstan’s developing halal cityscape is made up of a constellation of settings and locales in which the cultivation of Muslim personhoods can be pursued safely, unselfconsciously and even leisurely, in the company of one’s co-religionists (cf. Deeb and Harb, 2013). In the remainder of this paper, I shall argue that the irruption of Islam in the public sphere, with the attendant transformation of infrastructures and cityscapes, has unfolded simultaneously with a rise in the prominence of the self-reflective, individual, sovereign and plastic self as a primary site of religious life. These two processes can be seen as parallel outcomes of the success of Sunni piety trends in the region.

I wish to emphasise that I am not suggesting that the spread of Islamic piety movements ‘imported’ self-reflexive subjectivity into a context that had previously ignored it altogether – that would be factually wrong. Russia has long had rich emic cultural repertoires concerning the ‘soul’, the ‘heart’ and the ‘mind’ (Pesman, 2000; Wierzbicka, 1992), which are shared by its Muslim populations. The Soviet experience itself cannot be appreciated by focusing solely on the ‘collective’ and disregarding the ‘individual’ (Kharkhordin, 1999), even though the latter was ideologically overdetermined and an excessive focus on the self was considered suspicious (Kharkhordin, 1999: 192, 253; Miller, 1998: 70). Of course, the Islamic world also boasts an age-old tradition of enquiry into and stewardship of the human soul (*nafs*, sometimes considered alongside *qualb*, the heart, and *ruh*, spirit) (Deuraseh and Abu Talib 2005; Rothman and Coyle, 2018; Skinner, 2018), which historically must have been known in some form among Inner Russia’s Muslims, especially considering the strong pre-revolutionary Sufi presence in the region (Bustanov, 2016; Schmoller and Di Pippo, 2019).⁶

My argument, rather, is that the mass spread of Islamic piety movements has fostered a *specific*, and relatively novel, configuration of selfhood among Inner Russia’s Muslim population, in particular Tatarstan’s growing urban middle class. This configuration does not replicate earlier forms of subject-formation diffused among the ranks of the Soviet intelligentsia and Party hierarchy (Kharkhordin, 1999) and does not resemble models of *porous* selfhood like those that anthropologists have identified in vernacular Islamic settings (Boddy, 1988; Crapanzano, 1975; also see Mittermaier, 2012 – cf. Taylor, 2007). Revealingly, however, the idea of a self-reflexive, sovereign selfhood that I encountered in Tatarstan’s halal milieu appears to have much in common with models observed elsewhere by anthropologists in ‘Islamic reform’ scenarios (Mahmood, 2012; Pandolfo, 2009). In such models, the bounded sovereign self is understood as the main locus of moral responsibility, ethical striving and the encounter with a transcendental divine.⁷

As the historian Jerrold Seigel observes,

modern conditions require individuals themselves to participate in forming their selves, and [...] this need distinguishes modern situations from the typical earlier one in which the self or soul could be viewed as a substance and a kind of cosmic given. (2005: 43, also see Campbell, 2018: 122–123)

A voluminous body of scholarship (Keane, 2007; Roy, 2004; Van der Veer, 1995; Vicini, 2017) has investigated the extent to which modernist conversion movements promote understanding of believers’ inner worlds as sovereign, bounded and individualised. Such movements frame the self as a crux of personal responsibility and sincerity, understood in terms congruence between external conduct and internal state of opinion (Seligman et al., 2008). This process feeds back into global trends that have been described as ‘neoliberal’, reconfiguring the soul as plastic and ever-improvable (Feher, 2009). In a range of settings, Islamic scholarship has

cross-fertilised with such trends and with ‘secular’ psychological and neuroscientific disciplines (Rose, 1996, 1999), generating novel selfhood projects (El Shakry, 2014; Rudnyckyj, 2009). In the context of Muslim Russia, the emergence of interiorised, modernist religious narratives appears to speak directly to the existential needs of the rising post-Soviet urban bourgeoisie (cf. Biard et al., 2018; Zigon, 2010). In the words of a young Chechen female interlocutor:

There are no psychologists over here; I envy Western countries a bit for that reason. Certain things are never talked about. There are things I never talk about to anybody, not even my friends, not even my sisters, no matter how close we are. Religion helps. Through religion, I can have an inner dialogue (*vnutrenny dialog*), a dialogue with God. I tell God things I otherwise wouldn't tell anybody. I look inside myself. But sometimes I think it would be good to see a psychologist as well.

