

**Religious Revival in Tajikistan:  
The Soviet Legacy Revisited**

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## **Abstract**

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This dissertation proposes a political reading of the religious revival taking place in Tajikistan following the country's independence in 1991. It considers the impact of the Soviet legacy on the place of religion in Tajik society and on different modes of religiosity. It also highlights the continuities between the Soviet and post-Soviet eras and the porous boundaries between the religious and secular realms in Tajikistan. First, the thesis describes the specificities of the Soviet secularization process and emphasizes the holistic character of the Soviet ideology. I suggest that the secularization of Central Asia should be understood not as the complete eradication of religion but as the societies' accommodation to assertive secular policies, which produced a certain understanding of the place of religion in society. The research then looks at the resilience of Soviet values within both institutional and discursive traditions, as well as within individuals' perspectives on religion. This dissertation avoids reifying the state and accounts for the great diversity of state actors' strategies and interests as well as within communities. Finally, drawing upon extensive ethnographic fieldwork in Northern Tajikistan, the research depicts the religious revival from a local perspective by addressing the religious experiences of born-again Muslims. I suggest that Islamic values offset the Soviet holistic ideology, which can be explained by the affinities of religious and Soviet moral codes. The research also shows that increasing levels of religiosity contribute to social tensions around the definition of new moral standards in an uncertain socio-economic environment.

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## List of acronyms

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CRA	Council of Religious Affairs
CARC	Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults 1944-1965
CPSU	Communist Party of the Soviet Union Komsomol Young Communist League
PDPT	People's Democratic Party of Tajikistan
TSSR	Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic
TASSR	Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic
IRPT	Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan
SADUM	Srednoe Aziatskoe Dukhovnoe Upravlenie Musul'man – Spiritual Muslim Board of Central Asia

## Index

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Domullah	A polite way of addressing a mullah in Tajikistan, 'do' comes from Uzbek language.
Hanafism	The oldest of the four school of Islamic jurisprudence, mainly found, though not exclusively, in Turkey and Central Asia.
Hujum/Hudjum	Literally, the 'assault'. Soviet campaign for the unveiling of women which started in 1927.
Iftor	The meal that breaks the fast during Ramadan.
Imam	Prayer-leader in the mosque. In Tajikistan, it is often used interchangeably with the denomination 'mullah'.
Imam-khatib	Prayer-leader who delivers Friday sermons.
Ishan	Comes from persian « they » as a form of respect. In Arabic : shayk or pir.
Kishlok	A rural settlement, a village.
Mahalla	A neighbourhood in urban settlements.
Maktab	Arabo-persian word that designates a school, mostly used for elementary schools.
Mazars	Any place with magical properties, often burial places, which believers visit to pray, ask for special favours, or make wishes.
Mazhab	A school of jurisprudence in Islam.
Medresse	An advanced religious school.
Mudaris	A teacher in a medresse
Muezzin	The person who recites the call to prayer, mostly from the minaret.
Mufti	A Muslim scholar who interprets the sharia. In Soviet Central Asia, the Head of the SADUM.
Muhtasibs	A person who is charged to oversee religious behaviour. In Tsarist Russia, it was an official function.
Mullah	Muslim religious figure, or scholar of Islamic Law. In Tajikistan, it is often used interchangeably with the denomination/designation 'imam'.
Murid	Follower of an ishan.

Namaz or Namoz (Tajik)	Basic Islamic prayer.
Nikoh	Exchange of vows before God, between a groom and a bride.
Qazi	Originally, a judge in an Islamic court. In Soviet Central Asia, it designated Republican representatives of the SADUM. In nowadays Tajikistan, the Qazi is the Head of the Council of Ulemas.
Qaziat	In Soviet times, the Tajik Republican Branch of the SADUM.
Ramadan or Ramazon (Tajik)	The annual fast to which all Muslims must comply. One of the five pillars of Islam.
Sharia	Islamic religious law that governs religious rituals and aspects of day-to-day life in Islam.
Sovnarkom (SNK)	Council of People's Commissars/Soviet narodnyx kommissarov.
Ulama	Muslim theologian
Uraza	Fast of Ramadan.
Viloyat	Region or province in Tajik. The equivalent of oblast' in Russian.
Wahhabi	In the second half of the 80s, Soviets used this term to designate all islamist activists in the Ferghana valley and Tajikistan who opposed the official clergy. Today, most people use this term interchangeably with others to designate religious fanatics.

### **Note on transliteration**

Generally, the US Library of Congress (LOC) system has been used but with few exceptions to avoid the use of unusual characters such as ĭ used by the LOC for the Russian letter й and I prefer to use 'ii' instead, such as in Tadzhijskii/Таджикский. Also, it seems more appropriate to use the most common 'ya' and 'yu' instead of LOC's 'ia' and 'iu', for instance, Leninabadskaya/Ленинабадская and Kurgan-Tyube/Курган-Тюбе. 'Kh' is used to transliterate the Russian and both Tajik 'X' and 'X̣'. The Tajik 'Қ' is transliterated simply as K. Finally, a single apostrophe ' is used for both the soft 'ь' and hard 'Ъ' signs. I will use the 'J' for the Tajik 'Ҷ' such as in Panj (Панҷ) River. Unless specified, all translations are mine.

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## Chapter 1 – Introduction

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The impact of the Soviet legacy in Central Asia is an issue that has fascinated me since I first became acquainted with the history of the USSR. The Soviet socio-political engineering project has almost no equivalent in modern history, except perhaps for Communist China. The idea of radically transforming the social and economic order led to the implementation of brutal measures that in many instances had catastrophic consequences, particularly the terrible famines provoked by collectivization campaigns. Socially, damages were equally adverse: blind repression campaigns against “petits-bourgeois,” clergy and “saboteurs” of the like are responsible for countless deaths and unfair imprisonments. Behind numerous horrible stories, however, are also found tremendous achievements: near universal literacy, millions of individuals who came out of poverty, promotion of women’s rights, improved health and sanitary conditions, etc., and all this within only a few decades. The rapid processes of secularization and modernization provoked phenomenal changes, and the peoples of the Soviet Union came to form a powerful ensemble driven by contradictory forces. This process was inspired by a formidable emancipating message yet imposed through highly repressive methods.

In Tajikistan, the extent of the socio-economic transformation is especially striking when compared to its southern neighbour, Afghanistan. The two countries were part of an ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic ensemble<sup>1</sup> until the consolidation of the USSR in the early 1920s and then were set on exceedingly different paths following the Bolshevik revolution. A quote from a middle-aged woman I met in the city of Qurghonteppa<sup>2</sup> (Kathlon Viloyat), captures this idea: “I probably know more about Americans than I do about Afghans!”<sup>3</sup> she said in an amused tone. “I know we speak the same language, but we were completely cut off during the Soviet period so they are strangers to us. In fact, I’m afraid of them, they are radicals.” Adding to the irony of this statement is the fact that Qurghonteppa lies only about 50km from the Afghan border. In the Northern Gonchi district, an imam told me that although most Afghans were also followers of Hanafi Islam, the Taliban promoted different

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<sup>1</sup> Tajiks in Afghanistan make 23% of the total population (Olimov and Olimova 2013, 2), approximately 8 million people, more than the entire population of Tajikistan. Tajiks in Afghanistan live mainly in the northern and western provinces of the country, in regions bordering Tajikistan.

<sup>2</sup> Formerly Kurgan-Tyube.

<sup>3</sup> Fieldnotes, Qurgonteppa, September 11 2010.

ideas and obliged women to wear the paranja<sup>4</sup>. He declared that he would be “ashamed to be compared to them, because what they are doing is not right.”<sup>5</sup> The extent to which these societies were transformed is as fascinating as it is puzzling, and forms the starting point for my reflexion on post-Soviet religious dynamics in Tajikistan. Seventy years of Soviet rule have left a profound impression on socio-political orders, and the legacy of the Soviet Union has not entirely faded even twenty years after its dissolution.

The thesis seeks to reveal the traces of this legacy on formal institutions and the popular understanding of the place of religion in society in contemporary Tajikistan. I analyze the phenomenon with an institutional approach that considers institutions as constraints. More concretely it asks : how do Soviet atheistic policies and discourses continue to influence policy-making and social behaviour ? By combining the theoretical tradition of neo-institutionalism to an ethnographic method, my intention is to revisit the concept of path-dependency to include not only policy-making but popular understandings of the place of religion in society. This ethnography of the particular helps to make sense of the post-independence religious revival from a local perspective while not neglecting the socio-cultural referents in which socio-political relations unfold. The research highlights how Tajik state institutions continue to enforce a model of strict religious regulation and that the separation of state and religion remains an important political referent for the majority of the society, despite growing religious practice. It also explores the idea that some believers draw their religious identity from the proximity of Soviet moral and social codes and that it should be seen as a strategy to cope with changing socio-economic realities.

### **1.1 Religious revival in Tajikistan**

Islam is by far the dominant religion in Tajikistan. According to an official 2013 estimate, 99.4% of Tajiks identify themselves as Muslims (Tajikistan 2013). However, some estimates suggest greater numbers of non-Muslims.<sup>6</sup> There are indeed some lively Christian communities all over Tajikistan, such as the Orthodox, Baptist and Evangelical Churches. The issue of increasing religiosity is a topic widely debated in the media, as well as

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<sup>4</sup> See Index.

<sup>5</sup> Fieldnotes, Gonchi district, July 4 2010.

<sup>6</sup> For example, in 2012 a Turkish Information agency reported 95% Muslims (Islam News 2013b). Also, a 2003 estimate reported 85% Sunni Muslim, 5% Shia Muslim and 10% other religions (CIA 2013).

discussed among ordinary people, and represents an issue of concern for authorities. The phenomenon of religious revival since independence, albeit hard to quantify<sup>7</sup>, is significant. Hoji Ibodullo Kalonzoda, the respected imam-khatib of the Nuri Islam mosque in Khujand, mentioned that during Soviet times there were only 16 mosques in the whole territory of Tajikistan, whereas there are currently between 3,000 and 4,000 mosques.<sup>8</sup> According to official statistics, there were 247 grand mosques and 2,969 daily-prayer mosques registered in Tajikistan as of January 1, 2010 (RFE/RL 2010a). Although there are no concrete numbers regarding the number of women wearing the hijab, this practice has increased dramatically in the last few years and has become an issue of concern for authorities (Asia Plus 2010a). In a 2010 OSCE-led survey conducted in Tajikistan, 73% of respondents identified themselves as practising Muslims, while 17% declared that they were not practicing at all. Those who declared they were non-practising were mainly from urban areas (Taarnby 2012, 36). A 1996 IFES survey found that only one percent of Tajiks prayed five times daily (Wagner 1997, 111), whereas in 2010, this proportion had jumped to 63% (IFES 2011, 41).<sup>9</sup> Attendance at Friday prayers has also increased dramatically, from 13% in 1996 to 52% in 2010. In 2012, the Tajik newspaper Asia-Plus stated that according to a region-wide survey conducted during the month of Ramadan, 88% of Tajik respondents were fasting (Islam News 2012c). Interestingly, this article received many comments, a great majority of which pointed out that the numbers were certainly inaccurate: A casual observer will see that most Tajiks actually don't fast but won't publicly acknowledge it.

Tajikistan is the sole Central Asian country to have legalized an Islamic political party, the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (hereafter referred to as the IRPT). Integrated into the country's power structure in 1997 as a result of the signing of a peace agreement<sup>10</sup>, the

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<sup>7</sup> Froese (2004) cites a dubious survey published in the World Christian Encyclopaedia in 2001. Froese himself acknowledges that the use of surveys in authoritarian environments cannot realistically provide trustworthy data. According to the survey, the number of believers (including all religions) in Tajikistan has increased from 66% to 85% between 1970 and 1995 and is now one of the highest rates in the former Soviet states. Different statistics show that in 1987, 45% of Tajiks identified as believers (Hiro 1995, 197).

<sup>8</sup> Interview, Khujand, July 13, 2010.

<sup>9</sup> Participants were asked about the number of times they prayed a day; 41% of the respondents prayed 1 to 5 times a day, but only 1% prayed 5 times a day.

<sup>10</sup> The agreement devised the allocation of 30% of the ministerial positions to the opposition, a provision that was slowly implemented and which remained largely unaccomplished (Kabiri 2002, 55). Yet, in 1999, 5,377 veterans of the United Tajik Opposition joined the Army ranks as well as frontier and regular police services (Khamadov and Olimov 2003, 52).

party has since been marginalized<sup>11</sup>. However, it is still considered the most important opposition party, despite having only two deputies in the lower house of parliament. The IRPT has been subjected to recurrent political pressure since the mid-2000s. The party won 7.7% of the votes during the last parliamentary election held on February 28, 2010, although the IRPT leadership rejected these results and claimed to have won at least 30% of the votes, citing their increasing membership and popularity. IRPT Chairman Muhiddin Kabiri suggested that these results could not possibly be accurate<sup>12</sup> as the number of party supporters has been increasing steadily since the last election, reaching more than 40,000 people (Shodon 2010), of whom half are women (Islam News 2012f). Mr. Kabiri did not take part in the 2006 presidential election for reasons that remain unclear. In an interview with Radio Free Europe, Kabiri argued, “We didn’t want to place our country and our party at the front line of criticism that Islamic movements are very active here.” In the same article it is reported that lack of trust in the Central Election Commission and flaws in the country’s election law are the two main reasons cited by party delegates to explain their decision. Some analysts claim that the IRPT was pressured by the presidential administration and then decided to quietly withdraw from the race, foreseeing likely defeat. Others argue that the party was too weak to mobilize a significant number of supporters and lead an election campaign only two months after Kabiri took over the party leadership following the death its founder Said Abdullo Nuri (RFE 2006b). The IRPT’s preferred candidate for the 2013 presidential, long-term social activist Oinikhol Bobonazarova, could not join the race after her organization did not manage to gather the necessary 210,000 signatures. Bobonazarova claimed that the IRPT was unable to collect the required number of signatures because of negative publicity against them (Asia Plus 2013d).

Suspicious of this religious revival, the Tajik leadership currently exercises power to curb the development of religious groups and plays an assertive role in the regulation of religious practices. The Council of Ulemas and the Committee for Religious Affairs are

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<sup>11</sup> In 2000, the IRPT lost the Ministry of Economy, occupied by Davlat Usmon between 1998 and 2000 (Dudoignon 2005, 126). Immediately after the 2006 presidential election, which had been boycotted by the IRPT, Rahmon implemented a drastic reorganization of the administration, following which the IRPT was even more marginalized (RFE/RL 2006a)

<sup>12</sup> In Kistakuz, a representative of the IRPT was also suspicious of the results: “Overall, they gave us 7-8% but in reality, we obtained 30-40%.” He also claimed, although he could not be certain, that in the Rasht valley region, the IRPT perhaps received up to 90% of the votes.

responsible for shaping and implementing the rules concerning religious organizations, proselytism, religious education and the education of clerics. Heir to the SADUM<sup>13</sup>, the Council is concerned with the spiritual aspects of religious life and training, whereas the Committee is a governmental body that enforces laws regulating religious practices and education. The twenty-seven members of the Council are responsible for regulating all Islamic institutions and certifying imams. The Council is theoretically independent, but in practice it is greatly influenced by the government through the Committee on Religious Affairs. Advocacy organizations argue that in reality, the Committee stands as an executive body, and that real policy is formulated in the president's office (ICG 2003, 15). Interviews with various stakeholders on the ground also confirmed the perception that this institution is not independent and that as a result, it enjoys little legitimacy. Among numerous laws, decrees and ukases, the most significant developments regarding the regulation of religious practice were the amendments made in March 2009 to the *Law on the Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations* (Corley 2009) (modelled on a similar Soviet law), and the adoption in 2011 of the *Law on Parental Responsibility in the Education and Upbringing of Children*. Among other things, this law forbids minors from attending religious ceremonies with the exception of funerals (Top TJ 2011).

Most scholars portray the post-Soviet Central Asian states as secular and would describe the current politico-religious state of affairs as a continuation of Soviet practices, in terms of both institutional and ideological orientations. On the other hand, scholars acknowledge that Islam in Central Asia has become instrumental in national politics due to the fact that it is used for the purposes of legitimacy. Despite numerous publications addressing the issue of Islam in Central Asia, many facets of the puzzle still need to be addressed. As I will argue, the principal gap in the existing literature is that most scholars deal with Central Asia as a whole and tend to make broad generalizations on the state of affairs. Only on very rare occasions are individual countries treated as distinct cases to provide in-depth analysis of the social and economic issues specific to a region. I acknowledge the usefulness of approaches that take into account the region's history and intertwining geostrategic

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<sup>13</sup> SADUM stands for the Russian acronym: Sredne Aziatskoe Dukhovnoe Upravlenie Musulman. Established in Tashkent in 1943, the SADUM was responsible for elaborating and implementing the broad religious orientations for the Central Asian Republics.

interests, but not to the detriment of a deeper analysis of internal factors involving local discourses framing the issue of religious revival. As Adeeb Khalid rightfully stressed, “Before we can speak of the political role of ‘Islam’ in contemporary Uzbekistan, we have to comprehend what ‘Islam’ means to the people of Uzbekistan.” (Khalid 2003, 573 cited in Louw 2007, 41).

## **1.2 Central Asia in the scholarly literature**

Long kept in the shadow of the Soviet Union, the Central Asian region<sup>14</sup> did not attract much attention outside the USSR until 1991, with some exceptions such as the works of Bennigsen (1968), Carrère d’Encausse (1978), Bennigsen and Lemerrier-Quellejey (1986) and Crichtlow (1984). The breakup of the USSR has boosted scholarly interest in Central Asia, but the study of this region remains marginal within the body of literature in comparative politics. The difficult access for foreign researchers, its isolation from leading publication and research centres, language issues, as well as difficult economic and living conditions make the Central Asian region less attractive to researchers. Among the Central Asian Republics, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan have received the least attention from the academic community<sup>15</sup>. In the case of Turkmenistan, the dearth of scholarship can be explained by its exceptionally closed political system, limited freedom of movement within the country, and lack of access to people and documentation. In Tajikistan, the dangerous situation that prevailed in the country from 1991 to 1997 hampered the willingness of many scholars to conduct research there, but the country still receives far less scholarly attention than Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, for example. The region is certainly worthy of greater consideration and, as I will argue throughout this dissertation, scholars need to engage more actively in fieldwork to produce knowledge that is locally grounded, in order to better assess the major social and political developments that have characterized the region since the disintegration of the Soviet Union.

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<sup>14</sup> While some scholars include Mongolia and Afghanistan in their definition of Central Asia, the reference I use encompasses the five ex-Soviet republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Use of this denomination became widespread in the 1990s, whereas in Soviet times the region was referred to as ‘Middle Asia’ (Srednaya Aziya) and it excluded Kazakhstan (Vichnevski 1995, 101).

<sup>15</sup> Paradoxically, many books whose title reads “Central Asia” actually focus on only two or three republics. Among a plethora of examples, Eric McGlinchey’s 2011 *Chaos, Violence, Dynasty: Politics and Islam in Central Asia* deals only with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, and Louw’s *Everyday Islam in Post-Soviet Central Asia* (2007) deals with Uzbekistan only.

Religious revival and political Islam became hot topics even before the collapse of the USSR, and more so after the break-out of a protracted civil war in Tajikistan in 1991, in which the incumbent post-Soviet authorities were opposed by the United Tajik Opposition (UTO), the so-called Islamo-democrat coalition. The politicisation of Islam in Central Asia has nourished the field of post-Soviet studies, with a predominant focus on geostrategic issues, especially after the Western military intervention in Afghanistan in 2001. References to “The Great Game”, in allusion to the British-Russian competition for the control of the region in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were common and granted the region a geostrategic importance in world politics (Cooley 2012; Rashid 2010).

### **1.3 Contribution**

This dissertation addresses the issue of the place of religion in society in terms of the legacy of the Soviet secularization process. It explores traces of this legacy in state policies and orientations as well as among ordinary citizens’ attitudes and narratives. It investigates political circles, authorities and opposition figures alike with a double objective: to show the extent to which these positions were influenced by Soviet practices but also to reveal the interactions of various actors’ interests within state structures and to show the multiple facets of authority. It then considers perceptions and understandings of those labelled as ‘secular’ who support secularity and secular values and are concerned by religious revival. Perhaps more original is the consideration of those I designate throughout the manuscript as ‘strict believers’, that is, citizens who embrace a rigorous Islamic lifestyle and live according to Sharia. Contrasting these views will lead me to engage in a reflexion on both the ambiguity of the religious revival as well as scholars’ use of ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ categories. This thesis does not have the pretention to provide broad generalizations about the region’s religious development, but rather to paint a picture of everyday Islam in Northern Tajikistan, which in turn can improve understanding of the dynamics of the religious revival in the post-Soviet context.