Few Muslim leaders in Russia have given expression to the existential needs of this new, aspirational, inwards-looking and achievement-oriented generation of middle-class Muslims with the efficacy and popular resonance of imam Shamil Alyautdinov, Russia's ‘Muslim trainer’ in chief (Bustanov, 2012; cf. Hoesterey, 2016: 94–97). Alyautdinov's public image has been carefully crafted to appeal to the halal milieu. Always neatly trimmed, Alyautdinov prefers glamorous, smart business outfits to old-fashioned, mullah-like robes and is never shy about appearing in sportswear, riding his bike or working out. As an author of popular books, Shamil-hazrat gained notoriety through his multi-installment *Trillionaire* series, which revolves around the question of how to achieve success ‘both in this world and the next’ – a glaring example of ‘neoliberal piety’ (Tobin, 2016). Despite being an ethnic Tatar, Alyautdinov writes for a cosmopolitan, post-ethnic readership. The corporate-cum-spiritual language used in his volumes and during his seminars (which attract crowds of hipsterish urbanites) would befuddle any Soviet-educated *babay*, who would be unaccustomed to such rhetoric. Be that as it may, the appearance of religiously inspired content in the context of Russian popular self-help literature can be interpreted as yet another sign of post-Soviet desecularisation (Karpov, 2010).

A Trillionaire Thinks (Alyautdinov 2013a), entirely dedicated to the subject of the psyche, is replete with references to (primarily North American) neuroscientists, management experts, pop psychologists and global thinkers, combined with easy-to-digest snippets of Islamic theology. The volume starts by stating that ‘we are what we think’ and by extolling the virtues of inner dialogue (*vnutrenny dialog*) (Id., 10–22). Such a dialogue primarily involves awareness of one's own thoughts, worries, desires, and ‘mental processes’, but also communication with God, for instance by expressing gratitude for being alive. It is imperative, Alyautdinov writes, not to fall into the ‘grey mass of those who are indifferent about their own life’ (p. 30); to avert such a fate the volume offers a great deal of practical advice on how to change one's thinking (*izmenit' myshlenie*) and improve one's conception of the self or ‘I’ (*ya-kontseptsiya*). This includes cultivating optimism and confidence in the future (pp. 55, 70); compiling tables listing the positive and negative qualities of one's current

self ('I') and identifying a series of concrete goals on the path of improvement (pp. 162–168); writing life scenarios 'with oneself as the main character' (pp. 145, 170) and working on one's individual cognitive consciousness (*soznanie*) and subconscious (*podsoznanie*) to actualise them (pp. 187–197, 201). The volume includes examples of moral crises and how to turn them into opportunities and is peppered with quotes by contemporary theorists and experts in the 'art of living'.

Alyautdinov's approach to inner dialogue is strikingly different from dominant Soviet-era 'penitential' models based on collective moral (and political) conscience (*soznatel'nost'*) (Kharkhordin, 1999: 55–74). At the same time, Alyautdinov's characteristic emphasis on the *brain* as a primary locus of ethical and indeed religious life – in 2015, his multi-installment webinar titled *Brains: Instructions for Use* garnered thousands of views on several video-sharing platforms – is at least in part at odds with approaches to Islam that focus on the *heart*, and that tend to be associated with Sufi or Sufi-derived cosmologies (Vicini, 2017).

In a recent expanded re-edition (2018) of a more theologically oriented volume titled *The World of Soul* (*Mir Dushi*), Alyautdinov singles out the 'soul' (discussed using the Russian word *dusha*, rather than the Arabic term *nafs*) as the most important area of work on one's self, foregrounding inner inspection (*vnutrennaya inspektsiya*) or *muhasaba* as a key technology of self-improvement (Id.: 50). Despite his terminological choices, there is a great deal of overlap between Alyautdinov's approach and analogous discourses on the *nafs* that are widespread among the new generations of Russia's Muslims.

In a widely circulated educational clip, for instance, the Dagestani imam Zainullah Ataev identifies the *nafs* as one's 'ego' or 'inner world' (*vnutrenny mir*). Theologically, this inner world is described as the outcome of the encounter of spirit (*ruh*), the origin of which is divine, with the sensuous body. The *nafs* is rocked by instincts and passions (cf. Pandolfo, 2009: 78). As a result, it requires constant supervision and maintenance – if left unsupervised, the *nafs* risks becoming one's 'worst enemy' (in Ataev's words, quoting a prophetic saying). In a public lecture in a mosque that caters especially to Kazan's business circles, the Tatar imam Ilnur Zinnatullin described an unruly *nafs* as the 'dark (*cherny*) side' of the soul. He too emphasised that an unsupervised *nafs* is inimical to believers and will unflinchingly drag one into sinful conduct and eventually spiritual death. Each person is responsible for averting this risk. A 'weak' soul is a poorly supervised one. In Ataev's narrative (representative of the piety movement in general), a key element of inner dialogue is one's 'fight' with one's instinctual ego. Crucially, the *nafs* is improvable: by 'working on oneself' (*rabotat' nad soboyu*), one can extinguish its destructive tendencies, rise in spiritual perfection and address the foundational causes of personal and social problems (including 'economic, political and ecological' problems). The notion and terminology of work on one's self (*rabota nad soboyu*) are cherished and routinely employed by post-Soviet Muslims.

This model of the self is considerably different from vernacular models of the self as permeable identified by anthropologists in other Muslim settings, despite the fact that these models share the same terminology (*nafs*, *ruh*) and draw on a

common Islam-based conceptual repertoire. Working in rural North Africa before the spread of Islamic piety movements, for example, Crapanzano (1975) and Boddy (1988) have classically described Muslim selves as liable to intrusion by spiritual forces and beings (*jinns*, *zar*; also see El Hadidi, 2016). Selves are described as ‘culturally overdetermined’ – that is, as congruent as possible with a collective prototype – rather than sovereign, and as morally unaccountable for *jinn* action. Spiritual or existential unease was solved not through ‘work on one’s self’ or ‘inner dialogue’, but through ecstatic rituals. Spirit possession is well documented in North Africa and the Indian Ocean (Lambek, 2013), much less so in Muslim Inner Russia. While the historical record shows that *jinns*, ancestors and other immaterial beings played an important role in vernacular Tatar religiosity before the Revolution (though not necessarily in the form of possession), the combined effect of turn-of-the-century Islamic modernism and Soviet social engineering appears to have led to the withdrawal of spirits from Tatars’ cosmologies (Kefeli, 2014). Some respondents reported attending rituals, called *öskerü*, which they described as ‘exorcisms’ – the *öskerü* sessions I have attended, however, were closer to blessing rites than expulsions of spirits.

Transformations in Tatar thaumatological and cosmological systems lie beyond the scope of this contribution; my point in raising the issue of spiritual beings here is to show the variety of Islamic selfhood discourses, not all of which, despite a shared theological background, conceptualise the soul as sovereign, improvable through ‘work’, or as an ‘inner world’ that can be explored and governed rationally. Sufism is another case in point. The terminology of Sufism refers to a plethora of forms of mysticism-oriented religious life (Laude, 2010), making generalisations impossible. With their focus on the ‘heart’ as a locus of spiritual experience, and an emphasis on the divine as ineffable, however, many Sufi selfhood discourses appear to suggest models that are partly alternative to the ‘sovereign’, discipline-oriented configurations of the self discussed here (Mittermaier, 2012; Abenante and Vicini, 2017). It is important to acknowledge that the taming of one’s *nafs* is an important theme in Sufism, especially its most scripturally oriented strands, some of which are active in Inner Russia (in particular the southern Ural region). In such settings, however, the self is often understood to be permeable to spiritual energies that emanate from a *sheik*, divine sources, or even demonic agencies, and that appear to be present on the immanent plane (Lili Di Puppò, personal conversation; cf. Schmoller and Di Puppò, 2019). By contrast, as we shall see in the next section, reform-oriented milieus such as those examined in this paper tend to operate under minimally enchanted conceptualisations of the immanent world, viewing the material plane primarily as an arena in which ethical life unfolds.