The empirical contribution of the present work consists in offering innovative knowledge collected through ethnographic fieldwork on the issue of religious dynamics in Tajikistan, providing accounts of local discourses on religion expressed by a variety of actors. The idea

was to move away from alarmist discourses on religious radicalism and present an argument that puts religious beliefs in context and downplays the threatening character of Islamic piety often found in a certain literature.<sup>16</sup> On that matter, Heathershaw and Megoran (2011) warn that Western discourses of danger risk becoming self-fulfilling prophecies that could influence policy-making, which could actually endanger Central Asia.

The main theoretical contribution will be to bring a new perspective on post-Soviet studies by moving away from the all-regional and state-centred perspective that dominates the literature on post-Soviet Islam and tends to reify both state and society as solid opposing entities, and to adopt instead an ethnographic perspective that gives importance to local narratives on religious politics. As Edward Schatz phrases it, political ethnography compels scholars “to glean the meanings that the people under study attribute to their social and political reality” (Schatz 2010, 5). The argument will also engage a critique of the use of categories of the religious and the secular as distinct entities. Indeed, the epistemological approach chosen for this dissertation calls for a reconsideration of these concepts in order to support a deeper understanding of the religious revival phenomenon by dispensing with the dualities of state vs. society and religious vs. secular. The research also attempts to give a new meaning to the concept of post-Sovietism by looking for traces of the Soviet legacy not only in institutional design and governmental discourses but also in the most unexpected place, that is, in the narratives of those who most strongly rejected Soviet influence by adopting a rigorous religious lifestyle.

It should be clear that this thesis is not about Islam taken as a religious dogma. Rather, the dissertation is about a socio-political phenomenon in which religion plays a substantial role. Even though I learned a lot about Islam, Islamic laws and canons in the course of my fieldwork, I could not under any circumstances claim to be a specialist in Islam, and I leave to others the task of investigating Islamic theology and jurisprudence in the Central Asian context. Without making excuses for my lack of erudition, my focus is to some extent a ‘symptom’ of the object of study. Most people in Tajikistan have a limited knowledge of

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<sup>16</sup> See for example Akiner, 2003, International Crisis Group 2011, Malashenko 1999, Naumkin 2005, Steinberger 2003, and Vinatier 2002.

religious scriptures. Correspondingly, very few people know Arabic and a good number of people learn prayers by heart, with a greater or lesser knowledge of the prayers' meaning<sup>17</sup> (Froese 2010, 147-8). That being said, poor knowledge of religious scripts is not limited to the former USSR. Soviet author Tokarev points out that in America as well, believers have a relatively limited knowledge of the Christian doctrine.<sup>18</sup> What is unique to Central Asia in this respect is that people in this region tend to regret their poor knowledge of religion. In particular, people blame the Soviet authorities for that lost wisdom (Louw 2007; 145) even though there were some prominent Islamic scholars in Tajikistan during Soviet times (Brill Olcott 2007) as well as today. An OSCE survey revealed that only 3% of respondents rated their personal knowledge of Islam as very good, 19% considered their level to be good, 56% average, 16% listed poor and only 4% admitted to having a very poor knowledge of Islam (Taarnby 2012, 34). I am in no position to judge Tajiks' religious erudition or lack thereof, and in fact, it is of little significance in the story because, as one person I interviewed put it: "What matters is not the way you pray, how you place your hands, stand up and bow. What matters is to feel the presence of God in your heart."

#### **1.4 Organization of the thesis**

The thesis consists of seven chapters, including the introduction and the conclusion. **Chapter 2** aims at presenting the dominant approaches in the study of religious dynamics in Central Asia. Three main approaches will be considered: the religious economy school, historical institutionalism and ethnographic-anthropological approaches. I will argue that an ethnographic perspective and micro-level investigation of post-Soviet politics can be seen as both a response and a complement to all-encompassing studies and can positively contribute to the study of religious dynamics in the post-Soviet space.

**Chapter 3** will define and outline the research topic and present the theoretical framework, methodology, and research site. This chapter will more precisely define the concepts of

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<sup>17</sup> Akbarzadeh cites a 1993 survey which found that "a third of Uzbek believers and two-thirds of Kazakh believers could not correctly translate from Arabic the sentence 'There is no God but Allah and Muhammed is his prophet'", which is the first and most important of the five pillars in Islam and marks one's belonging to the Islamic faith (Akbarzadeh 1997, 73).

<sup>18</sup> The author cites a 1954 Gallup poll in which 96% of respondents identified themselves as Christians but 60% of them could not give the names of the Divine Trinity and 53% could not name the four Evangelists (Tokarev 1983, 127). A 2010 survey conducted in the United States also testifies to a significant 'religious illiteracy' (Pew 2010).

ideological vacuum and path dependency discussed in the literature review. The fieldwork and data collection will be detailed and a last section will include a reflection on the researcher's subjectivity and its impact on research.

**Chapter 4** consists of an account of the Soviet secularization experience. Emphasis will be placed on the ideological bases of Marxism-Leninism, its stance on atheism, the holistic character of the ideology and its ideological exclusivity. This chapter will also detail the measures taken by authorities to implement their social engineering project, the eradication of religious beliefs throughout the century.

**Chapters 5 and 6** form the empirical portion of the dissertation. **Chapter 5** will illustrate the relevance of the path dependency argument by reviewing the functions and responsibilities of current regulatory institutions as well as laws and official discourses framing religious practices. Given that my intention is to avoid reification of the state, this chapter will also attempt to account for the varying interests of multiple levels of state authority.

**Chapter 6** integrates the ethnographic analysis into the theoretical framework and consists of a representation of the religious revival through data collected during the fieldwork. This chapter highlights the similarities of religious and Soviet codes. It also portrays the extent to which religion is used as a source of morality but also functions as a source of tension within the communities.

**Chapter 7** will provide final conclusions.

## Chapter 2 – A critical review of beliefs and institutional dynamics in the literature on Central Asia

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### 2.1 Religious identities in post-Soviet Central Asian literature

The above sub-title may give a wrong impression. The choice of *Central Asia*, rather than Tajikistan alone, is not an indicator that I intend to make a comparison between all of the post-Soviet Central Asian republics but rather a reflection of the literature itself, as most scholars tend to write about Central Asia as a whole and focus on the regional trends even if they highlight, albeit hastily, differences between the five republics. In fact, there are very few scholarly articles, less so monographs, dedicated solely to Tajikistan (Dudoignon 2004 and 2011; Djalili and Grare 1995; de Martino 2005; Epkenhans 2011; Karagiannis 2006, 2010; Mullojonov 2001; Olimov & Olimova 2003; Gaidarov and Shozimov 2006), and many tend to focus on geopolitical and security issues (Akiner 2001, Heathershaw 2005, 2007; Jonson 2006, Mishra 2007; Nourzhanov 2005). Therefore, the literature review will echo this particularity, which as I will argue later, is a reflection of specific ontological and epistemological positions. The following section aims at presenting the main trends in contemporary research on religious revival in Central Asia as well as offering a critique of those approaches in light of the Tajik context. In particular, I will try to focus on what I recognize as lacunae, mainly, the regionalization of research<sup>19</sup>, the focus on state dynamics and the neglect of social processes.

Perhaps because of the influence of ‘Sovietology’ (DeWeese 2002), in general, the literature on Central Asian Islam has not been a field for great theoretical debates and theoretical approaches are hardly ever explicitly announced. Nevertheless, historical institutionalism and its concept of path dependency have dominated most research done by both historians and political scientists on the development of post-Soviet Islam. In particular, they emphasized the perpetuation of Soviet-style policies in regards to the regulation of religion. There are however, some innovative approaches used by scholars to assess the great changes taking place in the region, especially the religious economy school approach and the ethnographic perspective. As I will detail below, both these approaches

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<sup>19</sup> Though in a superficial manner since this issue was brought up in the introduction.

take into account agency in the redefinition of religious identities even though the latter looks at the way religious markets shape individual behaviour while the former focuses on personal interpretations and narratives to make sense of social and political dynamics.

### **2.1.1 Religious economy school**

The *religious economy school* emerged in the Eighties as a critique of the secularization theory by bringing forward the argument that far from disappearing, as the theory predicted, religion remained important in the last century. Indeed, one of the secularization theory's most prominent proponents, Peter Berger himself, revised his position in *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*. In the introduction, Berger states: "The world today is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places, more so than ever" (Berger 1999, 3). Three years before him, Casanova had developed the concept of "deprivatization of religion", defined as the refusal of religious traditions to accept the marginal and privatized role which theories of modernity and secularization have imposed on them (Casanova 1996).

The religious economy school advises scholars to pay more attention to the role of religion in politics on the basis that religious beliefs are profoundly rooted in almost every society and that religious movements have demonstrated a great capacity to mobilize collective political action. It is called *religious economy* because it views "churches and their clergy as religious producers who choose the characteristics of their product and the means of marketing it" (Iannaccone and Finke 1993, 28). The particularity of this approach is that it asserts that religious changes should be explained not by the demand for 'religious goods' coming from different sections of a given society but by the supply of religious goods. Like in classic economic models, the theory predicts that in a competitive environment, religious beliefs will flourish while governments' regulation can profoundly impact a country's religious dynamics.

More generally, Gill suggests that addressing religion in social science research can help better understand collective action, institutional design and the connection between ideas and institutions (Gill 2001, 130-132). He underlines that the approach's goal is "to explain religion's historical resilience, i.e. to understand why strict religions tend to have the greatest success in expanding" (Gill 2001, 130). This is an approach that seems particularly

appropriate for the study of post-Soviet religious dynamics, since a great deal of authors contend that religion did not disappear in Soviet times but was practised differently.

Two recently published books by American scholars, Paul Froese and Christopher Marsh, illustrate the popularity of this approach for the study of post-Soviet religious revival. Both works represent an attempt to demonstrate the failure of the forced secularization in the USSR as well as in China in the case of Marsh's comparative analysis of Russia and China. Froese's research offers an in-depth investigation of the Soviet secularization experience and even though he relies entirely on English-language publications and bibliographic methods, his research is quite extensive. Applying the logic of religious markets to the Soviet Union's context, Froese argues that even "in the absence of religious supply, religious demand did not disappear" (2008, 20). To explain the fact that the absence of religious market did not completely eradicate religious beliefs, Froese and Marsh rely on a common postulate used by tenants of this school: that the demand for religion or spirituality, as formulated by Stark and Finke, "is an essential aspect of human condition" (quoted in Froese 2008, 20). What is more, as soon as the period of repression diminishes or is brought to an end, people almost immediately turn back to religion again (Marsh 2010, 266). Froese suggests that "the end of Soviet Communism provided two basic circumstances theoretically ideal for religious growth: millions of religiously unaffiliated individuals and a free religious environment where no one religious group [sic] enjoys political favoritism" (Froese 2008, 147). In spite of this, Froese notices that the Central Asian countries do not match the predictive model because of the gradual reinforcement of religious monopolies along with increasing levels of religious practice. He explains that it is due to the fact that Islam is part of the definition of identity for Central Asian peoples and that authoritarian governments use religion to legitimate their authority (Froese 2008, 154-5).

The two-above mentioned studies of religious revival present a broad perspective on the issue of religious dynamics as the result of an extended archival research but definitely fall short on providing pictures of the everyday revival. No fieldwork has been conducted for their research and numbers and figures used for their demonstration are questionable. The

case could have been much more convincing if seconded by an in-depth investigation of local behaviours and practices.

This is what Sébastien Peyrouse accomplished in his comprehensive research on Christian minorities in Central Asia. Although he does not explicitly refer to the religious economy school, Peyrouse's main arguments resonate with that approach, which he complemented with first-hand data, a rare occurrence in the field of Central Asian studies. Introducing his research topic, Peyrouse insists that his main goal is to question the concept of a radical ideological rupture, a referential emptiness or ideological vacuum as the result of the Soviet Union's dissolution. Indeed, for Peyrouse, the Soviet regime constantly confronted itself to enduring manifestations of faith, which has never ceased to exist and which the break-up of the USSR only accelerated (Peyrouse 2003, 27-29). He later suggests that increasing religiousness should be seen as a resurgence of religious institutions and not as a revival of faith among individuals (Peyrouse 2003, 301). And that, he argues, is primarily explained by the sudden liberalization of religious life.

His approach, although inspired by the supply-side theory, differs a bit from the ones of other rationalists because he does not subscribe to the idea that people turn to religion to fulfil innate spiritual needs. This contrasts for example with Froese and Marsh's theses, which emphasize humanity's eternal quest for the Mystical. Peyrouse reckons that there is indeed a trauma behind the loss of an economic, social and ideological order but he argues that it is rather a process of individualisation, whether imposed and/or voluntary, that pushes people to join religious organizations, something that can help individuals to cope with the new difficult reality by giving them a sense of belonging (Peyrouse 2003, 306).

The main critique that can be addressed to the approach of the religious economy school touches on the main postulate conferring that plurality explains the vitality of religious beliefs and levels of religiousness. There does not seem to be a consensus on the definition of religious vitality: is it measurable, for example, with numbers and figures for the number of religious establishments, church attendance or religious education?

In his book, Froese does not linger on demonstrating that there is a religious revival but he takes it for granted. He mentions that religious revivals in the former Soviet Union have

been “systematically documented” while referring to these studies in an endnote.<sup>20</sup> He later indicates that the religious revival in Central Asia is measured by the performance of religious cults but does not give a detailed account of those rituals, nor of the scale of the phenomenon other than saying “that Muslims are eager to learn about and develop their religious lives” (Froese 2008, 149).

In that regard, Marsh’s study is also problematic. Not only does he fail to offer a clear definition of what constitutes a religious revival but his definition neglects Church attendance in favour of the completion of pilgrimages. He justifies his choice as the following: “Church attendance is not a very good indicator of Orthodox religiosity. Prayer frequency and participation in pilgrimages are better indicators, because monasteries have better reputations, they have never been co-opted” (Marsh 2010, 120). Also, his assessment of Russia’s religious revival seems quite exaggerated. Despite the number of people self-identifying as ‘believers’, observers could argue that Russian society is still very secularized and that performing some rituals does not mean that religion has become the new moral guideline for an important portion of Russian citizens. Marsh himself acknowledges that even if most Russians perceive Orthodoxy as an aspect of their identity, a minority of them raise their children with religious beliefs (Marsh 2010, 135). Finally, he stresses that religious revival is characterized by the increasing influence of the Russian Orthodox Church over political life in Russia, especially its role in the adoption of a new religious law that gives preeminence to the Orthodox Church over other religious organizations (130-139). But this could hardly be considered as a sign of a genuine religious revival since it testifies more about the political interests of both the authorities and the Church than the way religion (Orthodoxy)<sup>21</sup> influences people’s behaviour on a daily basis.

Confronted to Tajik realities, the religious economy school fails to explain religious revival. If there was indeed a significant liberalization regarding the practice of religion,

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<sup>20</sup> He refers to dubious statistics published in 2000 in the World Christian Encyclopedia, which measured religious affiliations across the world from 1975 to 1990. One can question the genuineness of its results in the Soviet case given the authoritarian environment in which data was collected. In another endnote, Froese merely mentions that there is a controversy concerning the extent of the religious revival.

<sup>21</sup> His examination of other confessions is slender.

there is on the other hand, very limited religious plurality. Islam is a near-monopolistic religion and the Hanafi school of jurisprudence is largely dominant, both because of the history of region's islamization and of official policies that elevated Hanafism to the rank of a quasi-national religion in Tajikistan.<sup>22</sup> There are of course missionaries, both Islamic and Christian, but their scope of action has been increasingly limited in the last few years and their impact on society today has become somehow insignificant. On that matter, Froese rightfully mentions that under the appearance of uniformity of the faith, Muslims in Central Asia are now confronted to competing visions of Islam (Froese 2008, 154).

To explain increasing levels of religiosity despite the absence of religious diversity, Gill suggests that in the case of Islam, the unique decentralized nature of the clergy compels imams, who do not in theory receive any salaries for their work, to actively seek parishioners, which contributes to religious vitality (Gill 2001, 132). Again, the Tajik context does not fit this schema since like in Soviet times, and in many Muslim countries nowadays<sup>23</sup>, Tajik religious figures are greatly subordinated to state authorities, mainly through their mandatory approval by the Department of Religious Affairs (Tajikistan 2009).

Gill also argues that the religious economy school predicts that in countries where government restrictions on religion impose high costs on consumers and producers, religious activity will decrease. Deregulation of religion is supposed to result in higher levels of religiousness (Gill 2001, 132; Iannaccone and Finke 1993). But then again, the theory proves wrong in Tajikistan since the government's increased control on religion (to be developed in Chapter 5) is not negatively affecting levels of religiosity, on the contrary. In particular, the 2009 *Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations* greatly

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<sup>22</sup> Mirzoshohruxh Asrori, Tajik Minister of Culture, referring to the religious institutions registered in the country told members of Parliament in 2009: "Since all of them are registered as followers of the Hanafi teaching we suggest declaring the Hanafi teaching as the official religious teaching of Tajikistan" (BBC 2009b). Also, the year 2009 has been declared the year of Imomi Azam [Abu Hanifa, the founder of the Hanafi branch of Islam].

<sup>23</sup> In some places like in Morocco, imams are downright civil servants (RFI 2008). In Tajikistan, discussions about the possibility to use public money to pay imam's salaries started in July 2013 (Asia Plus 2013c).

restricts the registration of new religious groups as well as the activities of clerics by limiting the number of mosques that can be set up according to the size of the population.<sup>24</sup> Also, if new legislation facilitating the growth of religious organizations is adopted, it is plausible that it will be followed by changes in mindsets regarding religious tolerance and openness. In the case of Central Asia and of Tajikistan in particular, it is undeniable that a liberalization process has been initiated since the end of the Soviet reign but it has not resulted in the appearance of more liberal attitudes towards new religious movements, on the contrary. Conversely, since the mid-2000s, there has been a clear return to more rigid laws, a legal move that has not contributed to slow down rising levels of religiosity. Here again, it seems crucial to study how the cultural, social and economic environment may foster or hinder religious revival.

Again confronting the universality of the religious economy school, one can argue that the Central Asian context is also not very suitable, or, to use terms inherent to the approach, perhaps not *liberal* enough, to contend that religious *markets* can flourish and lead to an increase in religious vitality. Since it assumes that religious or spiritual needs are universal, tenants of this approach somehow somehow neglect the impact of culture on the vitality of religion. On that matter, Naletova questions Froese's approach for the study of religiousness in the former Soviet Union on the basis that "neither market economy, nor religious competition, nor the idea of individual rational choice in religious matters have ever been rooted in Russian society (if not being alien to its traditional culture altogether)" (Naletova 2010, 311). While her observation is relevant, Naletova pushes the argument further and as a result, gives it a somehow primordialist twist by later suggesting that it is hard to imagine that Russians would rush to Orthodoxy because they would see it as an object of consumption rather than because it is "an inseparable part of one's own self?" In this case, not only does she fail to recognize the existence of a plurality of confessions in Russia but implies the inseparability of the Russian identity with the Orthodox religion, a position that is controversial as well as political because of the proximity of the Russian Orthodox Church to Russian authorities (Codevilla 2008).

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<sup>24</sup> For example, Friday mosques can be established in places with a minimum of 10 000 to 20 000 inhabitants and regular mosques can be established in places counting between 100 and 1000 inhabitants (Tajikistan 2009).

If these studies have the merit to incorporate the interests of political actors into the study of religious markets (Gill 2001, 132), they fail to contextualize the choices made and the attitudes adopted by actors. Marsh and Froese's works, which fall in this category, don't go very far in the exploration of personal motivations apart from the assumption that people want to be religious because they can. Ironically, tenants of the religious economy school who are the most interested in personal manifestations of faith and beliefs are those who neglect the personal dimension of research and investigation. Here we see the shortages of an approach that, for the most part, neglects the study of individual practices and therefore lacks reliable and grounded data that can back-up the very argument of a religious revival in post-Soviet states. If the theory is about the interests of political actors, then it seems necessary to dig deeper in this direction and rely on interviews, narratives and experiences instead of focusing on institutional and legal frameworks.