Self and transcendence.

Islam develops people, pushes them forwards. You start to look at your life through the lens of Islam (*cherez prizmu Izlama*) and experience a sort of uplifting (*pod'em*). Now I know why I am alive. Nothing can prevent me from seeking self-realisation.

In Islam, everything – how to conduct your family life, how to treat other people and how civilizations develop – proceeds from one starting point. You have to bear in mind that *there is another life*. And that the hereafter is more important than anything here. A Muslim does not confine himself within this life. . . he also bears responsibility for the other life. And tries to work for both. It is like discovering that the city you were born in is not, after all, as big as you thought – and that there is a whole country around it, a whole world around it – a *new continent*, and you cannot wait to explore it. And once you are back, you will have learned new ways to address those problems (*reshat te voprosy*) that, in the narrow scenario of your native town, loomed over you.

The piety-oriented young man quoted above offers, in a way, a variation on the inner world theme: the ‘return to one’s native town’ is a metaphor to describe a reflexive assessment of one’s own self. Interestingly, the quote suggests that this reflexive move can be made only as the self is repositioned within a broader order which offers a vantage point from which to critically look *inside* one’s inner world. Several participants described their embracing of Islam as the sudden realisation of a new ‘picture of the world’ (*kartina mira*). Of course, such a picture can only originate in one’s inner world itself, in a sort of *mise en abyme* between self and cosmos.

In this order of the world, material reality is bracketed within a transcendental order interwoven with moral forces that originate from the Godhead, the apex of justice (al-Hakīm, al-’Adl) and goodness (ar-Rahīm), as well as the ontological foundation of reality (al-Haqq). Destructive powers proceed from Satan who, despite not having creative power of his own, can tempt humans and lead them to perdition.

While this picture of the world is clearly not ‘secular’ or entirely desacralised (cf. Vicini, 2017), it cannot be described as strongly enchanted or preternatural either. Islamic texts state that humans share Creation with invisible sentient beings, such as *jinn*s, as well as angels and demons: no doctrine-conscious Muslim would deny this article of faith. To my scripturalist informants, however, the invisible hardly ever interferes with the sensible world through such phenomena as apparitions, haunting or possession. Unlike in other Muslim settings (Boddy, 1988; Crapanzano, 1975; Mittermaier, 2012; Taneja, 2017), including Central Asian diaspora communities in Russian metropolises (Oparin, in press), *jinn*s and similar spiritual beings are not an important part of everyday life for halal milieus in urban Tatarstan. Pious conduct, cleanliness, purity rituals and a judicious social life (nonbelievers and sinners attract *jinn*s) keep ambiguous spiritual forces at a safe distance. In my experience, invisible beings are rarely discussed and are hardly considered a relevant part of one’s quotidian existence. As we have seen above, possession is not entertained as a real possibility, unless one is foolish and corrupt enough to dabble in occult practices (cf. Pandolfo, 2009: 80): predominantly, inner worlds are not porous but bounded, de facto impermeable to preternatural intruders.