The religious economy school has the merit to move away from a state-centred perspective and consider a multiplicity of actors (embedded in religious markets) involved in the process of social change. Yet, in the methodology, very little attention is given to the motivations, aspirations and beliefs of individual actors and the dichotomous, often antagonistic, relation between society and the state remains. This stems from a tendency to consider social movement and institutional (legal) amendments as opposed to one another, as if individuals were (re)acting to legal changes and society was deprived of its capacity to generate autonomous change. That is why an approach that takes into consideration the cultural and ideological frames that contribute to shape behaviour seems most relevant.

### **2.1.2 Path dependency and historical institutionalism**

As mentioned previously, historical institutionalism (HI) is a very popular approach for the study of post-Soviet politics (Beissinger and Young 2002, Bunce 1995, Collins 2006, Jones Luong 2000), principally because the theory emphasizes the persistence of practices and institutional norms and the way they constrain behaviour. Henceforth, scholars emphasize the impact of seventy years of subsequent totalitarian and authoritarian Soviet rule, which

led to the implementation of a social project aimed at industrializing and secularizing the newly created Soviet Union.<sup>25</sup>

HI is an influential theoretical perspective in political science and comes in multiple forms. It defines institutions as formal and informal procedures, routines, norms and conventions embedded in the organisational structure of the ‘political’ and which influence and constrain the interaction of agents and actors in a given political system (Hall and Taylor 1996, 938). The main debate within the approach is the importance given to agency versus structure (Lecours 2005, 8), an issue that is common in the discipline of political science in general (Macleod and O’Meara 2007, 5). The theory emphasizes the persistence of norms and practices, which represent the main explanatory factor in determining the behaviour of actors, a concept referred to as *path dependency*. It is the idea that “once institutions are formed, they take on a life of their own and drive political processes” (Lecours 2005, 9). Concretely, HI is interested in discovering how “past lines of policy condition subsequent policy by encouraging societal forces to organize along some lines rather than others, to adopt particular identities, or to develop interests in policies that are costly to shift” (Hall and Taylor 1996, 941). Jones Luong writes that: “HI depicts political identities as “investments” that individuals consciously make in response to their institutional surroundings and yet unconsciously maintain.” For her, HI has the particularity to draw our attention “to the structural incentives that make some identities more desirable and enduring than others” (Jones Luong 2000, 2).

The main critique addressed to HI concerns its relative inability to explain change. As formulated by Theda Skocpol in her influential book on revolutions, changes occur after crisis, whether endogenous or exogenous, which she labelled ‘critical junctures’, shake the

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<sup>25</sup> The term *colonial* for categorizing the ‘Soviet Empire’ is controversial. First, many former Soviet citizens would not agree on that term since they did not see themselves as being colonized but entitled citizens of a large ensemble, albeit unfair to minority nations. Second, scholars disagree on whether or not one should speak about modernization or cultural transformation instead of colonialism (Khalid 2007b, 466) since Russians also had to be “transformed and modernized” (Khalid 2006b, 250). Beissinger suggests that because native language use and literacy were promoted, and efforts were made to integrate non-Russians into Soviet society, these, it would seem, were the tools, not of empire, but rather of the modernizing multinational state (2006, 296). Adrienne Edgar (2006), after comparing colonial policies towards the emancipation of women in the British, French and Soviet territories, rejects the term ‘imperial’ for characterizing Soviet policies. I stand with Beissinger, Khalid and Edgar on this issue and find it more appropriate to talk about a modernizing project rather than a colonial project, even though some dynamics bear colonial earmarks.

established order (Skocpol 1979). The weakness of that argument “rests on the debatable empirical argument that domestic changes always have external roots” (Lecours 2005, 12). Yet, institutionalists who focus more on agency and who agree on the fact that institutions exist to serve a purpose explain that they are transformed when they become dysfunctional or yield sub-optimal results (Lecours 2005, 12).

Many authors have also questioned the ontological foundations of the approach, in particular, the definition given to institutions. Hall and Taylor (1996) called them ‘Sociological institutionalists’ while they have named themselves discursive (Schmidt 2008), idealistic and constructivist (Hay 2004) institutionalists. Their variant of institutionalism aims at broadening the scope of the research to investigate the power of ideas and ideologies and their impact on policy-making. Proponents of new trends in the field of institutionalism critique the theory as being ‘over-structuralist’ and propose to ‘bring back agency’ in the explanatory model. However, Bell, a self-labelled historical institutionalist, is not convinced of the necessity of these various propositions and argues that a “suitably tailored version of historical institutionalism” can accommodate constructivist approaches to study the interactions between interpretative agents and institutional contexts (Bell 2011, 884).

The persistence of Soviet-style policies and behaviours has been one the most widespread objects of study in the literature on Central Asia. The constants revealed by authors refer to both formal and informal institutions as well as to the stability of political leadership.<sup>26</sup> One of the well-known examples is Pauline Jones Luong’s study of electoral systems in Central Asia. Her argument is that Soviet policies and institutions have successfully eliminated tribal, religious and national identities and created, transformed and institutionalized regional policies, which had an incidence in the development of post-independence electoral systems (Luong 2000). Kathleen Collins also relies on HI but rejects Luong’s thesis that Soviet bureaucratic institutions have created regional identities that have replaced the pre-Soviet ones (Collins 2006, 58). Instead, she goes back further in time to

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<sup>26</sup> In Tajikistan, Emomali Rahmon occupies the position of the Head of State since 1992 and President since 1994. In Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov has been President since 1990, Nursultan Nazarbayev in Kazakhstan since 1990 while in Turkmenistan, the death of Turkmenbashi in 2006 has led to a political shift, which did not result in significant changes in the country’s socio-political life. Kyrgyzstan is the sole country that had a political alternation via elections as well as ‘revolutions’ in 2005 and 2010.

demonstrate how pre-Soviet clan structures continue to influence Central Asian contemporary economic and political affairs.

In terms of religious dynamics, many studies have highlighted the continuation of Soviet practices. I will go as far as to say that this is a rather undisputed argument. For instance, Keller, in her research about the early years of secularization in Central Asia, perfectly captured the dynamic at work: “Instead of creating a hard-headed atheist proletariat, the state would have to settle for close control over the “official” clergy while maintaining pressure against “unofficial” religious observance, a system that would survive into the post-Soviet period” (Keller 2001, 245).

Tatari and Shaykhutdinov (2010) offer the most explicit and recent example of the use of HI for the specific study of religious dynamics in Central Asia. They describe their theoretical choice as an innovative one, arguing that hardly any scholar conducted research on secularization processes in Central Asia (2010, 91-2). After analysing religious policies in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, they come to three conclusions in regards to oppressive policies towards religion adopted by these three states: 1- they remain authoritarian, 2- anti-religious policies have been institutionalized and elites view secularism as a modernizing force, 3- secularism is used by elites to suppress Islamic forces. This situation they argue, is explained by the fact that the “religiously oppressive secularism ideology of the Soviets” (90) and “the institutionalized secularisation process and the dictatorial leadership structure of the Soviet regime have been institutionalized in the framework of the new independent States” (92). Their research provides interesting perspectives but is rather superficial.<sup>27</sup> Also, their claim that they use an innovative approach for the study of religious politics in Central Asia is unfounded since a great number of authors have, even though not referring explicitly to the HI approach, proposed very similar arguments.

One of the most influential writers in Central Asian studies, Adeb Khalid, has argued that the authorities hail the cultural heritage, frame the discourse and organize the religious

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<sup>27</sup> Admittedly, the format of a paper does not allow for lengthy elaborations and hopefully this is the premise of a more thorough research.

teachings through Soviet-type institutions, use repression and publicise an anti-fundamentalist discourse (Khalid 2006a, 106-7). Shirin Akiner also recognizes that Islam is instrumentalized by incumbent governments but also argues that the current approaches to religion rely on the Soviet practices (Akiner 2004, 76; Sagdeev 2000, 19).

Mehrdad Haghayeghi explored this issue in greater depth. He sees patterns of governmental activities that have either the objective of recuperating religious symbols or restricting religious life. Haghayeghi's framework consists of: 1- nationalisation of religious administrative structures, 2- adoption of regular and Constitutional laws defining the parameters of religious life, 3- repression of religious opposition, 4- assimilation of Islamic forces (Haghayeghi 1995, 157-160). He further argues that governments use the threat of extremism to justify the perpetuation of Soviet policies, combined with conciliatory approaches towards Islam since atheism can no longer be used to condemn religious practices and faith.

Similar path dependency arguments also refer to the pre-Soviet period to explain the adoption of religious policies. For instance, Brill Olcott sees in the post-independence institutional arrangement a continuation of Soviet practices, themselves inherited from the tsarist period<sup>28</sup> (Brill Olcott 2007, 4). This thesis is also the one put forward by Ro'i in his analysis of Islam in the Soviet Union, when he writes that in many ways, the attitude of the Soviet regime to Islam is reminiscent of late tsarist period which was characterized by: 1- talks on fanaticism, 2- the evidence of tolerance but not protection of the faith, 3- weakening religious institutions, 4- a disregard of individual practices, 5- an attempt to secularise with the help of material progress (Ro'i 2000, 550). On that matter, Olimova goes as far as to say that the Central Asian tradition intimates the subordination of the clergy to the political authority (Olimova 2000, 64).

The subordination of religion is not only seen as a path dependent phenomenon but also as a reinforcement of the importance of religion in the political game. As Hunter argues, the interference of the state in religious affairs as well as the authorities' attempts to wrap themselves in some religious legitimacy contribute to put religion on the political agenda

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<sup>28</sup> Similarities between tsarist and Soviet administrations are also highlighted by Keller (2001, 62) and Soviet scholar Dimitri E. Furman (1989, 7).

(Hunter 2001, 84). Babajanov makes a similar claim and suggests that the use of religion by state actors does not indicate a cultural or religious renewal but contributes to the islamization of politics in Central Asia (Babajanov 2008, 107).

Yet, the recuperation of religious values somehow marks a contrast with the Soviet period since institutions responsible for regulating religious organizations were given some prerogatives, which have little to do with those of the Soviet period. More than organizing relations between the authorities and the believers' communities, they are now used to promote an Islam defined as 'traditional' and 'legitimate' in opposition to an Islam presented as 'radical' and 'dangerous'. While the Soviet authorities tried to limit as much as possible the development of an Islamic identity, current religious institutions are used to channel an Islamic identity in conformity to an Islam defined as national and which refers to historical figures (Brill Olcott and Ziyaeva 2008, 22).

Despite insightful research, scholars have been focusing mainly on formal institutions, institutional design and strategies of political actors while neglecting the social dimension of religious revival. In the literature reviewed, state and society always seem to be in opposition to each other while the focus is much more on the state and institutional structures than on social forces, inevitably conferring it a passive character. Indeed, very few scholars have managed to escape the state-centric approach and as John Schoeberlein said in his keynote speech at the occasion of the 10<sup>th</sup> European Central Asian Conference (ESCAS) in Ankara in 2007: "Is it really fair to say that the state is the central issue for Islam in Central Asia?" (2007, 285). As the preceding discussion proves, the use of historical institutionalism for the study of religious politics in Central Asia is more than common. In fact, it seems at times impossible to move away from this approach when investigating the political development of the former Soviet Union, particularly Central Asia, a region that has been so profoundly transformed by the Soviet social engineering project.

### **2.1.3 Ethnographic-anthropological approaches**

We see that overall, not much importance is being given to micro socio-political dynamics within the larger phenomenon of post-Soviet transformation. However, there is an emerging research trend promoting innovative studies that dig deeper into local narratives and practices to picture realities that would remain invisible to state-focused observers.

Ethnographic research does not represent a monolithic block from which clear lines of conduct can be drawn since ethnography encompasses interpretativist as well as positivist research agendas (Schatz 2009). There are nevertheless some shared basic understandings of the approach and I see two points worth mentioning. First, ethnographers attempt to provide accounts of local perceptions of religious politics “to analyze the gap between the idealized representation and actual apprehension of events, people and political orders” (Weeden 2009, 85) and try to uncover the power relations that lie behind the making, dissemination and understanding of certain narratives in a given society. As Jourde wrote in his chapter presenting the utility of the ethnographic approach for studying religious phenomena: “when investigating Islam and politics, ethnography provides a sensibility that allows political scientists to “see” the large variation of meanings such a word [Islamism] can have across Muslim societies, as well as the complex struggles that are fought over this word” (Jourde 2009, 206).

Second, as opposed to a certain literature, which claims that objectivity should be a guiding principle behind investigative social research (Caramani 2008, 3), ethnographers are usually conscious of their own subjectivity and the impact one’s background (life experiences, values and assumptions) can have on the conduct of research. Reflexivity is inevitable as well as useful (Bayard de Volo 2009). However, it would be problematic to associate reflexivity solely with the attitude of the researcher towards a subject. Equally important is the subjects’ reactions and interactions to and with the researcher. Indeed, field research allows a dialogue between object and subject, who are both partial and carry complementary interests (Adams 1999). There is also an important aspect of subjectivity attached to the interpretation of narratives and discourses and not only to fieldwork research.

Unsurprisingly, in the literature on Central Asia, anthropologists have been leading in this field with investigations of individuals' responses to changing social, economic and political realities while few political scientists have pursued such research.<sup>29</sup> Few exceptions among political scientists are noteworthy.

Heathershaw and Roche (2011) produced an interesting analysis of the causes of the armed clashes in the Kamarob Gorge in 2010, which suggests that local grievances rather than Islamic militancy, were responsible for the eruption of violence. Karagiannis, while not using an ethnographic perspective, has relied on first-hand data in his investigation of radical Islam, in particular, the popularity of Hizb ut-Tahrir.<sup>30</sup> Capitalizing on social mobilization theory, Karagiannis explains that the party's ideology is of particular importance, especially, its inclusive, nationality-blind message and Islamic values of solidarity in a corrupt and unfavourable economic environment (Karagiannis 2010).<sup>31</sup> Likewise, an interesting novelty in the scholarly landscape is Yemelianova's collection on Islam in the former Soviet Union. As she herself underlines, most publications analysing Islam in the former Soviet Union are not derived from fieldworks findings, but largely based on journalistic reports, periodicals and other secondary sources (2010, 2). Unfortunately though, none of the chapters include a theoretical discussion on the definition or relevance of an ethnographic perspective and the edited volume lacks a clear theoretical orientation. The chapter on Islamism in the Ferghana valley written by Yemelianova and Salmorbekova, is said to be based on ethnographic fieldwork but disappoints in terms of the investigation's depth. In fact, a single page details the fieldwork: 37 semi-directed interviews conducted in the three different countries over two years. This is a rather 'thin' ethnographic account in comparison to other scholars who have dedicated

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<sup>29</sup> Likewise, in the field of sociology, Laura Adams offers very pertinent insights on the prevalence of Soviet schema in the cultural renaissance in Uzbekistan (Adams 1999, 2010).

<sup>30</sup> Originating from East Jerusalem, the Hizb ut-Tahrir is a radical but non-violent Islamic political party whose aim is to re-establish an Islamic Caliphate. One of the local leaders revealed that the party counted more than 10 000 supporters in the Sughd region (Northern Tajikistan) (Rashid 2003, 131). Karagiannis estimates that the Party has around 3000 members in Tajikistan, and many more sympathizers (Karagiannis 2006, 4).

<sup>31</sup> Also using social mobilization theory, Omelicheva (2010) argues that different levels of islamization among Uzbeks and Tajiks (in comparison with the 'superficial' islamization of Kyrgyzs and Kazakhs) explain their propensity to join radical movements such as the Hizb ut-Tahrir. Her analysis, much more superficial, touches on five Republics and does not rely on any first-hand data.

their research to smaller communities for a much longer time period.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, the chapter provides interesting findings and reveals a growing interest from the younger generation towards Islam as “part of their spiritual heritage and national culture” as well as the contrasting religious views between generations (2010, 226-227) that can be explained not by a single factor but by the combination of economic hardship, the theological inadequacy of traditional clergy and lack of political liberties.

Also digging into local narratives, Dudoignon and Epkenhans have focused on religious discourses to show how certain religious leaders compete for influence in Muslim communities as well as, in Epkenhans’s case, for patronage and/or solidarity networks. Epkenhans’s research focuses on the dissemination of normative Islamic discourses by one of Tajikistan’s most prominent cleric, Hoji Akbar Turajonzoda, as a way to set one’s religious authority while “generating a legitimate social order among Muslim communities” (Epkenhans 2011, 82).

At last, a survey conducted by the Olimovs in 2006 gave precious insights on the country’s religious leaders, their embodiment and influence in society. Their research aimed at expounding a broader perspective on the issue of religious leaders’ alleged influence in society since their data collection was made using a survey involving 1000 respondents.<sup>33</sup> If quantitative analyses<sup>34</sup> can be useful in drawing attention on specific social patterns and public opinions, they can be of little help in grasping “hidden transcripts”, infrapolitics and their relationship to the public transcripts (Scott 1990, 19).

It is in this perspective that anthropologists have studied the social dynamics of post-Soviet transformation via the narratives and lived experiences of individuals. In this line of research, the concepts of morality and moral questioning, secular and religious, are central (Louw 2007; Pelkmans 2009; Pelkmans and McBrien 2008; Rasanayagam 2011; Steinberg and Wanner 2008; Zigon and al. 2011). More specifically, it is the recalibrating of multiple, perhaps conflicting, moralities and the transformations of the selves that are under scrutiny.

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<sup>32</sup> Rasanayagam and Luehrmann for instance spent, though in separate periods of time, almost three years in their respective field site, working as teachers.

<sup>33</sup> Admittedly, one chapter presents the personal stories of two young women and two young men who stand as informal religious leaders (Olimov and Olimova 2003, 63-76).

<sup>34</sup> I will come back on the difficulties of conducting surveys in Tajikistan and their doubtful pertinence in the methodology section.

These studies show that religions have become one of the central social arenas in which these moral processes are taking place (Zigon 2011, 3).<sup>35</sup>

Rasanayagam for example, in what seems to be a direct answer to Schoeberlein's proposition of paying more attention to social processes than state dynamics, is interested in how, despite government's attempts to shape religious expression, people develop "their own understandings of what it means to be a Muslim" (Rasanayagam 2011, 5). Louw has a similar interest in unearthing "the ways in which Islam is lived and experienced in practice" (Louw 2006, 321). Both their work are based on in-depth interviews and long-term immersion in the milieu. With approaches that leave aside dramatic stories of religious revival and radicalization, both studies show how the redefinition of Muslimness is a way to cope with changing social realities, regain agency and a sense of belonging.

Most important to us however is that anthropologists are those who first got interested in investigating the connection between religious revival and Soviet legacies. Pelkmans insists that scholars need "to acknowledge that Soviet rule did more than simply repress religions. It also influenced understandings of religion and modes of religiosity" (Pelkmans 2009, 5). For instance, how Soviet policies contributed to reify the association between ethnicity and religion (Pelkmans 2009, 6) as well as the distinction, which often bears a negative connotation, that people make between 'religious' and 'a-religious' individuals (Pelkmans and McBrien 2008). Panchenko in his case-study of contemporary esoteric Russian religious movements, argues that this peculiar moral culture "has its origins in Soviet collectivist practices" and that "Russian new religious movements should be discussed in terms of social and cultural continuity rather than change or influence from abroad." In particular, he evokes the late Soviet urban culture with its peculiar mix of New Age beliefs, utopian expectations, and totalistic forms of social control (Panchenko 2011, 120). Actually, he looks into the new Last Testament Church, a Christian-inspired movement led by a former policeman who had a spiritual awakening in 1991 and whose disciples follow

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<sup>35</sup> Zigon sees three aspects to morality: institutional, of public discourse and embodied positions (Zigon 2011, 8). Institutional morality is "a significantly influential moral discourse that is oftentimes supported by very real expressions of power" (Zigon 2011, 9). The public discourse of morality is "all those public articulations of moral beliefs, conceptions, and hopes that are not *directly* articulated by an institution" (Zigon 2011, 9). Finally, morality as an embodied position "is not though before-hand, nor is it noticed when it is performed. It is simply done. Morality as embodied dispositions is one's everyday way of being in the world" (Zigon 2011, 10).

him, waiting for a Second coming. He sees in their holistic cosmological beliefs and practices a continuation with some late-Soviet urban alternative esoteric movements. Indeed, most followers of the Last Testament Church represent the last Soviet generation. The idea of continuity, or path dependency, historical institutionalism's main concept, is also present in all these studies and many underline the fallacious character of the traditional clear-cut distinction between Soviet and post-Soviet social orders. While not entirely rejecting the concept of ideological vacuum, authors carefully and adroitly nuance it. Luehrmann's fascinating piece on religious education in rural Russia proposes to see the secular (Soviet) and post-secular (religious) periods not as eras opposed to each other but as "sites of engagement that alternate and overlap in the lives of both societies and individuals" (Luehrmann 2011, 199). Her thorough investigation of didactic and pedagogical methods in both the Soviet and post-Soviet periods of the Republic of Mari shows that post-Soviet religious seekers are recovering the concepts of Soviet moral education. Her argument rests on the idea that three sources of didactic approaches – Soviet atheist, secular Western, and transnational religious – influence the making of new religious and secular identities in post-Soviet Russia. Even Karagiannis, although not focusing on the Soviet legacy, contends that the post-Soviet ideological vacuum is not easily measurable but exists nonetheless. He explains Hizb ut-Tahrir's popularity in Tajikistan by the fact that there are affinities between Hizb ut-Tahrir and the communist internationalist rhetoric and that the party's ideology fills a void left by the dismissal of the Communist ideology (Karagiannis 2010, 93). Most significantly, it is the idea that the Soviet secularization process, its imposition, methods and repudiation have an impact on governance and public affairs as well as on people's understanding of the socio-political and religious order (Wanner 2011, 219-220).

Dudoignon also addressed the issue of the perpetuation of the Soviet legacy by religious actors through the dissemination of Islamic discourses in the Sughd region. Looking at the political and religious context surrounding the publication of a religious history book of the city of Khujand exposed regional power struggles connected to the quest for local religious legitimacy as well as illustrated traces of Soviet historiographical culture in the construction of the narrative (Dudoignon 2004).

Bissenova too reflects on this idea in her captivating study of identity construction among Central Asians living in the Middle East. In an effort to downplay the narratives emphasizing the radicalization of Central Asians who live in Middle Eastern countries, Bissenova reveals that in most cases, her interviewees were differentiating themselves from Arabs in terms of piety, themselves being more 'modern' than Arabs. Bissenova attributes their behaviour to the reminiscence of their Soviet secular education and socialization (Bissenova 2005).

Finally, contrary to most political scientists, anthropologists are more inclined to acknowledge the tenuous distinction between what is considered religious vs secular or at least are interested in understanding the apparent contradiction expressed by some individuals for example, these young Egyptians who express a pious character and strong beliefs but behave in a way that does not meet up Islamic standards (Schielke 2009). Bissenova has also investigated 'degrees of religiousness' and how people relate to others' manifestations of faith. These studies, by investigating how individuals build their own Islamic identity or the factors influencing the choices they make have the merit to demonstrate that there is a thin line between what is considered religious and secular. Luehrmann's and Louw's theses also go in this direction and in fact contribute to refute the idea that there are separate secular and religious realms. For them, there are no contradictions between attitudes that seem at odds with each other, only strategies of self-redefinition in the making.

## **Conclusion**

What I tried to do in this section was to review the literature with a critical eye and to highlight both positive and negative outcomes inherent to the literature's most prominent research trends. By doing this, we might find inspiration among different research traditions in order to build a multi-faceted theoretical perspective. Even though the religious economy school is concerned with individuals and religious organizations, it lacks sensibility towards the socio-cultural environment in which changes take place. Historical institutionalism is an engaging approach that has mainly been used to probe the survival of Soviet-style institutions and policies. Accordingly, political scientists have neglected to see its usefulness in addressing religious revivalism. Hardly any Central Asia scholars could

possibly deny the impact of 70 years of Soviet rule on the socio-economic development of the peoples of Central Asia. So why then have so few scholars investigated the persistence of the Soviet worldview on today's popular mentalities?

The literature review revealed a convergence of not only the objects of study but of the organisation of thought and the way data is collected and processed. Indeed, the vast majority of scholarship seems to follow a standardized chronological caveat to show the perennity of policies from Tsarist to Soviet to post-Soviet orders without paying much attention to local current socio-political dynamics. While I don't refute the argument that post-Soviet governments more or less reproduce the Soviet religious subordination model, current developments of state-religion relations of Islam in Tajikistan imply political dynamics that go beyond the path dependency scheme and that are characterized by the expression of multiple and often conflicting discourses on the place of religion in the society.<sup>36</sup> Also, some scholars, especially in the nineties at a time when little fieldwork was being conducted, have portrayed the region as a cohesive unit of analysis from which generalizations could be drawn (Haghayeghi 1995; Hiro 1995; Karam 1996; Malashenko 1994). If it seems relevant to make comparisons between the former Soviet republics since they share a common history, local factors such as regional politics and economy, history and culture matter and scholars should not underestimate variations across the region.<sup>37</sup>

The evaluation I make of the literature follows a line of thought expressed by Schoeberlein in 2007, in a critical account of the literature about Central Asia. He underlined the paradox between the fact that scholars have a tendency "to focus on how actually weak the states are, how poorly institutionalized, how ineffective they are in pursuing their policies" and the fact that "the state ends up being at the centre of many analyses" (2007, 284). This epistemological position has two implications. First, it leads to the reification of both the state and the society since states are portrayed as monolithic, and societies, as homogenous, ensuing a neglect of the insider's perspective that would allow the reader to understand the power dynamics within the society to "look well beneath the placid surface that the public

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<sup>36</sup> Shozimov mentions the multifaceted aspects of Islam in Tajikistan: traditional, official, political and pan-Islamic (2006, 127).

<sup>37</sup> I do not pretend that is particular to the Central Asian region. There are indeed many examples of 'regionally flattening' analyses on the 'Middle East', 'Sub-Saharan Africa' and 'South East Asia' which are composed of countries with contrasting realities. Although a smaller ensemble, Central Asia is no exception to the rule.

accommodation to the existing distribution of power, wealth, and status often presents” (Scott 1990, 15).

The state-centric approach confers a relative passiveness to Central Asian societies. They are not described as passive per se, but since little fieldwork or ethnographic research is being conducted in Central Asia, their actions, performances and activities are practically absent from the analysis. Very little voice is given to civil society actors, whether organized or not. Schoeberlein rightfully recommended scholars “to look at the way people think about Islam in as a form of reasoning and understanding about their world, about their dogmatic frameworks and so on” (Schoeberlein 2007, 286). The common interpretation of the issue of religion in post-Soviet Central Asia, which has the state as a main ontological object testify of an understanding that needs to be reassessed.

The challenge that unfolds here will be to demonstrate that it is relevant to use an approach that insists on path dependency, continuation and persistence of old habits to explain the religious revival in Tajikistan. The use of this approach to study a phenomenon that clearly contrasts with Soviet realities can appear to be incongruous. Per contra, I will make use of historical institutionalism’ central concept – path dependency – and a broad definition of institutions that includes ideas and norms to argue that the phenomenon of religious revival is subsidiary of Soviet legacies of understanding and conceiving the social and political order. The challenge is two-folded. First, ontologically speaking, I will seek equilibrium between the impact of the structure (Soviet legacy) on the individual (life and moral choices) and, epistemologically speaking, a balance between what is a finding, a universalisable truth and an observation.

## **Chapter 3 – Theoretical framework and methodology: a neo-institutionalist ethnography**

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The purpose of this chapter is to define more sharply the theoretical orientation of the thesis, to defend a methodological project that reflects the ontological and epistemological choices made, and to give a detailed account of the fieldwork.

### **3.1 The research proposition**

The literature review has revealed two main lacunae. Firstly, studies tend to ignore differences between various regions of Central Asia. Few scholars have studied religious identities from a local perspective. Secondly, the literature reflects an excessive commitment to dichotomies such as state and society, religious and secular, and Soviet and post-Soviet. This dissertation tackles these issues by studying changing religious identities through the prism of the legacy of the Soviet secularization. The principal objective is to assess the impact of the Soviet legacy in the redefinition of religious identities in Tajikistan. I orient my interpretation along two critical axes: ontological and epistemological. Firstly, I address religious revival, an ontological object subjected to diverse interpretations and debates. Indeed, many scholars refuse to frame post-Soviet Islam in Central Asia as a ‘revival’ given that religion did not disappear in Soviet times but was merely lived and practiced differently and more or less secretly. My intention is to nuance the notion of *revival* in order to support the idea that there is continuity between Soviet and post-Soviet order such that against all odds, religious sentiments may have their origin in Soviet values. As Shahrani has suggested, “questions about the Islamic identity must be studied and analyzed within the broader spectrum of the hegemonic Soviet cultural legacies, especially the all-pervasive political culture of scientific atheism” (Shahrani 1995, 275). By using the path dependency argument, I aim to reconcile Soviet and post-Soviet orders by interpreting them not as antagonistic, but as overlapping.

Seeking to grasp the significance of religious revival rather than to look for a sociological explanation reflects an epistemological supposition that reality is not made of causal relations waiting to be discovered by scholars. In this, I follow Davie, who renounces universalisable truths and refers instead to socio-political patterns which reflect the “non-

randomness of human living” (Davie 2013). Ethnography’s emphasis on subjects’ narratives makes available competing discourses on religion and illuminates “the large variation of meanings and complex struggles” (Jourde 2009, 206) that the interaction of religion and society typically entails. These narratives must be understood not as historical facts but as “constructions which justify the present” (Schiffauer 2000, 237, cited in Stephan 2006, 155).

The theoretical perspective that I adopt supplements interpretivist and positivist epistemologies with concepts borrowed from historical institutionalism and political ethnography. At first, institutionalist and ethnographic methods do not seem intrinsically compatible but they can be reconciled in a hybrid theoretical position that acknowledges structure, agency and reflexivity. On the one hand, the concept of path dependency, more specifically the resilience of Soviet values, will be used to assess both state and individual orientations. For this, I abide by Smith and Grahame’s evocation that “the social organization which makes possible the daily scenes of life in contemporary societies isn’t wholly contained within the local setting or its associated sensemaking practices. Rather, this organization is generated by social relations which originate outside of the local setting and which can only be partially glimpsed within it” (Smith 1987 cited in Grahame 1998, 350-1). This is precisely what this thesis is about: glimpses of local narratives about religion understood in the context of the legacy of Soviet rule.

First, I want to show that Tajik state institutions and laws responsible for regulating religion have been greatly modelled upon Soviet institutions. Second, I will argue that the path dependency argument is also useful in decoding the behaviour of ordinary citizens as well as believers who seem to have rejected the Soviet lifestyle. On the other hand, the interpretivist stance offers two possibilities: 1- to explore social narratives that have not been significantly considered in research conducted in Central Asia, 2- to revisit common dichotomies of state and society, religious and secular and Soviet and post-Soviet by showing the blurred boundaries between them.

The phenomenon that I am studying concerns both national and local contexts, but since my fieldwork was concentrated in one relatively small area, its comparative value might appear limited. But as I will detail in the methodology section, my research deals with

“multiple levels of insight” (Bayard de Volo 2009, 222). The discourses on religion that I study involve multiple voices, including those formulated at the national level by politicians and various institutions that deal with the regulation of religion. Even if, according to Gledhill, the study of micro-political processes can reveal that “local level processes not merely reflect larger political processes and national-level conflicts” (Gledhill 1994, 124), the analysis should not be hermetic. Local narratives should be understood within the broader national context. Ethnography is especially well suited to handle due to its “consideration of transtemporal and translocal effects” (Glaeser 2004, 7).

### **3.1.2 The Soviet modernization project’s path dependency**

#### *The Soviet modernization project: Success or failure?*

In the previous chapter, I discussed the virtues and downsides of the path dependency argument, but so far it has been presented at the conceptual level. This chapter will not only identify what exactly is path dependent in the story—laws, attitudes, social norms—but will also articulate how I intend to use the known attributes of path dependent processes to illustrate the continuity between the Soviet and post-Soviet periods. The following discussion revolves around the effects of the forced secularization and the social engineering project, which I will detail in Chapter 4. It focuses on socialization and education to argue that even though secularization was not entirely successful, in the sense that Soviets failed to eradicate religion completely, the attempt to secularize the Tajiks deeply informed the understanding of the world for generations of Soviet citizens. The discussion will build into an argument for interpreting the current situation in Tajikistan in terms of the accommodation of values rather than passive resignation (Froese 2008) or resistance (Poliakov 1992).

Many authors have underlined the failure of the Soviet’s transformative attempt. For instance, Myer’s survey of the literature shows that a majority of scholars endorse the idea of a failed transformation. In particular, they emphasize Central Asian peoples’ distinctiveness, manifested through the persistence of local languages (as an important cultural marker), the survival of cultural traditions (respect for elders, gender division, large families), and the resilience of religion. That last point is what authors see as the breaking

point dividing Muslims from Russians and the main reason why assimilation did not work (Myer 2001, 169-173). Rywkin (1982) has most strongly stated the failure of Soviet policies in Central Asia and “USSR’s Muslim problem”<sup>38</sup>. Poliakov suggested that in many respects, the structure of the traditional society has been preserved because Soviet authorities have simply superimposed their authority on existing structures, notably, production units in Central Asia (Poliakov 1992, 17). Researchers working with Fierman have directly and systematically addressed the failure of the modernization project in terms of culture, language and religion (Fierman 1991).

DeWeese refers to this discussion as a ‘fruitless debate’ and argues that when comparing Central Asia to the rest of the Islamic world, it is easy to conclude that the Soviets definitely “succeeded all too well” (DeWeese 2002, 302). In this line of thought I compared present-day Afghanistan and Tajikistan in the Introduction. Therefore, the question should not ask if the Soviets managed to transform the societies of the former USSR but how? On that matter, Adams, in her investigation of the cultural revival in post-Soviet Uzbekistan, mentions: “The story that I find myself telling is one not of an Uzbek cultural renaissance blossoming in the wake of independence but, rather, of the successful institutionalization of a Soviet cultural schema that continue to define Uzbek culture and national identity” (Adams 1999, 336). The focus here should not be on the extent to which atheistic ideas conquered the hearts and minds of individuals but rather on the way it affected people’s understanding of the role of religion in society. Dealing more specifically with the issue of religion, Wanner suggested that secularization does not lead to the eradication of religion but rather that secularization processes draw on “particular views of how religion should relate to politics, governance, and public affairs and lead to religious change” (Wanner 2011, 219).

Gellner has quite convincingly demonstrated the socialization mechanisms behind Western modern education systems. His influential book, *Nations and nationalism*, connects the

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<sup>38</sup> In the Seventies and Eighties, authors like Rywkin (1982) and Carrère d’Encausse (1978) predicted that the USSR’s Muslim republics would be the ones to precipitate the fall of the Union because of their demographic weight and the failure of transforming Muslim people into *Homo Sovieticus*, to use a term coined by Carrère d’Encausse. As history showed, it was rather nationalist mobilizations in the Baltic republics that destabilized the country.

creation of identities to the process of state making, and more globally, to modernity and the technological upheavals it generates. For Gellner, state-making created the nation. His argument suggests that modern economic development fostered a necessity for specialization which eventually led to the development of a universal education system whose task was to generate common values and knowledge, that allowed social groups to communicate and exchange knowledge understood by all (Gellner 2008). Anderson's *Imagined Communities* similarly suggests that nations are formed because of modern education, standardization of means of communication and knowledge that unite people around similar ideas. In the cases studied by Anderson, mostly Latin American countries, pilgrim creole functionaries and provincial printmen thus played a decisive role in creating the new consciousness of an imagined community (Anderson 1991). Here again, literacy is seen as central: print and newspapers in vernacular languages contributed to the creation of a powerful emotional bond. A fascinating article from Geddes and Zaller (1989), which investigated the issue of legitimacy and support of political leadership in authoritarian countries, can help us understand the mechanisms behind the dissemination and internalization of political ideas. Their study of 1970s' Brazil shows that popular support to the government was determined by both the exposure to the official discourse and the capacity to formulate independent opinions. Their surprising conclusions reveal that middle classes were more supportive of the authorities because of their repeated exposure to the latter's discourse and the lack of intellectual sophistication that would have allowed them to resist that discourse. They found that this contrasted with upper classes which were exposed to the same discourses but were far more critical. Also, they found that lower classes were less supportive due to the fact that official discourses simply did not reach them as a result of their limited involvement in public matters and interest in politics. What these influential studies tell us is that the transmission of information and the exposure to discourses are determinant in forging national consciousness and identity.

Echoing these studies, Yurchak pushed the reflexion further and proposed to study Soviet hegemony not only in relation to its hegemonic discourse but its "meaning inscribed in ideological performance and representation" (Yurchak 2003, 480-1). Yet, because he warned about binary divisions, scholars need to "question how Soviet people in fact interpreted the lived ideology and reality of socialism" (Yurchak 2003, 485).

*Accommodation in context*

The concept of accommodation supposes that imposed practices and discourses are not only contested or passively accepted but can be negotiated and contribute to the making and remaking of personal and socio-political identities. Thinking in terms of accommodation instead of resistance or resignation allows us to give agency to individuals in a broader sense than by referring to the concept of resistance. This is the case because resistance usually implies a concerted and motivated defiance of authorities. In James Scott's examination of peasant resistance in Malaysia, he described 'everyday form of resistance', actions that required little or no coordination and which were conducted with "ordinary weapons of relatively powerless groups such as foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, sabotage, etc." As a result of these mostly non-violent actions, peasants engaged in low-intensity conflicts with the authorities (Scott, 1985, 29). And yet, while Scott's studies gave a new understanding to the concept of resistance, it did not allow for the consideration of different responses to authoritative change because people don't always resist; many comply, many defy, but many more accommodate. As summarized by Husband: "In a larger context, far more citizens everywhere practice accommodation than ever take up activism" (Husband 2000, 150).

Historians and anthropologists have made better use of the concept of accommodation. In the Soviet context, Husband looked at secularization campaigns in Russia between 1917 and 1932 and studied the way people tried to resist and to accommodate the imposition of a secular lifestyle. In trying to break the image of passive submission conferred to populations, Husband mentions that it created "circumstances in which individuals and groups not only had the opportunity to reevaluate their relationship to the sacred, but indeed could not escape doing so" (Husband 2000, 162). Northrop goes in the same direction by focusing on strategies of Central Asians to cope with Soviet colonialist policies (Northrop 2004), in particular, the transformation of gender relations in the absence of proletarian classes. Northrop focuses on the discursive and physical battle over the definition of proper forms of everyday life which involved both the Soviet authorities and Uzbek women and men. His later book, which covers the whole Stalinist period, concludes that: "In the local encounter between Soviet power and Central Asia, both sides emerged transformed" (Northrop 2004, 345). Northrop acknowledges that by the late 1960s in Uzbekistan, "the

Russians' self-styled European mission appeared, at long last, to have achieved hegemony among Central Asians themselves" (Northrop 2004, 351) and that in contemporary Uzbekistan, the *Hujum*, the Soviet campaign for unveiling Central Asian Muslim women, is almost universally seen as a positive mark of progress and a landmark of the Uzbek nation's development (Northrop 2001, 115).

Beyond literacy campaigns and the transmission of values via a standardized education, Suny argues that the Soviet authorities and the intelligentsia managed to foster emotional connections "first to the Revolution and Civil War, the project of creating a new world, then to Lenin and Stalin as personifications of the Soviet project, later to the victory over fascism". The end result was the creation of a powerful civic culture that connected persons from an extended space (Suny 2012, 23). Likewise, Lane suggests that Soviet rituals were effective tools because they often blended with "interpersonal values that bind the individual to his family and his local community" and "rechannel them towards the large and more impersonal political collective" (Lane 1984, 215).

Indisputably, Central Asia ended up being profoundly transformed by the Soviet social engineering project. But given the resilience of traditional customs and religious habits, there is no doubt that Sovietization was not entirely successful. The Soviet transformative process cannot simply be described as the imposition of foreign atheist modernistic norms and values upon traditional societies. Opposing both the idea of the resignation of Soviet peoples and the exceptionalism of the Soviet experience, Suny argues that: "supposed Russian exceptionalism is to see the ethnic or national as self-generated and the socialist and Soviet to be an artificial imposition" (Suny 2012, 17). The social engineering project should rather be seen as a process of forced negotiation between foreign and local norms in which some local actors retained agency. Yurchak has adroitly touched upon the issue of accommodation with his study of the appropriation and reinterpretation of Soviet values and discourses:

"The relationship of the last Soviet generation with official ideology did not simply involve a resistance to ideology, or its opportunistic use for self-advancement, or a dissimulated repetition of official ideological statements, but also entailed interesting and creative acts of rendering communist ideology meaningful within the broader framework of human values" (Yurchak 2003, 499).