The self, however, is not impervious to *transcendental* forces. Satan manifests himself in ‘whispers’ (*waswas*) that take the form of spiritual doubts, temptations and all manners of evil thoughts. By means of these whispers, the devil tries to corrupt the minds of believers. As the imam Ilnar Zinnatullin put it in the aforementioned lecture, Satan is the *other* chief enemy of the believer, alongside a ‘darkened’ soul. In any case, satanic whispers can be fenced in by informed, self-reflexive work on one’s self. It is telling that Satan manifests himself not in any supernatural way, but through psychic phenomena. A Muslim’s ‘worst enemy’ remains his or her own poorly controlled *nafs*, through which the devil attacks – not the devil himself, let alone middling spirits. Virtue paradigms, like that which boomed in post-Soviet Tatarstan, appear to be structurally incompatible with strongly supernaturalist understandings of the world. As Charles Stewart put it in his study of Greek popular religiosity, when ‘immoral actions [...] are said to be the work of demons, this may exonerate the individuals involved, removing any doubt that their condition is their own responsibility. [...] Private guilt is also less likely to arise’ (1991: 107). Discussing cases of spirit possession in a number of settings, including Muslim ones, Michael Lambek advances the notion of ‘discontinuous’ (or mimetic) personhood, characterised by ambiguities and intervals in terms of ethical responsibility – for, in such scenarios, the ethical agency of spiritual forces intertwines with that of their hosts (2013; see also Rudnycky, 2010: 201–202). ‘Forensic’ models of personhood – which Lambek identifies as ‘western’ (2013: 846) – by contrast, emphasise consistency, autonomy and unity. Without wishing to join the debate about the hidden ‘Protestantness’ of Islamic piety trends (Loimeier, 2005; Vicini, 2017), I observe that Tatarstan’s halal milieu shows that ‘forensic’ models are not the exclusive province of the secular West. Forms of Islamic religious life that posit the inner world as a main seat of ethical deliberation require that spiritual agencies be kept at the margins of the cosmological picture, well beyond the well-maintained boundaries of the self.

This applies not only to potentially hostile or disruptive spiritual forces, but also to benign ones. In the ethnographic literature on vernacular Sufism, *jinn* possession scenarios are often accompanied by saintly figures and thaumaturgic forces. Saints’ spiritual force (*barakah*) can be used as an antidote to spiritual disruption or illness. It can be conjured (usually at sites associated with holy men) and passed on or conveyed by human intermediaries (Crapanzano, 1975). In post-Soviet Tatarstan, there are no ecstatic cults of saints such as those documented, for instance, in colonial North Africa. Devotions associated with holy figures’ burials and miraculous springs have long existed in the region (Kefeli, 2014), however, and even though saintly sites have undergone processes of incorporation into secular heritage regimes (Urazmanova et al., 2014), the thaumaturgical reputation of such places does attract visitors – from occasional spiritual tourists to *barakah*-seeking neo-Sufi pilgrims,⁸ although rarely scripturally oriented pietists. Among Tatars who do not participate in piety movements, as well as some *babays*, I have observed spiritual healing practices (*öskerü*) that do rely on the conjuring and harnessing of *barakah*-as-a-fluid. These practices are associated with folk Sufism

(sometimes dubbed ‘*babay* belief’, *babayskaya vera*), sometimes mixed with ‘New Age’ sensitivities, and involve the accumulation of *barakah* in substances like water and oil, which are then used for therapeutic purposes or to counter malignant ‘energies’: while full-blown *jinn* possession is not a common occurrence in contemporary Tatarstan, talk of occult threats is as widespread among the ‘secular’ Tatar public as it is in other segments of Russian society (Lindquist, 2005). Also widespread among Tatars not aligned with scripturalist movements is the practice of visiting sacred springs (*izge çışmä*), often associated with or in the vicinity of Muslim cemeteries, whose water is understood to be charged with spiritual energy.

Many scripturally oriented members of the halal milieu, however, tend to consider such practices superstitious or downright idolatrous. *Barakah* is talked about regularly, but hardly ever conceptualised as a fluid- or energy-like ‘thing’, nor is it associated with holy sites, springs or tombs. It is something more abstract yet more cosmic, a state of blessing that stems directly from the Godhead. Just as spiritual threats are ruled out, so are benign occult powers and intermediaries. In keeping with a picture of the world in which the divine and the satanic are transcendental rather than immanent, the holy cannot be directly encountered in or through the world. The divine (or the demonic) is experienced through the self – in the form of thoughts, feelings and sometimes dreams.