### *Ideological vacuum*

Using the concept of ideological vacuum is both controversial and challenging. As Louw suggested, referring to the ideological vacuum argument is risky because it can be used as a tactic by incumbent governments to legitimate authoritarianism (Louw 2007, 130). The idea is obviously not to endorse authoritarian practices, and as I indicated earlier, my intention is to go beyond the study of state practices. Instead, I propose to use it to make sense of changing individual religious identities. I don't want to limit the definition of the concept of ideological vacuum to the disappearance of the Soviet ideological framework. Instead, the meaning I give to it encompasses both the ideological and material delinquency that followed the break-up, which was particularly painful in war-torn Tajikistan. The dynamics I explore take place in a political context within which the post-Soviet ideological vacuum is coupled with failed attempts to construct new national histories (Karagiannis 2010, 93). The civil war in Tajikistan epitomizes this failure. It shattered an already fragile economy and delayed economic growth, which could have been a factor favouring national cohesion. Finally, beyond common social narratives, material from my own interviews strongly leads in this direction.

The concept of ideological vacuum is also contentious because a great deal of authors contend that there is no clear boundary between Soviet and post-Soviet periods (DeWeese 2002; Louw 2007; Peyrouse 2003; Rasanayagam 2011). The ideological vacuum surely created a destabilizing and uncertain environment, but it does not mean that Soviet values were suddenly discarded and forgotten. In accordance with the overall objective of the thesis, the concept of ideological vacuum has to be nuanced in order to avoid marking a definite line between Soviet and post-Soviet orders. The absence of delimitation between these two historical periods can be explained by the affinities of religious and Soviet moral codes (Luehrmann 2011; Zigon 2011). In sum, the main concepts of the thesis – path dependency, accommodation, and ideological vacuum – while seemingly antagonistic, can be reconciled in a new interpretation of post-Soviet attitudes toward religion.

### **3.2 Methodology and fieldwork**

The methodological project was, manifestly, designed in accordance with the theoretical stance adopted for this research project. It therefore dedicated great importance to ethnographic fieldwork, investigative techniques that involve familiarization with the milieu and immersion as well as formal interview techniques and bibliographic research. Even though the research deals with reminiscences of the past, archival research has not been conducted. Instead, I have tried to emphasize the legacy of the Soviet modernization and secularization experience in today's Tajikistan. The following section includes a presentation of the research site, a detailed account of the fieldwork, and a section on subjectivity and positionality in ethnographic research.

#### **3.2.1 Tajikistan, the Sughd viloyat and the city of Khujand**

Central Asia is a fascinating region that has been subject to various religious and cultural influences over the centuries; Zoroastrianism cohabited with Buddhism, Christianity, Manichaeism, Judaism, and local beliefs before Arabs conquered the region in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. Later came new rulers: Persians, Mongols, Russians and then Soviets, leading to the ethno-national territories we know today.

Tajikistan is now a small country of 143,100 sq km landlocked between Uzbekistan to the West, Kyrgyzstan to the North, China to the East and Afghanistan to the South. A majority of Tajiks today speak a Persian language close to the one spoken in Iran, though still written with a modified version of the Cyrillic alphabet<sup>39</sup>. Tajikistan is an ethnically diverse country; as of 2010, it was composed of 84,3% Tajiks, 12,2% Uzbeks and 0,5% Russians (Tajikistan 2012, 7). The country gained independence on September 9, 1991. Already the poorest of the republics during the Soviet period, current economic indicators reveal the economic decline of Tajikistan that was accelerated during the civil war: Industrial production dropped of 50% between 1990 and 1998 (Brill Olcott 2005. 27). The economic situation during the war was a complete catastrophe; the average monthly salary was less than five dollars and the average monthly pension around two dollars (Rotar 1996). The economy has never completely recovered from the initial shock. In 2011 47% of the GDP came from the revenues of migrant workers, making the Tajik economy the most

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<sup>39</sup> Though different, Tajik, Iranian Persian and Afghani Dari are mutually intelligible.

remittance-dependent in the world (World Bank 2012). The number of migrant workers is estimated at nearly one million persons, and a great majority of them (93%) work in Russia (ILO 2010). A critical lack of economic resources, bureaucratic weaknesses, internal instability as well as regional isolation<sup>40</sup> has led observers to question the future stability of the country, especially on the eve of the NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan (ICG 2009, Olimov and Olimova 2013).

My fieldwork was conducted in Northern Tajikistan, in the Sughd Viloyat, formerly called *Leninabadskaya oblast* up until November 10, 2000 (Tajikistan 2011a). Located partly in the Ferghana valley and at the crossroads of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, the region has often been labelled as a hotbed of radical Islam in Central Asia. As of 2011, there were 2,251,700 inhabitants in the whole territory of Sughd. The region is densely populated with 89.3 inhabitants/km<sup>2</sup>. Urban and rural dwellers account for 25% and 75% of the population respectively (Tajikistan 2011a, 12-16). As with many other regions of Central Asia, the Sughd Viloyat is ethnically mixed and has a large Uzbek population. The ethnic composition of Sughd is 83.3% Tajik, 14.6% Uzbek, 0.4% Russian, 0.6% Kyrgyz (Tajikistan 2012, 110).<sup>41</sup> Interestingly, there are no statistics on unemployment rates. However, the 2010 census documented 398,700 persons employed in Sughd (Tajikistan 2012, 50), which represents 17% of the region's adult population.

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<sup>40</sup> Some authors point out that the geography of the country, 93% of which is covered with high mountains, engenders a lack of national unity (Rashid 1994, 162) as well as hindering trade connections.

<sup>41</sup> The Uzbek and Russian population significantly dropped after independence; the region included 7.6% Russians and 23.5% Uzbeks in 1989 (Tajikistan 2012, 7).



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During Soviet times, the province of Leninabad provided most of the intellectual and governing elite of the country from 1943 until independence, when the civil war broke out and forced a regional power shift favouring southerners (Martin 1997). Sughd was and still is Tajikistan's most industrialized region. It was also perceived as a very Sovietized region, with cities like Chkalovsk and Taboshar having large Russian populations. However, some districts remained very conservative throughout the Soviet period, for example, Kuhistoni Mastchox<sup>42</sup>, Isfara and Asht. The Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) has a large membership in the north and the party is very active on multiple fronts.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>42</sup> In the 1950s, the Soviet government resettled the inhabitants of the whole highland valley of the Upper Zarafshan River, Kuhistoni (Mountainous) Mastchox district, to the steppe of Dilwarzin, later renamed Mastchoxi Nav (New) (Zevaco 2013).

<sup>43</sup> The IRPT has around 12,000 to 13,000 members in Sughd. The party is involved in a number of issues including the 2010 pay-road construction's scandal, prohibition of the hijab in schools and institutions of higher education, and addressing increasing suicide rates.

Sughd was spared mostly because of its isolated geographical position and the neutrality of the Northern elite. Most of the fighting took place in the southern province of Khatlon and around the capital and involved regional factions from the south and the Pamirs (Nourzhanov 2005). During the civil war, Sughd was mostly cut off from the rest of the country, and goods came in and out of the region through Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. However, a brief armed rebellion took place in January 1996, when local politicians and their supporters protested against the 'Kulyabisation' of politics (Martin 1997). The mutiny, led by General Mumin Mamadzhanov, Head of the Leninabad oblast military registration and enlistment office, was eventually suppressed and Mamadzhanov arrested (Rotar 1996). In November 1998, Colonel Khudoberdyev, an ethnic Uzbek military commander and former pro-government warlord from the Qurghonteppa region who had been in exile in Uzbekistan after a failed insurrection in June 1997, invaded the Leninabad region from Uzbekistan. Government forces put down the rebellion after a week of heavy fighting (Nourzhanov 2005,123-4).

Since the end of violence in the late 1990s, the situation in Sughd has remained tense, but the civil war agreement is holding even though "the war-time political division between the state and the opposition thus remains" (Heathershaw and Roche, 4), and warlordism continues to pose a threat to stability (Nourzhanov 2005). Political events of the last three years have contributed to feelings of insecurity and instability in the country. On August 22, 2010, 25 political prisoners escaped during a mass prison break from a high-security prison in Dushanbe, "including the brothers of Nemat Azizov, the sons of slain ex-Minister of Emergencies Mirzo Ziyoev, as well as several members of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan" (Asia Plus 2010c).

On September 3, 2010, a suicide bomber drove into a police station in Khujand that housed the Anti-Organized Crime Unit of the Police of the Sughd Province, a dreaded institution locally referred to as the 6<sup>th</sup> Department. Two police officers died as the result of the explosion and 25 were injured (Asia Plus 2010d). I was myself 3 km away from the station when the bomb exploded and clearly felt the detonation. The event created a commotion in the city since it was the first suicide-bombing attack ever in the territory of Tajikistan. To this day the identity and motives of the perpetrator(s) remain unclear. The government initially blamed the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan but offered no evidence to support its

claims. Responsibility was later claimed by an unknown Islamic group until they released a video on a Chechen website, Kavkazcenter.com (Asia Plus 2010d), but the authorities declared that there was no evidence of involvement of this group (Asia Plus 2010e). Fourteen alleged members of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan were later detained in connection with the bombings (RFE/RL 2010e). On the ground, people were speculating on the motives, citing possible revenge by previous detainees or the family of former detainees who had been tortured in this infamous station. Some also questioned the veracity of the story told by authorities, alleging that there was no one in the car, that it was parked close to the station when the bomb was set off, and that there were certainly more casualties than had been reported. Other sources indicated that the attack was intended to interfere with the investigation of the murder of Homidjon Karimov, the owner of Isfara's Bazaar (*Bozorkom*)<sup>44</sup> who was shot dead in his home village on August 30 (Harambaeva 2010). In general, people were not surprised that this particular station was the target of an attack.

Several days after the Khujand bombing on September 19, an attack on a military convoy passing through the Kamarob Gorge killed at least 25 police officers and soldiers. This was followed by two months of fighting against 'insurgents' in the Rasht valley. The government blamed former opposition commanders Alovaddin Davlatov and Abdullo Rahimov for the ambush (RFE/RL 2010d). Davlatov and seven followers were killed by government forces in a controversial operation in the village of Runo in January 2011, while Rahimov was killed along with 10 of his followers April 14, 2011 (RFE/RL 2011b). While authorities portrayed the conflict in Kamarob as an Islamic insurgency involving foreign actors, evidence suggests that local commanders "acted autonomously against the government as they felt threatened by the further incursion of the Dushanbe government into their region" (Heathershaw and Roche 2011, 13).

Finally, in July 2012, the southern Pamir region of Kuhistoni-Badakhshan<sup>45</sup> was the scene of another violent clash. The conflict was touched off by the murder of General Abdullo

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<sup>44</sup> Karimov was known to be involved in criminal circles and had previously been convicted for criminal activities (Hamrabaeva 2010).

<sup>45</sup> Officially the Mountainous Badakhshan Autonomous Province (in Russian Gorno-Badakhshan), a sparsely populated region in the Pamir Mountains with a population of about 250,000.

Nazarov, the chairman of the Directorate of Tajikistan's State Committee for National Security in Badakhshan Province.<sup>46</sup> This was quickly followed by a crackdown in the province against so-called 'militants' and their alleged leader, Tolib Ayombekov, a former warlord from the civil war (RFE/RL 2012b). Clashes resulted in the death of 70 persons, some 20 of them civilians (RFE/RL2012c). Ayombekov claimed his innocence for the murder of Nazarov (Aioubov 2012), denied that the matter was connected to tobacco smuggling, and declared that authorities accused him because they wanted to get rid of former field commanders (Asia Plus 2012b). Adding further complexity to the matter, Sabzali Mamadrizoev, the Islamic Party's local representative was killed on July 25 (RFE/RL 2012a), while Imumnazar Imumnazarov, a respected informal community leader was killed by gunmen in his home in Khorog on August 22 (Mirzobekova 2012). Making the situation even more opaque, all telephone and Internet connections were cut entirely for several days during the clashes. Authorities claimed that communication lines had been hit by bullets, which explained the unavailability of means of communication, though no one was convinced by this explanation (Chorshanbiev 2012). In this case again, violent events found their sources in a complex web of events and socio-politico-economic interrelations and cannot be easily explained. Thorough research has yet to be conducted to understand the causes and consequences of these events. Perhaps it is a sign of a political delinquency, the salience of regional identities and the subsequent military reaffirmation of authority by the government. These matters may also have been connected to financial interests and black market activities.

By relating those events, my intention was to underline the fragile nature of national politics in Tajikistan. Interestingly, these stories corroborate Kalyvas' proposal to focus on local narratives for the understanding of violence because what may be perceived as political violence could actually be an act of violence in connection with local personal matters and dynamics (Kalyvas 2003). However, it is certainly more convenient for the authorities to blame events on extremist or insurgent groups. These incidents are yet other examples of "rhetorical battles for control over defining the event" (King 2004, 449) and

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<sup>46</sup> Nazarov, a former KGB agent and member of the United Tajik Opposition (against governmental forces) during the civil war, was linked by a Tajik Court to the August 2010 mass jail break (RFE/RL 2012a).

testify to the impossibility of truly making sense of social reality in light of divergent interpretations of events by different actors.

### **3.2.2 A voyage to Northern Tajikistan**

Prior to starting my doctoral research, I had never been to Tajikistan. Though I spent some time in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan before, I had a very limited network in the region. For this reason, I decided to combine my first doctoral research to a five-month internship with the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) – Office in Tajikistan after its Human Rights officer proposed me to do so. As a “summer intern”<sup>47</sup>, I was working on the implementation of a survey project, which focused on people’s perceptions of religious extremism in Tajikistan. I was working in partnership with two different local implementing partners as well as with local and international scholars affiliated to the project. It was embedded in a broader OSCE programme called, in the OSCE parlance, VERLT- “Violent Extremism and Radicalization that Lead to Terrorism”. An officer in the Dushanbe Office was coordinating the project and I was tasked to work in the Khujand Field Office in partnership with a local NGO. Therefore, my fieldwork was for the most part conducted in Northern Tajikistan, in the Sughd Viloyat. I spent most of my time in the capital of the province, Khujand but made several visits to surrounding villages and towns, mainly in the districts of Bobojon-Gafurov, Isfara and Gonchi as well as in the capital city, Dushanbe.

Having worked on the design and implementation of a large survey in Tajikistan and having conducted and monitored surveys myself, I realized the limits of such an approach. In addition to translation issues, our team faced many difficulties linked to the fact that most respondents were very reluctant to answer questions. Because of the nature of the research, it is possible that some respondents feared that authorities would subsequently use their answers against them.<sup>48</sup> Also, the survey design seemed inadequate for rural settings where respondents seemed to lack sufficient information to properly understand and answer some of the questions. Finally, the implementing partner responsible for administering the

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<sup>47</sup> I hereby refer to the sarcastic comparison made by Hopf when criticizing Laitin’s approach to field research and data collection in his 1998 book, *Identity in Formation*. “In IF, on the other hand, rational choice is the senior partner, ethnography, the summer intern” (Hopf 2006, 18).

<sup>48</sup> Allina-Pisano also suggests that people might be reluctant to talk because of their fear of local gossiping afterwards (2009, 68).

survey did not take good care in the selection of pollsters who lacked experience and diligence. In the Tajik context, addressing a matter as touchy as religion clearly requires more than the one-time administration of a pre-formatted questionnaire.<sup>49</sup> For that reason, the ethnographic proposition to establish a relationship of trust with interviewees and “focus on the ways in which Islam is lived and experienced in practice” (Louw 2006, 321) is definitely more appropriate although it can easily be complemented with quantitative data.

My position within the OSCE greatly facilitated the establishment of contacts with various groups of people such as imams, representatives of the Islamic Revival party, civil society activists and state representatives. However, it also limited my interactions with ‘ordinary people’ and though I visited many cities and villages around the city of Khujand, I had few opportunities to have significant contact with rural communities. When I arrived in Tajikistan, my knowledge of Russian was good but still deficient and it took me some time to become comfortable enough to conduct interviews on my own. My field research combined media (newspapers and television) surveying, attendance of focus groups, semi-directed interviews as well as ethnographic in-depth exchanges and observations but this fieldwork was deficient in terms of ‘immersion’. If ethnography is defined as an approach that intends to make sense of a particular group’s system of meanings, long stays become essential though long duration stays are also not a guarantee of genuine ethnographic work. The second fieldwork in 2011 deepened my connection with many of my interlocutors. Building up a good reputation and developing genuine relations of trust with interviewees, was imperative for the kind of fieldwork I conducted. Coming back in 2011 showed my interlocutors that I was very dedicated to my research, eager to learn and more importantly that I cared about them, their opinions and life stories.

Prior to both departures, I had the intention to live with a Tajik family in order to be able to grasp the nuances of Tajik daily life and social organization as well as improve my knowledge of Tajik. During my first stay, I had lived in the small OSCE Office in Khujand. During my second stay, I lived for two months with a family I had met the previous year

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<sup>49</sup> The survey was reconducted when a new experienced partner organization came in the picture and the final results are certainly more representative (Taarnby 2012).

before moving in an apartment on my own. Central Asian hospitality is a double-edged sword. As Laura Adams puts it: “the hosts are free to kill the guest with kindness” but “the guest must submit, willingly and with a pleasant disposition, to the wanted and unwanted attentions of the host” (Adams 1999, 342). And that is why, like Adams did back then, after two months, I chose to live on my own to maintain a sense of autonomy.

The fact that I did not share a roof with a family for the entire time period does not mean that I was disconnected from the intimacy of Tajik life. I became entangled in many events of everyday life and exceptional moments while being there. Though it is not possible to recount them all, fieldwork brought me to unexpected places: I was stuck in the middle of a couple’s fight, became a confidant to troubled girls, attended countless wedding parties, asked to help a married man find a third wife via online dating, celebrated the end of Ramadan and the return of Hajjis, questioned for having ‘Wahhabi-looking’ acquaintances, received countless marriage proposals etc. These events all represented opportunities to immerse myself in the everyday life of Khujandis in order to grasp the socio-political realities of people around me.

Both periods of fieldwork took place during the period of Ramadan. It was the occasion to examine how the observance of Ramadan (or its non-observance) can fuel tensions between those who do not observe it and those who do. Indeed, religious practices is a source of tensions between families of a same neighbourhood (*mahalla*) or even within families, where a generational gap is often visible; the older generations generally being ‘less religious’ than their children. Finally, my stays mainly covered the summer season and though the heat is sometimes unbearable, summer is a pleasant season. During my second stay, I stayed longer and experienced the harshness of winter with water and electricity shortages.

Cefai alleges that prior to starting the research, scholars should only have a vague idea of what they will investigate during the fieldwork and that the research topic will emerge through familiarization with the milieu and people (Cefai 2013, 25). If desirable, the absence of predispositions is hardly achievable. Yanow explains that the ethnographer is “understood to bring prior knowledge to his or her experiences, thereby giving shape to the myriad sensate stimuli (...) vying for attention” (Yanow 2006, 9). In the case of Central

Asia, a set of assumptions about religious dynamics can blind researchers and lead them to overemphasize the prevalence of radical beliefs and conservative values.

I was not immune to that myself. Prior to arriving in Tajikistan, I had in mind that I would be confronted with two types of people (religious or secular) and that it would be easy to differentiate them. I anticipated manifestations of faith to be very obvious. For instance, I was very much looking forward to attend a ‘religious wedding’, which I expected to be transcendent until I realized that there was not much religion involved in such a wedding except for the ‘Nikoh’ during which the bride and the groom exchange vows before God. It is performed in the presence of a third party who is not necessarily a religious figure. The Nikoh itself does not require the presence of guests and family and friends gather afterwards to celebrate in a reception hall or at someone’s place where no alcohol is served, no music is played and where women and men sit in two separate rooms.

Another example is the month of Ramadan, which I expected to be very solemn and profound. Instead, I ended up celebrating the first day of Ramadan in July 2011 sitting in a potato field with a bunch of men who claimed a Muslim identity yet did not see much irony in making vodka toasts to underline the beginning of the Muslim Holy month. At the end of Ramadan, I accompanied a friend to visit her grandparents. Most people honour the end of Ramadan by visiting family elders and offering them presents. While there was a short prayer pronounced when we arrived (as there often was), the conversation quickly moved to profane matters. At this occasion again, religion was not as apparent as I expected it to be.

The main methodological challenge was to move away from the dichotomic relations that I criticize: religious-secular dyads. Ethnographic immersion appeared to be the proper approach to break the binaries of religious and secular realms while studying behaviours that seemed inherently religious or secular. The idea is not to say that categories are irrelevant but to argue that they are porous and reflect complex socio-political dynamics.

### **3.2.3 State institutions and actors**

The problem with a state-centric approach is that it is occulting other forms of political manifestations. While we should avoid a focus solely on the state and its apparatus, it would be impossible and even dishonest to neglect the importance of Tajikistan’s state

policies and institutions. State policies do matter and in this research, they are considered as an integral part of the politico-religious dynamics.

Concretely, the first task was to substantiate the formal institutionalization and interpretative processes by detailing the Soviet secularization process and dissemination of Soviet values. For this, I used a typical neo-institutional approach that considers that institutions are formal norms and rules but could also be unwritten social practices, conducts, and habitus. The idea is to look at how new institutions borrow from old ones, how customs become laws and the way in which the existing institutional world circumscribes the range of institutional creation. I use a common definition of historical institutionalism: “the same operative forces will generate the same results everywhere in favour of the view that the effect of such forces will be mediated by the contextual features of a given situation often inherited from the past” (Hall and Taylor 1996, 941). This is what Palier calls *interpretative processes*, which are shared with other social actors and generate coordinated and reinforcement effects (Palier 2005, 39).

Informal practices play an affirmative role in the definition of the state’s orientations and are observable through the actions and dispositions of the current leadership, who are successors of the Soviet Nomenklatura. If we agree that informal institutions influence actors’ political inclinations, it seems relevant to observe the reflection of values and norms that guided the actions of political figures for decades. This is to corroborate an idea widespread in the literature: that the “Central Asian elite will long continue to be determined by the Soviet habitus” (Abashin 2004, 215).

A scholar once warned me that interviewing civil servants would be boring<sup>50</sup> and useless since they would only ‘waffle’ and provide no original point of view on state-religion relations. I decided to conduct interviews with civil servants nevertheless and while some were rather rhetorical exercises, others turned out to be very insightful. Institutions that were scrutinized are those of the Council of Ulemas and the Committee for Religious

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<sup>50</sup> During an interview conducted on a hot summer day, an interlocutor at the CRA fell asleep during our conversation. I was highly embarrassed whereas she did not even notice that she slipped away for few minutes.

Affairs. These bodies are the heirs of the defunct SADUM<sup>51</sup> and the All-Union Department of Religious Affairs. I conducted interviews with six representatives of the Committee of Religious Affairs, one in Dushanbe, two in Khujand one in Isfara, one in Kistakuz and one in Buston. I conducted one interview with the Head of the Council of Ulemas for the Sughd region in Khujand but failed to get proper interview with the Qazi in Dushanbe. In addition to formal interviews, I attended a dozen meetings where representatives of the Council of Ulemas and the Committee of Religious Affairs (CRA) were present, such as focus-groups and round-tables in the framework of the OSCE survey-project I was working on, Summer Camps on religion in 2010 and 2011. I also attended two international conferences where I could observe the interactions between the Council, CRA representatives, and other audiences.

I also spent a significant amount of time at the regional headquarters of the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan in Khujand. I was introduced to Party members through the OSCE in 2010 but spent most time there in 2011. Their office is a busy place always filled with supporters who come to pray, attend special Koranic or political lectures, take language classes, etc. I got acquainted to many female and male members who always warmly welcomed me and eventually started inviting me home for tea. Despite that, a friend of mine<sup>52</sup> once told me that some party members were suspicious of my interest in the Party's affairs. Yet, I was never asked to stay away and received many invitations to formal and informal events.

I looked into official documents dealing with the regulation of religion such as the *Law on Freedom of Conscience and of Religious Associations*, the *Law on Parental Responsibility in the Upbringing of Children* as well as other relevant legislations. I also surveyed numerous presidential decrees, which contributed year after year to strengthen the regulation of religion. Presidential decrees also tell us about the structure of authority in Tajikistan where the President enjoys extended political power. Emomali Rahmon<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> The Spiritual Muslim Board of Central Asia. SADUM stands for the Russian acronym: Sredne Aziatskoe dukhovnoe upravlenie musul'man. Established in Tashkent in 1943, the SADUM was responsible for elaborating and implementing the broad religious orientations for the Central Asian Republics.

<sup>52</sup> See footnote 56.

<sup>53</sup> The president dropped the Russian suffix 'ov' from his last name in 2007 and encouraged the population to do so as well (Najibullah 2007b) but not many people seem to follow his example.

represents a strong authoritative figure, an unofficial father of the Nation who is held in great respect for bringing peace upon Tajikistan. In addition to having his portraits all over Tajikistan, he is omnipresent in the media. His speeches and whereabouts are reported daily in television reports as well as in newspapers. The President's speeches, available in Tajik, Russian and English on the official website, represent a pertinent source of information for assessing the authorities' take on religion and the discursive dimension of state actors.

Apart from formal interviews and documentary research, immersion and daily observations proved to be extremely beneficial since it allowed me to observe the important gaps between the laws and their implementation on the ground. Following my intention to avoid reifying state structures, narratives from interviews will reveal that state actors are not always faithful representatives of state policies and they can hold their own interests and agenda. As such, institutions are “dominated as much by informal structures and practices as by formal institutions, which are used to varying degrees by both actors seeking to establish their authority and those seeking to resist this authority” (Grzymala-Busse and Jones Luong 2002, 531).

### **3.2.4 Societal discourses**

Since I argue that the state-centric approach has to be transcended in order to allow multiple voices, mainly societal voices, to be heard, the second step was to map the various and sometimes competing discourses on religion. What I propose is “to analyze the gap between the idealized representation and actual apprehension of events, people and political orders” (Weeden 2009, 85) by providing an account of local perceptions of religious politics and trying to uncover what lies behind the making, dissemination and understanding of narratives addressing the issue of the place of religion in the society.

Schatz describes ethnography as “a sensibility that goes beyond face-to-face contact. It is an approach that cares – with the possible emotional engagement that implies – to glean the meanings that the people under study attribute to their social and political reality” (Schatz 2009; 5). For Cefai, the ethnographic survey “explores ‘perspectives’ which unfold in social situations, as perceived, done and said by the persons concerned, *in situ*” (Cefai 2010, 548). Instead of starting from an overlooking viewpoint, the narrative starts from the perspectives of those who are surveyed. The idea is to uncover, rather than presuppose,

individual's motivations and behaviours (Bayard de Volo and Schatz 2004, 268). My research combined multi-level exchanges and participant observation, from formal interviews to oral testimonies: with ordinary citizens, believers and non-believers, and clerics. In most cases, exchanges were conducted in an informal manner, either at a tea house, the bazaar, my apartment or my interlocutor's place. I tried to loosely orientate the discussion but left much leverage to my interlocutors. My interactions were not limited to mere conversations and often involved other activities such as travelling and working and I tried to be sensitive to the contexts in which respondents were offering their oral testimonies. Depending on the formality of the meeting, I took notes in a small notebook or simply engage in conversation without writing anything down. At the end of the day, I wrote down my notes from memory. On four occasions at the beginning of my first stay, I used a tape recorder for formal interviews since I was not very confident with my language skills but avoided it afterwards. If there are risks of forgetting details without written or audio record, it certainly makes people feel more at ease and conversations seem more natural.

Overall, the sampling of interviewees involved a great deal of improvisation, which does not mean that it was disorganized. Improvisation in fieldwork should not be seen as sloppy method but as a flexible process that reflects everyday life as it unfolds on the research site (Cerwonka and Malkki 2007). I relied mainly on snowball sampling technique that "yields a study sample through referrals made among people who share or know of others who possess some characteristics that are of research interest" (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981, 141). I spent most of my time in Khujand and made contacts through acquaintances and friends as well as by myself by just engaging in conversations with people on the street, mostly at the bazaar. This is where I met Iskandar and Mera, the couple who was to become my main interlocutors. They themselves introduced me to a number of people, acquaintances and friends. Snowball sampling is a technique that is particularly useful in a context like Tajikistan where communities are tightly connected and interpersonal relations play a major role in defining social and professional networks.

The problem with the snowball technique however is that there is a risk of stagnation in the same circles because the researcher is dependent on the subjective choices and

understandings of the first respondents; there is a risk to miss potential participants who are not connected to the given network (Atkinson and Flint 2001, 2).

While I don't pretend that my sample was fully representative of Tajik society, I tried to develop research circles in different towns and milieus to avoid this problem. I also developed a research site in a different rural setting, the Gonchi *jamoat* (district) through a friend and made several few days visits to his home village. In the Isfara region, I had acquaintances who help me get a limited, albeit useful, number of interviews. Since I spent very little time in Dushanbe, I mainly conducted formal interviews with state and party representatives with the help of friends and acquaintances. I was also invited to attend the 9<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan in Dushanbe in September 2011 as well as to two international conferences: an international scientific practical conference on the theme of "Problems of Safety and Stability in the Central Asia" [sic] at the Center for Strategic Studies, and the European Union's international seminar entitled "State and Religions: The Challenges of Secularism". They were held in Dushanbe in November and December 2011, respectively.

During my second stay, I spent most of my time working with a very small local Human Rights NGO called the Civil Society Center where only two women were working.<sup>54</sup> I was helping them with writing project proposals and English translations. The Director of the NGO, Mohiniso Khorissova<sup>55</sup>, is an energetic human rights activist<sup>56</sup> in her fifties who acts as a mediator between political parties in the Sughd region. Therefore, she had the reputation of being neutral and had good contacts with politicians, clerics as well as with state representatives. She also introduced me to a number of people in the Bobojon-Gafurov district.

I also conducted interviews with Evangelical and Orthodox Christians in Khujand and in Dushanbe. The minority position of these churches induces a particular relation with the authorities as well as with the rest of the community, since both ordinary citizens and the authorities sometimes perceive them as a threat against the Muslim faith and national values. Also, it seemed important to conduct research among Christian communities

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<sup>54</sup> Though chronic lack of funds meant they were volunteering most of the time.

<sup>55</sup> I will further refer to her as *Moallima*, literally Madame Professor. The word is a polite way to address a professor, a learned or wise person with moral authority. Younger people often addressed me as Moallima.

<sup>56</sup> She was also one of the co-founders of the national Social-Democratic Party of Tajikistan in the early 1990s but no longer had an affiliation with the Party.

because according to my research proposal, Christians would be equally influenced by the Soviet legacy.

Even though there is an important Uzbek minority in Sughd, I did not pay particular attention to the ethnic dimension of my sample. Most of my interlocutors were Tajiks but I made several day-trips to Uzbek villages near Spitamen and Proletarsk (20km South of Khujand). Also, the families I stayed with in Isfara and Gonchi were mixed. Interestingly, in comparison to neighbouring Kyrgyzstan, ethnicity does not seem to be of much concern for people in Tajikistan and nothing indicates heightened tensions between communities even though current bilateral relations between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan could be qualified as execrable. Based on a 2003 report from the International Crisis Group and other secondary sources, Omelicheva argues that most members of Hizb ut-Tahrir in Sughd are Uzbeks (2010, 171) but I found no evidence of particular Islamic activity within Uzbek communities and Uzbek-speaking journalists I met in Sughd denied this claim.<sup>57</sup> Also, when the Tajik Press reports the arrest of Hizb ut-Tahrir members, the ethnic background of the convicts is hardly ever mentioned so it becomes difficult to verify this information.

The names of all respondents were changed at the exception of people who represent figures of authority with whom I conducted formal interviews. For instance, I report the names of representatives of the regional government, of the Council of Ulemas, of political parties unless they specifically required to talk under the cover of anonymity, which happened only once. In a majority of cases, the observations recounted in this dissertation come from informal interactions. Therefore, I chose to conceal the names of interviewees because observant participation can create its share of ethical problems, even though people I talked to always knew that I was a researcher. That being said, I estimate that people who took part in my research did not face a particular danger

### **3.2.5 Positionality and reflexivity**

As opposed to a certain literature which claims that objectivity should be a guiding principle behind investigative social research (Caramani 2008; King, Keohane and Verba 1994; Lichbach and Zuckerman 2009; Popper 1972) here, subjectivity is fully assumed.

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<sup>57</sup> Fieldnotes, Khujand, July 7 2011.

This is not only because, as many scholars would acknowledge, inevitable, but because it is also useful (Bayard de Volo 2009; Warren and Rasmussen 1977). Moreover, Cefai argues that emotions, far from distorting data collection, foster cognition because they represent a way to understand a situation, beyond logical representation. He suggests that sympathy allows researchers to understand what drives actors in their “faith in God, hatred of the enemy, revenge, love of country etc” (Cefai 2013, 6). Therefore, a relative importance will be given to subjectivity in terms of gender, the foreign status of the researcher, religious beliefs and language and how those affected my own research.

The selection of the research topic and the preferred theoretical orientation both depend on the personal interests and academic background of the researcher. Conceding positionality is to acknowledge that the researcher comes from somewhere, somehow, somewhat. Schatz writes that “The job of the ethnographer is to become aware of what these researcher effects are to estimate their impact” and that “any truth-claim is necessarily ‘partial’” (Schatz 2009, 15). There are reasons why I became interested in studying the politics of this far-away country and this intellectual curiosity comes with and from a number of assumptions about faith and politics. Like most French-Canadians of my generation, I was raised in a moderate Catholic family but my childhood was marked by religious tensions since a member of our family became a Jehovah’s Witness after fighting depression for years. Part of my interest for spiritual quests certainly comes from this peculiar life experience. In particular, the fact that I’m interested in the empowering effects of religion and how it can be used to cope with difficult life situations.

### *Foreignness*

Ethnography is a subtle enterprise. It perhaps is even more challenging when conducted in a foreign country where socio-political norms and gender relations are unknown to the researcher. It is of course possible to develop sensibility to decode hidden hints, silences and behaviours in order to avoid unfortunate misunderstandings but the researcher is neither omniscient nor unflawed and tensions are inevitable. “*Vostok – delo tonkoe*”<sup>58</sup> ‘The East is a delicate matter’ many Tajiks told me all along. Although this famous idiom bears

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<sup>58</sup> This is a quote repeatedly spoken by Sukhov, a kind-hearted Red Army officer, in Soviet cult-movie *Beloe solntse pustyni* – The White Sun of the Desert. Released in 1970, the movie recalls the Basmachi rebellion in Central Asia during the Civil war.

a somewhat orientalist tone, I use it here in order to illustrate the challenges one can encounter when conducting research in a foreign land.

I don't think it is exaggerated to affirm that a general lack of transparency pervades the culture in Tajikistan and it is often difficult for outsiders to distinguish right from wrong. Let me illustrate this with few concrete examples concerning rules of acceptance and refusal, which can relate to both business and private matters. For instance, when people meet acquaintances on the streets, they systematically invite each other home to drink tea, invariably accept but never go and it is considered proper behaviour. In fact, the opposite behaviour would be considered impolite and someone who would accept every invitation would be judged as a profiteer.

A failed attempt to interview the Qazi Said Mukarami Abduxodir in Dushanbe is worth detailing since it is emblematic of other refusals that were not explicitly uttered. When I first went to the Qazi's office, his assistant told me that the Qazi's door was always opened to foreigners and that he would be happy to meet me the next day. I arrived the next day at the convened time and waited in the lobby for about 20-25 minutes. A different assistant wrote down my name and the purpose of my visit on a piece of paper and handed it to the Qazi who was sitting in the adjacent office. I was then allowed in the Qazi's office who quickly told me (with a smile and in a very good English) that he was very busy and had no time to talk to me. Instead, he pointed at the man sitting next to me and said he was going to answer my questions. I followed the man, a jurist and Head of Department for International Relations of the Qaziyat, to his office. There I was told to write down my questions. After I finished writing my questions with flimsy enthusiasm, I was told that answers would be available the following day. I called a couple of times in the next days but in the end, answers were never handed to me and they ultimately stopped answering my calls. Perhaps this performance is also rooted in Soviet culture. Pretending to do something, not doing it and getting away with it is after all very Soviet. As the old Soviet joke goes: "We pretend to work and they pretend to pay us".

Ethnography is about developing an insider's perspective, which can be difficult to accomplish when the researcher is an alien. For instance, Iskandar told me that if I really wanted to understand Islam, I needed to convert because "Islam is like a house, and you

walk around it looking through the windows. But you have to go inside to fully understand it.”<sup>59</sup> The difference is that I was not looking to understand “Islam” but to make sense of people’s experiences with faith. That is not to say that local researchers have it easy in comparison. Foreign and ‘domestic’ scholars encounter different challenges but both positions of outsider and insider and everything that comes in between can bear both advantages and disadvantages. As Bolak suggests: “While a foreign researcher runs the risk of being culture blind, an indigenous researcher runs the risk of being blinded by the familiar” (Bolak 1996, 109). That being said, scholars should not think of outsider and insider as antagonistic positions. Instead, as Bolak proposes, it is rather a continuum in which the researcher’s position is “informed by the definition used by the participants” (Bolak 1996, 109). DeVault suggests that it forces the ethnographer to use his or her social competence as a guide toward interpretive analysis and that this position while, not that determinant, should be seen as a resource rather than a problem (DeVault 2004, 6).

Yet, positionality does not only refer to the researchers’ baggage and the way it affects his/her thinking, methodology, interactions and reactions during fieldwork. It also refers to the fact that my personality and image influence the way people on the field interact with me. This has an equally important impact on the way research is conducted and data collected. We have to keep in mind that the researcher is not all-powerful and as Wolf so rightfully stated: “We run the risk of patronizing our interviewees if we do not recognize their agency in the research relationship and how their reactions to us fundamentally affect the knowledge we are able to glean” (Wolf 1992, 135 in Adams 1999, 332). Baker provocatively suggests that scholars have a tendency to study those with lower status than themselves: “Indigent and poorly educated people do not have the resources or knowledge, the lawyers, or the ‘I’m too busy excuse’ to fend off social researchers” (Baker 1988, 74). This affirmation is shocking and makes the scholarly community feels uncomfortable because there is certainly some truth in it. I was often refused interviews, forgotten or ignored by ‘people in power’ whereas ‘ordinary people’ were most of the time willing and enthusiastic about talking to me. Another less cynical explanation would be that people in subordinated positions are more likely to have grievances and see an opportunity to

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<sup>59</sup> Fieldnotes, Khujand, October 8 2010.

advance their cause in talking to a foreign researcher. It was clearly the case with the IRPT, which doors were always opened for me. The Party has a favourable image and reputation abroad and knows that international support and sympathy is crucial for its viability in a context of increasing political pressure.

The researcher can also be perceived as a threat to local culture or interests. Palmer talks about the sociologist as the “chaperone”, the “soft deprogrammer” who is susceptible to corrupt the interviewees’ morals among other instrumental positions (Palmer 2006, 174). People in power might also be suspicious for fear of saying something that would do them harm. I was confronted to such a situation only once when I attempted to meet the city representative of the leading party, the Popular Democratic Party of Tajikistan. After politely welcoming me into his office, he asked me to leave when he heard that my questions were concerning religion and declared he could not answer without an authorization from his superior in the Party hierarchy. I never heard from him again.

Researchers can be instrumentalized in all sorts of ways. Adams refers to the ‘mascot researcher’ who can be used for instance to boost someone’s prestige and/or legitimize certain cultural or socio-political practices (Adams 1999). I was never confronted to such behaviour towards me though at some occasions was reminded to “write nice things about Tajikistan”. Conversely, performances for the foreigner can be set up and generic social narratives repeated (Allina-Pisano 2009, 69). It is the role of the researcher to distinguish common narratives from erroneous knowledge and interviewees’ genuine thoughts or experiences.

### *Faith*

In Tajikistan, some introductory questions are inevitable: “Where are you from?” “Are you married?” “Do you have children?” and sometimes even “How much money do you earn?” I was also frequently asked, since the object of my research called for it, if I was a believer or to which religion I belonged. This question made me felt uneasy since I was afraid to disappoint my interlocutors. I refused to lie about this but I would invariably answer: “I’m Catholic” which was an acceptable answer to me because I’m baptised but at the same time, it did not explicitly implied that I was practising. In general, people would be satisfied with this answer. Whereas a minority of people in Tajikistan actually respect the five pillars of

Islam, people consider themselves religious and care about religion and traditions. In fact, I have met only one person who openly declared to be an atheist. Another reason was that most Muslims respect Christians for they are “People of the Book”. In Islam, the Bible is a Holy Book and Jesus a prophet, though suggesting that Jesus is God’s son “is a sin” as I was told more than once.