The deprivatisation of religion discussed in the first part of this paper has not generated a proliferation of ‘holy’ places. Halal goods and locales are not ‘holy’: they are neither set-apart, as per Durkheim’s characterisation of the sacred (1995), nor awe-inspiring, as per Rudolf Otto’s equally famous understanding of the holy (1999). Rather, they are permissible in an entirely unexceptional sense. Halal places are indeed mundane: spaces in which to consume, spend time, practice sports and socialise safely as cultivation-oriented Muslims, not to experience the divine. Mosques too, as we have seen, are taken to be locales in which to perform a certain activity – prayer – that in most cases is understood as a routine obligation and a technique of the self rather than a mystical, ecstatic or emotional experience. Places of worship are therefore treated with care by halal movement members, but not with particular reverence. *Babays’* above-mentioned preoccupation with ‘respect’, on the other hand, might be connected to a non-reformed type of vernacular religiosity in which the possibility of the sacred’s being concentrated in certain places is taken very seriously.

In the halal milieu, the quotidian world is a place of self-formation (Foucault, 2010) and inner-worldly asceticism (Weber, 2002). The cosmic battle between God and Satan occurs against a transcendent background, while demonic-elemental and saintly forces have essentially no role to play in the halal milieu’s picture of the world. God and Satan do have a special place in this cosmology. The battle a pietist must fight, however, is with his or her own self.

Disciplining the soul and the body. The pietist’s inner world is, thus, the centre of religious life for members of the halal milieu. Establishing an intimate relationship with a transcendent God, countering dark psychic whispers and overcoming one’s

selfish impulses require a significant investment in terms of discipline. In this paper, I will not dwell on the well-documented ambiguities that piety-oriented ethical projects necessarily entail (Beeker and Kloos, 2017; Fadil and Fernando, 2015; Schielke, 2009). In Tatarstan, halal movement pietists acknowledge the difficulties and setbacks that they face but in most cases remain committed to the project.

Most of my devout participants insisted on discipline as a fundamental aspect of their lives. Some informants claimed that ‘Islam is first and foremost about discipline and order’, and that ‘being a Muslim takes twice as much discipline as being a good person in the secular sense’. Alyautdinov’s work is replete with references to self-discipline as an indispensable quality possessed by the Trillionaire: lack of it is perceived as a sign of intellectual, moral and spiritual deficiency. As he observes, ‘most people live as if they were asleep, [...] immersed in a flux of disorderly thoughts’, driven by circumstances unless they learn to establish ‘firm control’ over their minds and bodies (2013b: 8). One entire chapter of Alyautdinov’s book *A Trillionaire Listens* is therefore dedicated to the art of governing one’s self (*rukovodit’ soboiu*, pp. 25–43), complete with practical exercises designed to improve one’s grip on oneself. Self-mastery techniques include formulation, visualization, verbalisation of intention, mating lists, and meditation.

Naturally, in pious milieus, keeping a strict halal regime is seen as fundamental to a Muslim life. In 2015, I attended a business dinner for Muslim entrepreneurs held in the context of Moscow’s Halal Expo. During the event, one of the organisers, a chief figure in the halal milieu and one of the protagonists of the deprivatisation of post-Soviet Islam, emphatically declared that ‘only those who strictly keep halal will possess control/power (*budut imet’ vlast’*). They will be masters (*khozyainy*) over their own family, their women, and their business’ (cf. Rogers, 2006). There is a strong connection between discipline projects and the halal infrastructure discussed in the first part of this article.

Nevertheless, self-discipline is understood not only in terms of keeping halal or praying regularly – but also, more globally, in terms of mental, emotional and bodily processes. This is hardly surprising in a context where, as we have seen, religious life is highly interiorised. Thus, for instance, a Salafi-oriented entrepreneur with whom I become acquainted practiced yoga-inspired meditation to ‘achieve control over [his] thoughts and emotions’. Emotional awareness is prized among young post-Soviet middle-class Muslims, with many participants claiming to be better attuned to their emotions than the generations who were raised in the Soviet era (*babays* and middle-agers). Additionally, the ‘container’ of emotions and thoughts, the ‘outside’ of pietists’ inner worlds – that is, their own bodies – receives as much attention as the inside in many cases.