However, some interviewees whom I got to know better were not satisfied with this answer and asked me if I was practising and I had to admit that I was not. Therefore, they saw this as an opportunity to ‘convert’ me to Islam. On numerous occasions, I was subjected to proselytism. Most pressure came from a couple Iskandar and Mera, who became close acquaintances. Iskandar was especially pro-active in this. He told me countless times how my unbeliever’s heart was black, that something bad would happen to me, that I would burn in hell if I did not convert to Islam etc. At the beginning, it seems that he was doing this for proselytizing purposes only. He did not understand why I was so interested in religion if I was not myself a believer. But the more we got to know each other, he came to feel really sorry for me, he truly did not want *me* to burn in hell. Iskandar told me: “I can see it in your eyes that you are a good (*dobrii*) person because eyes are the mirror of the soul. But I also see that your soul is sick.”<sup>60</sup> Also, he was convinced that I could not marry a Christian because my heart was not really Christian anymore, but already half-Muslim.<sup>61</sup> On another occasion, thinking I was going to a casual drinking tea session with three women from the Islamic Party, I found myself having dinner with eleven women from the Party. All of them were wearing their hijab even though there were no men in the house. The topic of my own faith was brought up after a girl in her early twenties asked me what I thought of Islam. She was particularly emotional about faith, even cried when she told how much she loved Allah. Her discourse became a bit more aggressive when she said: “We respect you but there is no other choice than to believe in Islam, it’s the ultimate religion. Mohammed is the last prophet. Those who do follow Islam will stand higher than others when Judgement Day comes.”<sup>62</sup> They too thought that my interest in their religion was a sign that I could convert to Islam, that interest could be transformed into faith. Conversion attempts also came from the fact that I displayed a very non-judgmental attitude towards

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<sup>60</sup> Fieldnotes Khujand, September 3 2011.

<sup>61</sup> Fieldnotes, Khujand, November 21, 2011.

<sup>62</sup> Fieldnotes, Khujand November 21 2011.

strict believers whereas many non-practising acquaintances and relatives expressed disagreement with their religious lifestyle.

More or less the same dynamics were at play in Christian settings. Though I did not develop close relationships with my Christian interlocutors, I was also subjected to proselytism and asked to reflect on my own faith and spiritual life path. Overall, my own religious beliefs, or lack thereof, did not impede my research. Perhaps the fact that I was not religious even helped me because some faithful people would reach for me in the hope that they could convert me.

### *Gender*

Despite what one might expect, being a female scholar in a relatively patriarchal society proves not to be handicapping. Quite the opposite, it turns out to be an advantage because it grants the female researcher an almost equal access to both female and male circles. As Douglas suggested: “women do not threaten either the women or the men. They are liked by and commonly share intimacies with both sexes. Men are simply more threatening to both sexes, even when they are the most sociable” (Douglas 1976 cited in Warren and Rasmussen 1977). Overall, Tajik people are very friendly and it was easy to get in touch with women whom were interested in talking to me, showing me around, telling me about their life and their family. I had an easy access to their intimate life. My female friends and acquaintances invited me for sleepovers<sup>63</sup> at their house and they shared memories and problems with me to the extent that a male researcher could have never experienced. I also had equally intimate discussions about marital life and gender relations with some men who perceived me as a confidante who would not gossip about their problems.

This is what scholars refer to as the ‘third gender’ that rendered social conventions inapplicable towards female scholars (Schwedler 2006). Indeed, men were very familiar with me, much more than they would have been with a local woman. On some occasions, I found myself sitting at the men’s table while other women were sitting aside. This situation made me feel sorry and uncomfortable, since I feared that it would prompt resentment. On

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<sup>63</sup> In Tajikistan, very few houses have beds in the Western understanding of the term. People sleep on ‘kurpachas’, thick colorful cotton mattresses that are unfolded at night for sleeping and put away in the morning. Therefore, there are no ‘bedrooms’ per se, and many family members can sleep together in one room.

one occasion, an imam whom I had previously met a couple of times, shook my hand when I entered his office together with Moallima. Jokingly, she told him that for all those years, she had been waiting for him to shake her hand. Visibly amused, the imam replied: “But it’s different, she is a foreigner!”<sup>64</sup>

The other reason as to why gender matters is linked to laws of attraction. Whether female scholars like it or not, women are also judged based on their looks and ‘sexual availability’. Rasmussen and Warren suggest that gender matters since “respondents perceive us as women or men, as sex objects or not” (Warren and Rasmussen 1977, 350). Despite social conservatism, adultery is widespread and though legally forbidden, polygyny is common with about 10% of Tajik men engaged in polygamous relationships (Khushvakt 2010). Uehling argues that: “marital infidelity was reframed as a Muslim tradition called polygyny, lending it an aura of respectability” (Uehling 2007, 128).<sup>65</sup> My personal experience points in this direction. In a particularly embarrassing moment of my fieldwork, Iskandar asked me to teach him how to use the Internet. After I had accepted, I found out that his intention was to register to a dating site. He was planning to travel to Russia for work and was thinking to find a wife in Russia and perform the Nikoh. Iskandar, who already had two wives, admitted that: “he could not live without a woman”.<sup>66</sup>

I was myself more than once confronted with ‘romantic’ invitations. I received a number of marriage proposals from married men to become a second or third wife or from divorced men to become the first wife or simply asked on dates. I was what can be called a good party since I was tall<sup>67</sup>, looked young, educated and potentially rich. Though I dressed conservatively wherever I went, men regularly flirted with me and I found it highly annoying at times even if men were overall polite. But this could also turn into an

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<sup>64</sup> Fieldnotes, August 9 2011.

<sup>65</sup> I have met an important number of people who genuinely thought that polygyny was justified since women greatly outnumbered men in the world. In Tajikistan, the great numbers of war widows and migrant workers’ abandoned wives probably results in an imbalance between the number of men and women. In order to protect the rights of second or third wives, some civic organizations favor the legalization of polygyny (Khushvakt 2010).

<sup>66</sup> Fieldnotes, Khujand, October 20 2011.

<sup>67</sup> During my time in Tajikistan, I have heard an unprecedented plethora of negative comments towards short people, such as: “short persons should marry between each other”. Beyond aesthetic considerations, a short woman is often perceived as fragile and therefore unfit to fulfill household duties.

advantage: I had men's attention. Though I never flirted with any of my interviewees, my marital status certainly helped me to establish contact with men.

I can further illustrate this with an anecdote involving one Khujandi policeman during my second fieldwork. In late October, a policeman conducted a passport check in my building. Because there are not many foreigners in Khujand, he was curious about me and we chatted a bit. He came back for another passport check three weeks later while I was having dinner with Iskandar and Mera who happened to look very 'religious'. I was also dressed conservatively and I was wearing a scarf, though not a hijab. The policeman seemed shocked by the scene. When he checked Iskandar's passport, an argument broke out because Iskandar had written something in Arabic in it. The argument did not last long and the policeman left, but came back an hour or so later after my guests had left. He asked me to go on a car ride with him, just to talk. I hesitated since I was a bit afraid but decided to go out of curiosity. In the car, he started questioning me about my guests: Who were they? Why was I dressed like that? Had they tried to convert me? etc. He was very suspicious of 'such fanatics' and he said: "I was surprised to see you with them because we have terrorists here you know. We don't like these people. You did not wear a scarf before. Our girls dress in modern clothes you know." After discussing for half an hour or so, he drove me back home safely.<sup>68</sup> Though his reasoning very much matched the state rhetoric on radical Islam, the policeman was not acting upon formal orders he received. I had the impression that he did this because he was truly concerned about me, that 'these people' would lead me in the wrong path. Actually, he seemed interested in me as a woman but that does not change the fact that he was concerned about me getting influenced by radicals and felt compelled to intervene. I was afraid my guests would later have problems but he did not follow-up on that. This example shows that formal and informal practices intertwine and that local dynamics and interests play an important role in the actions of law enforcement authorities and state structures.

Yet, there is a downside to the laws of attraction. While non-threatening to most men, women can perceive the female researcher as a threat. That situation ultimately came up with Iskandar and Mera. When Iskandar asked me to teach him the basics of Internet, we

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<sup>68</sup> Fieldnotes, Khujand, November 20 2011.

were sitting at the pierogi stall where Mera was working. I was not sure of what to do but he became very insistent so I accepted and we left abruptly. Understandably, Mera was very upset. I was quite embarrassed since I knew I did not act appropriately even though it was genuinely unintentional. I later had the chance to have a one on one conversation with Mera and she did not blame me for that incident. Afterwards, I explained to both of them that I did not want my presence to disturb their relationship and Iskandar tried to reassure me by saying: “There is nothing to worry about, Mera will not be jealous anymore. You have to excuse her, she did not know it was *haram*<sup>69</sup> to be jealous.”

### *Language*

I conducted most of my interviews in Russian. I relied on friends and acquaintances for translation from Tajik into English or Russian. Therefore, I had total confidence in the interpreter who understood very well my objectives and in some cases, also was interested in the subject. When I required the help of translators, I still asked questions in Russian because nearly everyone in Tajikistan has at least a passive knowledge of Russian. I acknowledge that not knowing Tajik kept me away from developing a sensibility that could have led to a very different, perhaps richer, data collection. My basic knowledge of Tajik allowed me to understand the topic of the conversation but not the subtleties of the speech. But there is more to it than the being able to appreciate nuanced conversations.

Russian can be perceived as the ‘colonial’ language in Central Asia. Already in 1989, the Kyrgyz, Tajik and Uzbek Socialist Republics adopted laws that made titular languages official (Gleason 1997, 190). However, Article 2 of the Tajik 1994 Constitution makes Russian the ‘language of cross-ethnic communication’ (Fierman 2012, 1083). Furthermore, in 2009, the government adopted the *Law on State Language* according to which every citizen was obliged to know the state - Tajik – language. The law also stipulates that all the seals, stamps and signs should be in the official language, and official correspondence conducted exclusively in Tajik (Ferghana News 2011). Yet, in 2011, Russian language was reinstated as a language of interethnic communication and citizens can use it for communication with state agencies (Asia Plus 2011).

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<sup>69</sup> ‘Sinful’ in Arabic. In the Islamic jurisprudence, it designates something that is forbidden as opposed to ‘halal’, i.e. permitted.

Being aware that Russian is susceptible to be associated with political and cultural domination, I always started a conversation with new interlocutors with greetings and excuses in Tajik before switching to Russian. Only on one occasion have I felt that Russian was not really appropriate. It was in an informal meeting with an imam-businessman from Mastchox, one of the conservative areas close to Khujand where Sufi lineages remained strong despite seventy years of Soviet rule (Zevaco 2013). After this meeting I realized that there is another aspect to the language issue that goes beyond the colonial association with Russian language and which reveals the divide between ‘traditional’ Islam from the countryside and the ‘new urban’ Islam. By urban Islam, I mean not necessarily the one found in cities (although mostly) but more specifically an Islam where religious networks are recent and not inscribed in an opposition movement against the Soviet system as it appears to be the case in Mastchox for example.

On that matter, Iskandar’s attitude is significant. He once told me that there was no need for me to learn Tajik since I already knew Russian and could easily go around with it in Tajikistan. According to him, I needed to learn Arabic because it was the Prophet’s language. When I told him about people who sometimes refused to speak Russian, he said: “This is not right, they are uneducated and don’t understand. After all, it’s God who created all languages on earth. But I understand why they do so, they have very bad memories from Soviet times.”<sup>70</sup> Another of my interviewees, Hoji, received his education exclusively in Russian. He spoke Tajik very well but had problems reading it. He did not read nor listen to local poets and religious leaders and only relied on religious literature imported from Russia. He was also not attached to any mosque in particular and visited several different ones every week.

In this particular context, language issues go beyond the characterization of anti-colonial attitudes and can reveal a divide between old-time believers and those I call born-again Muslims. For this reason, having conducted my interviews almost exclusively in Russian did not dramatically impede my research. Though I must acknowledge that it prevented me from grasping important nuances in discourses.

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<sup>70</sup> Fieldnotes, Khujand, November 10 2011.

**Conclusion**

I have outlined how I think my particular researcher's position (agnostic white French-speaking North American single female scholar) affected the conduct of my research. But even if I am conscious of my own subjectivity, it is hard to fully grasp their impact on the ground. Scholars should be attentive, sensitive and responsive to the interviewees' reactions and try to act accordingly in order to maintain good relations with interviewees as well as to efficiently pursue research but it remains difficult to judge the effects of interviewees' perceptions on data collection. For instance, I cannot tell how differently my fieldwork would have unfolded if I had been a Tajik or Hindu (polytheist) male scholar. How differently would people have reacted to me and my questions then? It seems impossible to speculate on that. However, what matters is to be conscious that the researcher is biased, interviewees are partial and that our position can represent an advantage or a disadvantage depending on circumstances.

## Chapter 4 – The Soviet Secularization project

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Fifty years is ample time to change a world and its people almost beyond recognition. All that is required for the task are a sound knowledge of social engineering, a clear sight of the intended goal - and power.  
ARTHUR C. CLARKE, CHILDHOOD'S END

In Clarke's novel, benevolent aliens have been given the task of peacefully leading earthlings toward a spiritual awakening, an endeavour which is part of an even greater cosmic plan. Nor did Marx ever advocate using force to lead people away from their God (Marsh 2010, 13) although the Soviet regime ultimately resorted to this very thing. The eradication of religion was part of a vast and ambitious socio-political engineering project, which aimed at nothing less than the destruction of traditional institutions and the establishment of a new socio-economic and political order on the territory of the Soviet Union. This is what revolutions are about after all.

The purpose of this chapter is to broadly introduce the social and political context of Soviet Islam based on the idea that seventy years of Soviet 'management of religion' continue to influence the understanding of religion and its position in society in contemporary Tajikistan. I do not intend to provide an extended account of the evolution of Islam in the region. That ground has been more than adequately covered by others; in fact, it is no exaggeration to say that nearly half the content of most available books and articles on Central Asia is dedicated to the history of Islam, starting from the period of Islamization (late 8<sup>th</sup> and beginning of 9<sup>th</sup> century) and ending with the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991.<sup>71</sup> While I strongly emphasize the importance of history on the formation of social structures and religious traditions, I don't pretend to offer any new groundbreaking knowledge about the history of the region and the development of religion in Central Asia. Numerous excellent books have covered the history of the region (Khalid 2007a; Froese 2008; Ro'i 2000) and undertaking a long historical essay here seems only redundant. Moreover, in keeping with the overarching idea of the thesis, the objective is to focus on

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<sup>71</sup> Even Salmorbekova and Yemelianova (2010) who conducted an ethnographic survey of Islamism in the Ferghana valley dedicate 14 of their 29-page chapter to the history of Islam in the region.

current practices and narratives with particular regard to identifying traces of the Soviet legacy.

This chapter focuses on the Soviet secularization experience as an aspect of the radical transformation the region's peoples underwent within a relatively few years. The first part of the discussion considers Soviet materialistic atheism and the resultant conception of secularity as the underlying philosophical and political principles that have impelled the newly created Soviet state to undertake the eradication of religion. The second part examines the various stages of the forced secularization process itself and the measures taken not only to impose the separation of Church from State but also to persuade citizens of the backwardness of religious feelings and of the importance of abandoning them. The third part details the spiritual role and administrative responsibilities of the institutions established to regulate religion.

It is not my intent to offer a comprehensive analysis of Marxist-Leninist philosophy in this thesis. That being said, I will present a detailed overview of the philosophical and ideological orientation of the secularization project, with emphasis on the omnipresence of the Soviet Party-state and the holistic character of its materialistic atheism. The project's lingering resonance will be explored in subsequent chapters. The following sections are based on primary and secondary sources, both Western and Soviet, available in North American libraries, in Tajik bookstores, libraries and personal collections. The works cited were selected for the purpose of highlighting the contrast between the (very negative)<sup>72</sup> Western and (very optimistic)<sup>73</sup> Soviet views of the secularization project.

Because my research work did not include archival research, this section offers little insight on the situation in the Tajik SSR even though I tried to gather as much information as possible from secondary sources, especially from Keller's and Ro'i's extended archival work. There are two main reasons explaining why I did not dig into archives. First, as I

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<sup>72</sup> Marsh describes forced secularization in such terms: "Much like the Holocaust, this experience of inhumanity must be properly understood as a part of the larger phenomenon of religion's struggle with modernity itself" (Marsh 2010, 2).

<sup>73</sup> Okulov states that "The October Revolution has shown that man's life having been liberated from every kind of social oppression, is naturally freed in all aspects from religious ideas, customs and rituals" (Okulov 1983, 176).

mentioned previously, this thesis does not aim at presenting a complete historical account of Soviet secularization policies; rather my intention is to focus on current conceptions of state-religion relations while showing that they are importantly conditioned by the Soviet experience. Secondly, Soviet Tajik archives appear to be slender and not very accessible. Dudoignon, who conducted research on Soviet religious personnel in post-war Tajikistan, mentions that most archival material emanating from the Tajik Qaziyat is written in Chagatay-Turkic language, which I don't know. Also, he mentions that the country's potentially most interesting archival material, the KGB documents, have apparently been entirely destroyed by opposition forces which briefly gained power in the Spring and Summer of 1992 (Dudoignon 2011). Finally, as with other aspects of dissident life in the USSR, there are few records of the activities of unregistered clergy and their presence and influence can only be extrapolated from oral narratives.

#### **4.1 Soviet scientific-materialism**

“[Understanding Marxist philosophy] is the only efficient way to gain an insight into the process that have been taking place in Soviet society for the last seven decades” (Pospelovsky 1987, 6)

Dialectical and historical materialism are the founding doctrines of scientific atheism, which Pospelovsky defines as follows: “The ontological model of materialism posits the existence of an objective, self-sufficient world in which laws regulate the order of things” while “historical materialism aims at extending the materialist approach to the sphere of culture and society” (Pospelovsky 1987, 22). Haldane, in his preface of Engels' *Dialectics of Nature* writes that dialectical materialism is “a philosophy which illuminates all events whatever, from the falling of a stone to a poet's imaginings.” (Haldane 1949). More concretely,

“it is based on the foundation of all the philosophical, natural and social scientific, political, moral, and aesthetic views and convictions, which express the interests and ideals of the working class. The mastering of the scientific world outlook – the dominant element of the spiritual make-up of the Soviet people – helps in taking an active part in life and in solving pressing problems in the development of socialist society” (Kurochkin 1983, 142).

As a corollary to dialectical materialism, atheism is an important aspect of Marxist theory. In the words of Marx's famous maxim: "Religion is the opium of the masses". Beyond this iconic phrase, Marx compared religion to the 'inverted world consciousness', one that reflects an inverted world of social inequalities which prevent people from grasping the true nature of social and natural relations (Luehrmann 2011, 212). In Marxist theory, religion or religious beliefs arose among primitive human societies because men, lacking scientific knowledge, tried to make sense of the natural phenomena that affected their everyday lives. In modern societies, religions have become entangled with political power. This relationship contributes to keep the masses in a state of servitude, passively accepting their fate, which they perceive as their destiny and therefore as inevitable. Servitude is driven by fear, which is itself brought upon people by the blind and brutal forces of capitalism (Kania 1946, 18). In modern times, however, science provides the basis for understanding: gravity, illnesses, astronomy, mechanics, agronomy and so on. Through science, men are able to understand the world they live in so they behave consciously and no longer need to rely on 'false beliefs' that place them in a state of ignorance. For Marx, the fight against religion is the fight against the 'world' that religion creates, a world he describes as a popular form of logic, a moral sanction, an encyclopaedic compendium and a 'spiritual delight' that is to be defeated (Marx 1977 [1843] 8). Hence, materialist knowledge and enlightenment are necessary to free the masses from the intellectual and material oppression imposed on them by the ruling class, whether aristocratic or bourgeois.