Learning to care for one’s bodily self through the pursuit of health, fitness and style is an important part of post-Soviet ways of being Muslims, to the point that it could be said that the self-as-body is yet another crucial site of Islamic life in Tatarstan, alongside self-as-soul. In Russia, the pursuit of wellness carries explicit ethical implications beyond Islamic milieus. Unlike Soviet-era models of personhood, the ideal locus of which was the politically conscious member of a collective

body, new discourses on wellness have shifted towards the individual self: ‘bypassing Soviet-style gymnasiums, swimming pools, and sanatoriums in favour of sophisticated Western-style fitness centres [. . .], Russian health and wellness enthusiasts are increasingly focused on techniques for perfecting their bodies, both inside and out’ (Caldwell, 2014: 200). In the case of Muslims in Inner Russia, the surprising number of gyms attached to or associated with mosques in several of my field sites testifies to this juncture between a bourgeois drive towards self-perfection and the salvific teleology of Islam:

It is imperative for a Muslim to practice sport. For one’s own sake, not professionally, just to keep one’s [muscle] tone – one must swim, jog, ride a bike, eat properly, whatever. However busy one might be with their job. I try to work out a bit every day. Muslims have to keep healthy.

In other words, it is incumbent upon Muslims to keep fit. Shamil Alyautdinov likes to remark that, thanks to his consistency in practicing fitness, he looks at least ten years younger than he really is and plans to remain fit until old age. Of course, fitness is one of the characteristics of a ‘trillionaire’, bound to success ‘in both this world and the next’.

Religionists also see a connection between Islam and decorum, respectability and being mindful of one’s *imidzh* (image). Theological reasons for cultivating one’s appearance as a specifically Muslim practice are cited. As several respondents explained to me, ‘if you can afford the best, then dress accordingly – this is how things work in our religion. One should not deliberately hang out in poor attire if one can buy good clothes. That is not welcome in Islam.’ In what seems to be a classical Foucauldian scenario, learning to care for one’s psychic as well as bodily self in Tatarstan’s halal milieu is far more than self-indulgence and consumerism (though middle-class aspirations are certainly part of the picture). Care for the self is coextensive with an ethical imperative. The halal places that sprung up with the post-Soviet deprivatisation of Islam are locales in which Muslim bodily and spiritual selves exist, publicly, at ease.

Conclusion

By discussing the simultaneous emergence of new types of public places and inner spaces as interconnected phenomena, I hope to have offered a complement to anthropological approaches to selfhood that, while focusing on the individual, fall short of capturing trends and processes that unfold in the world at large (Anderson, 2011). Ethical self-formation *takes place* in the material world, *relies* on affordances that exist in the world (Keane, 2016), and can even *transform* the world. Halal places directly affect Tatarstan Muslims’ soul-shaping work, and are in turn affected by the pulsations of the halal milieu’s social and political life.

Furthermore, this paper locates the emergence of ‘forensic’, sovereign, self-reflexive models of Muslim selfhood within a historical trajectory that unfolds

amidst broader social dynamics, in particular the transformations of social life in Tatarstan between the late- and post-Soviet periods. While an exhaustive comparative discussion of forms of the self in Islam (in Russia and elsewhere) lies beyond the scope of the present contribution, this paper has framed models of the Muslim self – ‘porous’, sovereign or anywhere in between and beyond – not as mere analytical abstractions but as historical phenomena that deserve recognition as such.

Lastly, my focus on halal landscapes and practices has attempted to move beyond an exclusive focus, dominant in the anthropology of religion, on ‘sacred’ spaces. Ethicised religion in the Abrahamic tradition operates under the cosmological assumption that the natural world, although created by a transcendental divine agent, is not in itself divine: rather, it is ‘the physical arena in which one obey[s] God’ (Partridge, 2005: 9). As obedience is intertwined with consumption, sociality, leisure and public life in general in Tatarstan, religious practices have become publicly visible – ‘deprivatised’ to an unprecedented extent in recent history.

The divine, however, is not beyond the experiential grasp of pietists: rather, it is a crucial figure in their inner worlds, alongside a transcendental tempter who manifests himself through psychic whispers and unregulated passions. Winning the inner battle to ensure control over one’s soul through discipline and *askesis* is thus a Muslim’s greatest task. The need for, and proliferation of, halal places in Tatarstan is therefore inextricably linked to the existential and ethical vicissitudes of a new generation of Muslims. Public spaces and inner worlds are connected by a thin interface made of flesh.

Author’s note

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Notes

1. I use this term, which emerged in conversation with halal-minded participants, to define a nameless and poly-centric phenomenon: a loose galaxy of theologically heterogeneous scripturalist milieus characterised by a shared emphasis on halal living (cf. Benussi, forthcoming). This expression should not be mistaken (Almazova and Akhunov, 2019) as indicating an organised group having institutional or sectarian form and using halal as an 'ideology'.
2. According to Benningsen and Lemerrier-Quellejey's analysis of Soviet materials, Muslim populations demonstrated more reluctance to embrace atheism than the Russians. In the Northern Caucasian republics, up to 70% of ethnic Russians declared themselves atheists among, compared to only between 20% and 30% of atheists among the titular nationalities. In Central Asian regions like Karakalpakstan (Uzbekistan), only 25% of the population appeared to consider themselves convicted atheists. However, Soviet statistics are notoriously unreliable, and so these figures must be taken with a pinch of salt.
3. In the 1970s, the percentage of self-proclaimed believers was 34% in rural areas compared to 25% in Tatarstan (Ashirov, 1978: 23; Benningsen and Lemerrier-Quellejey, 1981: 253–258). Profession played a role as well. Farmers were more likely to harbour religious feelings than blue-collar workers, who in turn were more religious than white-collar workers.
4. Benningsen and Lemerrier-Quellejey report the story of a Kirghiz head of kolkhoz, a staunch atheist who had been responsible for shutting down his village mosque. After his retirement in the early 1970s, to the bafflement of the Soviet and French sociologists alike, the man began attending Friday prayers in the village mosque that his successor had re-opened. Furthermore, this Party man started fasting during Ramadan and observing other religious customs (1981: 255). The authors report that such episodes, although odd, were not uncommon. Soviet explanatory models, quoted by the French authors, suggested that this sudden change can be understood as a way to avoid social isolation through the disingenuous donning of a mask of belief before one's fellow villagers.
5. On the relationship between Tatarstan's halal milieu and the marketplace, see Benussi (forthcoming). Reform-oriented Muslims' positive engagement with capitalism has been noted elsewhere, in both Sunni (Maqsood, 2014; Schielke, 2015: 119) and Shi'i contexts (Rajaei, 1999: 222; Rouhani, 2003) (for a comparison with a classic Weberian scenario, see Loimeier, 2005).
6. A diachronic analysis of Islamic subjectivity discourses in Russia lies beyond the scope of this paper, partly because the historical record in this respect is still fragmentary. The history of Soviet-era Muslims' subjectivity has literally just begun to be studied, namely by an Amsterdam-based research group led by Alfrid Bustanov.
7. The self is not, however, divine in itself, as has sometimes been defined in the context of 'New Age' spiritualities (Partridge, 2005: 32).
8. See Schmoller and Di Poppo (2019) for the appearance and activities of transnational Sufi orders in post-Soviet Inner Russia. While Sufi religious life, especially in scripturally oriented orders, may be characterised by a pronounced cultivationist bent (as mentioned above in the text), what distinguishes Sufi practitioners from the piety milieus discussed in this paper is the former's pursuit of the blessing 'force' or substance embodied in the *sheik's* persona – or sometimes his burial. In the mainstream of the halal movement, such an emphasis on physical, bodily and placial manifestations of the supernatural is not prevalent.

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