The theory of scientific atheism has two aspects: 1- the scientific critique of religion 2- the study of the positive and creative role of atheism, including its role in the development of the cultural and spiritual life of society (Kurochkin 1978, 142). Unlike atheism alone, materialistic atheism not only offers a critique of religion but anticipates and hopes for a revolution leading to the creation of a society in which the existence of religion becomes superfluous. "Materialistic atheism is revolutionary" (Skazkin 1981, 44). According to another Soviet ideologue, materialistic atheism is distinguishable from the tragic atheism of the 'Nietzschean and existential type' and "intends to revive man's confidence in man: to convince man that life has a meaning and is worth living" (Okulov 1983, 177).

As in typical Western conceptions of secularization, the Soviet view emphasized the importance of social and economic development, and especially education, in the

progressive decline of religion. But overall, Soviet ideologues were very critical of the secularization theory and processes, as defined and instrumentalized by Westerners. Understandably, the main difference between the Western<sup>74</sup> and Soviet conceptions of secularization lies in Soviet atheism's perception of religion as an obstacle to human emancipation, both individual and social. "Religion is always a reactionary force hindering social progress" (Skazkin 1981, 426). The Soviet Atheist's Handbook<sup>75</sup> summarizes the difference starkly: "Western atheist ideas do not acknowledge that the antagonistic class structure is even more problematic than religion and that religion is used to reinforce the exploitation of the classes" (Skazkin 1981, 49). Soviets also questioned the authenticity of the actual separation of Church and state in the Western world. Rosenbaum suggests that in contrast with the Western interpretation of secularism, in the Soviet atheist state no religion was superior to another and therefore, all were equal before the Law. For Rosenbaum, Western secularism was a fallacy because in some bourgeois states, Spain for example, the Catholic Church was recognized as the official Church (Rosenbaum 1985, 32).

Late Soviet thinkers, however, were far more critical of Soviet atheism. For example, in 1989, in the midst of Perestroika, Sadur explained that Soviet atheism held some anti-Muslim sentiments because it was greatly influenced by European atheism. Therefore, its rhetoric and terminology were filled with anti-Muslim stereotypes (Sadur 1989, 415). Without being benevolent-minded towards Islam, the Soviet Atheist's Handbook acknowledges that the reason why revolutionary movements in pre-Soviet Russia criticised certain religions and depicted Islam as idiotic was that they could not openly criticize Orthodoxy (Skazkin 1968, 49). Nevertheless, Islam is pictured as a fatalistic religion<sup>76</sup> since God is said to be Almighty and 'without God, not a single hair falls from a man's head' says the Atheist Handbook (1968, 249)<sup>77</sup>. Islam is also depicted as a religion standing against scientific knowledge and encouraging backwardness. Finally, it is said to cultivate

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<sup>74</sup> There is a distinction to make between the French and American secularisms. In the French conception of secularism, it is the duty of the state to prevent religion from penetrating the political domain. In the American conception, the state is expected to insure and manage the religious diversity (Kuru 2007).

<sup>75</sup> First published in 1968 and reedited 1981, the book was a very influential one and considered to be the 'Bible' of Party-members, professors, atheist propagandists and the like.

<sup>76</sup> The book also quotes Karl Marx: "Fatalism is the stem of Islam."

<sup>77</sup> This is not the wording used in the Koran but the idea refers to the 6<sup>th</sup> Surate which states that everything in the world is a reflection of God's will.

selfishness, because men are too busy thinking about their own salvation to care about other people and the world around them (Skazkin 1981, 225-231). The *Atheist's Handbook* is certainly harsh towards Islam, but it is equally so toward other confessions reviewed in the book: Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism as well as some mystical movements. In the case of the Soviet Union, it would be appropriate to say that the State had an equal aversion to all religions.

However, Lenin explicitly mentioned that if the State should remain neutral towards religions, the Communist Party could not because it does not consider religion as a private affair (Skazkin 1981, 431).<sup>78</sup> This became problematic since there was only one legal party in the Soviet Union<sup>79</sup> and it *was* de facto the State, commonly called a party-state (Huntington 1970). Hence, there could be no mistake about the involvement of the state in religious affairs. Later internal critiques were thorough and touched a fundamental aspect of state-religion relations; the actual absence of separation between church and state in the Soviet Union. In the spirit of Perestroika, Furman wrote that: “Church and state could not possibly be separated in the USSR because nothing was separated from the government” (Furman 1989, 7). Indeed, Soviet Marxism-Leninism touched upon all aspects of life from religion to sexual health through housing and industrial manufacturing.

#### **4.1.1 Soviet materialism: a religion?**

Because Marxism-Leninism was a philosophy “that has implications for just about every aspect of society, from the family to international relations” (Marsh 2011,18), some authors conceptualise it as a religion in itself with its own ideology, worldview, moral codes and rituals (Agadjanian 2011; Codevilla 1971; Marsh 2011). Codevilla suggests that: “for its messianic and prophetic attitude, it [Marxist-Leninism] takes on a religious hue”. Like a *Weltanschauung*, the Soviet ideology, with its absolute values and objectives, aimed at the creation of a new society and a new man (Codevilla 1975, 26).

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<sup>78</sup> Similarly, Stalin, in his *Problems of Leninism*, stated that: “The party cannot be neutral in regard to religion and it undertakes an anti-religious propaganda against all and every religious prejudice, because the party rests upon science whereas religious prejudices are against science for the reason that any kind of religion is something contrary to science” (cited in Kania 1946, xvi).

<sup>79</sup> The absence of other parties was justified by the fact that such parties can exist only in societies which contain antagonistic classes whereas in the USSR, there were only two united classes: peasants and workers (Kania 1946, 5).

Soviet thinkers fully acknowledged the holistic character of the ideology promoted by the Communist Party. This was not perceived as something negative, quite the contrary. A noteworthy statement of this position is Lenin's famous quote: "The Marxian doctrine is omnipotent because it is true. It is complete and harmonious, and provides men with an integral world conception which is irreconcilable with any form of superstition, reaction, or defence of bourgeois oppression" (Lenin 1977 [1913]). At the beginning of the Soviet Union, there were even deliberate attempts to create a new religion although Lenin opposed any such undertaking. In particular, Lunacharsky, Gorky and Bogdanov were among top party members who proposed the creation of a Communist religion. For this, they were called 'Bogostroitelny', that is, 'Creators of God' (Codevilla 1971, 30). Gorky sought to escape the overly-mechanistic character of materialism by including within the definition of an atheistic religion the characteristic that it acknowledged "a sense of connection with the past and future" (Pospelovsky 1987, 93). Similarly, Lunacharsky thought to replace the traditional idea of God by building a new vision of humanity, positing for instance, that socialism could become an object of love and adoration. Lenin strongly opposed this proposed direction, perceiving it as an attempt to "dissolve Marxism into a mild liberal reformism" (Pospelovsky 1987, 21).

Despite the fact that the Bogostroitelny project was never approved, Agadjanian underlines that in many respects, the Soviet ideology contained "unmistakable religious connotations". For instance, the *Moral Code of the Builders of Communism*, a 12-point party program adopted in 1961 has biblical connotations even though it rejects religious meanings (Agadjanian 2010, 16). Froese's stance on the religious character of the Soviet ideology is somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, he writes that Soviet communism was an alternative to religion rather than a competing religion (Froese 2008, 16). On the other hand, he dedicates almost an entire chapter to a comparison between religious faith and cults and the Soviet ideology. First, he compares the League of Militant Atheists<sup>80</sup> to a Church because of its 'conversion' mission and its local cells, whom he finds reminiscent of religious parishes. When the League was abolished after the Second World War, it was

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<sup>80</sup> Sometimes referred to as the League of Militant Godless, it was an atheistic and antireligious organization of workers. Section 4.2.4 will detail its activities.

replaced by a variety of organizations that actively promoted atheism, including the Knowledge society, Komsomol<sup>81</sup>, and the Institute of Scientific Atheism. Second, he associates atheistic science that proved the fallacy of religious beliefs to homily. Third, he sees as liturgy the new Soviet rituals and holidays (Women’s Day, International Labour Day) and mimicry of religious practices at weddings and funerals (Froese 2008, 40-70). Also, Froese suggests that perhaps the promises of Communism — the end of injustice and the advent of personal and social emancipation — might be considered analogous to the otherworldly rewards offered by religion (2008, 34). Ultimately, he likens Marxist-Leninists to religious fanatics, finally making it clear in the end that he sees Sovietism as a religion (2008, 70). There is however a distinction to make between historical periods. While ideology drove the secularization process, the Stalinist period, characterized as totalitarianism and often referred to the ‘Great Terror’ had little if nothing at all, to do with Marxism-Leninism. As Keller puts it, “If we consider for a moment the role of Marxism-Leninism as a quasi-religion, Stalin and his supporters, in fact, exhibited very little faith in their doctrine [...] but the behaviour of Stalin’s regime suggests that the only “ideology” in which it truly had faith was force and unquestioning obedience” (Keller 2001, 250).

On the one hand, most authors consider that Sovietism was a religion but if that was accurate, wouldn’t there be ‘Soviet atheist believers’ too? Interestingly, authors such as Marsh and Froese who see Sovietism as a religion, are the ones who most vehemently argue that the Soviet secularization was in fact a failure. While many authors have investigated, albeit not in great details, the perpetuation of Soviet-style policies, very few have explored the resonance of the Marxist-Leninist ideological schema among the population. Rigby (1984) and Lane (1984) have in fact argued that this was an issue which could not be solved.

Despite the civic rituals, the cult and the myths Communists have built over time, I do not conceptualise Materialistic-Atheism as a religion. Gellner is right when he underlines the impossibility of associating Soviet Marxism with religion. Even though he acknowledges the similarities between Marxism and other religions, “at the doctrinal and intellectual level

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<sup>81</sup> Komsomol is a contraction of three Russian words, Kommunisticheskiy soyuz molodezhi, The Young Communist League.

the proud boast of Marxism was that it had exiled the supernatural from social life” (Gellner 1991, 1). Another way to look at it is best exemplified by Lane’s take on Soviet legitimacy. Using Weber’s typology, she considers the Socialist rituals in their relation to the nature of the legitimacy stemming from the practices of the state. For her, post-war Soviet authorities relied on “the revolutionary tradition (the time of the Revolution and Civil War), the patriotic tradition (the War period) and the Labour tradition (starting with industrialization in the early thirties)” (Lane 1984, 212). These elements often fused with local traditions and used to help foster social cohesion and to stabilize power relations.

I regard Sovietism as a worldview, as the term is defined by Pospelovsky: “1- A certain vision of the relationship between man and nature 2- A concrete understanding of the relationship between man and society or groups of men and society 3- A certain understanding of the meaning of life, of human nature and its destination” (Pospelovsky 1987, 21). This definition I think captures the essence of what the authors cited above mean when they liken Sovietism to a religion, i.e. a way to explain the world around us as well as the meaning of life, but without giving it a supernatural tone. Luehrmann suggests that this is why Soviet theorists of religion adopted a definition of religion that is not based “on the contrast between the sacred and the profane, but always defined as faith in God or spiritual beings”. Therefore, they “saw the creation of an exclusively human community as the ultimate goal of secularization” (Luehrmann 2011, 7). Whether or not we can consider Sovietism as a religion is crucial, because it determines the way we conceptualize its impact on Soviet peoples.

#### **4.2 Secularization – Soviet style**

Secularization processes are commonly associated with modernity and generally from a Western perspective that depicts this process as stemming from an ineluctable evolutionary socio-economic movement (Apter 1965, Berger 1967 and Martin 1978). Scholars make a distinction between secularization and secularism. Secularization is seen as social phenomenon characterized by 1- the decline of religious beliefs and practices, 2- the privatization of religion, 3- the differentiation of the secular spheres (Casanova 2006). Secularism - and its corollary the secular state – represents a political principle understood

as “a discourse and an institutional practice positing that religion should not be the final determinant of political outcomes and that religious institutions should not directly exercise secular power” (Berman, Bhargava and Laliberté 2013, 8). As pointed out in the latter book, one of the secularization literature’s lacunae is that it does not pay enough attention to non-Western states. As Marsh noticed, “virtually none of the debate on secularization has considered the only part of the world where it actually became a state policy, and where tremendous amounts of resources were allowed to erasing religious faith and promoting atheism in its stead” (Marsh 2010, 1-2). Secularization in most parts of the former Soviet Union was not the result of a long social evolution but of a revolution. Even though several historians have investigated the issue (Ro’i, Husband, Keller, Northrop, Froese), political scientists have yet to demonstrate academic interest in the subject. In this section, I will focus on the major features of the social engineering project, from the physical destruction of religious institutions and the prohibition of religious performances and duties, the implementation of education and propaganda programs and the establishment of administrative structures to manage religion. All these elements contributed to the progressive decline of religion in Central Asia. As Schatz describes it: “the destructive side of Soviet power accompanied the profoundly constructive transformations that Soviet rule brought” (Schatz 2010, 249).

#### **4.2.1 Early promises and appeals**

Husband argues that atheism was not a significant part of the Bolshevik’s prerevolutionary messages nor did it influence their victory. Instead, the revolutionaries elaborated ad hoc the complex cultural strategies that would transform the face of the empire (Husband 2000, 35). Keller insists that “Soviet anti-Islamic action cannot be separated from Soviet policy toward the non-Russian peoples” (Keller 2001, 53). At the beginning of the revolution, appeals from the Bolshevik party to ‘toiling Muslims of Russia and the East’ were full of promises. On December 7, 1917, the Council of People’s Commissars published an appeal to Muslims “whose mosques and shrines have been destroyed, whose beliefs have been trampled on by the tsars and the Russian oppressors. Henceforth your beliefs and customs, your national and cultural institutions are declared free and inviolable” (quoted in Riddell 1993, 251). That would explain the Communist Party’s proposal to give the right to Nations

of Imperial Russia to secede by promulgating the “Decree on Nationalities” and the “Declaration of rights of peoples of Russia”, which leaders thought would rally non-Russians to the Communist Party (Werth 1992, 124). In the event, this promise generally proved illusory, as most secessionist movements would later be crushed. As Lenin said: “The right to divorce does not mean the obligation to divorce” (Werth 1999, 175).

Later in 1919, while inviting the masses of the East to join the revolutionary movement, Lenin offered the following guidance: “[Unlike in Europe] You must be able to apply that theory [communism] and practice to conditions in which the bulk of the population are peasants, and in which the task is to wage a struggle against medieval survivals and not against capitalism” (cited in Riddell 1993, 263). Because there was no proletariat as such, local traditions and religious habits were regarded as the social and ideological system to be overcome. Also, religion was inevitably associated with nationalism, yet another counter-revolutionary ideology (Dunstan 1993, 158). Keller, citing the famous historian H  l  ne Carr  re d’Encausse, argues that the struggle from 1917 to 1922 was not only for the imposition of Bolshevik power over the region but for Russian influence as well (Keller 2001, 36).

The task of undermining religion in the Central Asian region was colossal, considering the dominance of Islamic Law and traditions in the Khanates despite their having been under the Russian protectorate since the late Nineteenth century. The three Khanates: Bukhara, Khiva and Kokand<sup>82</sup>, were still administered in accordance with Sharia, which regulated courts, taxation and education (Sadur 1989, 430). A report made by a Russian Communist party member indicates that in 1925, there were no less than 11,680 imams and mullahs in the Samarkand, Ferghana and Syr Daria oblasts alone<sup>83</sup> (Keller 2001, 169).

Overall, the Bolsheviks’ appeal was not received favourably by local populations, even though the anti-Western discourse of the Soviets did prove attractive to some (Froese 2008, 92), especially the so-called ‘Red mullahs,’ as well as the Jadids,<sup>84</sup> who represented a

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<sup>82</sup> Northern Tajikistan (Sughd) belonged to the Kokand Khanate.

<sup>83</sup> These regions partly encompass today’s Sughd viloyat.

<sup>84</sup> The modernist movement, with its roots in Tatarstan and Siberia, also attracted supporters in Central Asia. Jadidists were driven by the idea that Muslims should emancipate through education, find a way to open up to the world and participate in modern life while reinforcing their Islamic identity (Dudoignon 1996). Authors disagree on the extent of their influence. Fourniau for example, argues that the Jadid movement was not politically significant in Central Asia and found echoes among a few secret societies in the Emirate of

modernizing force in the region albeit not a homogeneous one (Sadur 1989, 427). Despite their support for the Bolsheviks, Jadids were later evicted from the political scene (Keller 2001; Sadur 1989, 432). As we will see, in the early years of Soviet rule in Central Asia, the state maintained a prudent ambiguity towards the clergy.

The Soviets faced harsh resistance when trying to impose the Bolshevik government's authority in the early years of the revolution. The 1916 revolt,<sup>85</sup> which started in Samarkand and spread over Russian Turkestan, can be seen as the prelude to the turbulent years that followed. The October Revolution in Russia precipitated a great turmoil in Central Asia, even if the battles between the Red and White armies were confined mainly to the northern part of the Kazakh steppe. Also, the very small number of native Marxists meant that active participation in the military action was limited almost entirely to Europeans (Fourniau 1994, 107). The victorious Bolsheviks established the Tashkent Soviet in March 1918, and on the 30<sup>th</sup> of April, the former Turkestan became the Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (TASSR 1918-1924). However, the Soviets would meet resistance in the form of a loosely organized rebellion, the Basmachi.<sup>86</sup> This movement, more or less inspired by pan-Turkism<sup>87</sup>, was composed of various groups, with sometimes relatively conflicting interests (Wheeler 1964, 111), which undermined its effectiveness.<sup>88</sup> Most of the fighting took place in the territory of Tajikistan, later moving to Afghanistan. The struggle grew into a guerrilla war, but the rebels never managed to dominate large portions of the territory. Even after the Soviet Union had been established in its definitive form in 1922, the Basmachi continued to oppose the Red Army until the

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Bukhara (Fourniau 1994, 100). Others, however, give it much significance in the political and intellectual history of the region (Dudoignon 1996, Keller 2001).

<sup>85</sup> The uprising occurred after the declaration of an Imperial Decree stating that non-Russians too were to be called to serve for labour duties in the Russian Army engaged in the First World War. The decree unleashed a wave of violent protests severely repressed by the Russians.

<sup>86</sup> In 1918, the chaotic environment and the harsh economic conditions set up the stage for the development of widespread thievery in the new Republic. For this reason the Basmachi movement (in local Turkic languages, a *basmak* or *basmach* is a thief) was rapidly associated with the marauders in order to discredit its action. Buttino admits that many combatants were also involved in some kind of larceny (Buttino 1997, 195). Fighters referred to themselves as Qurbashi (nightwatchmen), a term also found in official Communist documents (Keller 2001, 47).

<sup>87</sup> Pan-turkism, an ideology calling for the unification of all Turkic people, was steered in Central Asia by former Turkish Minister of War, Enver Pasha. As Roy argues, while the movement was ethnicized in Turkey, "among Russian Muslims, pan-Turkism was merely a variant of pan-Islamism" (Roy 2001, 38).

<sup>88</sup> The movement attracted different political actors such as the supporters of the Emir of Bukhara, conservative local leaders and Muslim reformists (Buttino 1997, 201).

execution of one of its most prominent leader, Ibrahim Bek, in Tajikistan in 1931. Poliakov suggests that there was still some Basmachi activity in Northern Tajikistan (Asht raion) as late as in 1941 (Poliakov 1992, 19). Notwithstanding the absence of formal control over the region, the first actions against traditional institutions were taken in the early 1920s. These steps included the limitation and finally abolition of the Islamic courts, the confiscation of waqfs<sup>89</sup>, and campaigns for the promotion of women's rights. These radical measures were coupled with the imposition of new social norms, which greatly affected the traditional organisation of the society.

#### **4.2.2 Victorious but unassertive**

Much confusion marked the first years of Soviet rule in the newly created Turkestan Republic. Politics is often a process of trial and error, and so were the early Soviet policies by which leaders, in an uncertain administrative, political and social environment, introduced rapid changes while trying to avoid creating too much unrest. In contrast, the Stalinist period that followed brought full-fledged repression of religious behaviour, institutions and clergy.

The first legislation against established religions was adopted on December 18, 1917. A decree entitled "On civil marriage, children and book-keeping of acts" recognized civil marriages and children born outside marriage, granted women the right to divorce and nullified the celebration of religious marriages (Skazkin 1981, 418-9). Another significant legislative step was taken with Lenin's Decree of 23 January 1918, which separated Church and State by depriving the Church of its legal status and of its property rights, as well as prohibiting it from teaching minors religion in either state or private schools (Pospelovsky 1987, 27). Article 3 of this decree provided the right for citizens to believe in any religion or in no religion at all (Skazkin 1981, 419), while Article 5 recognized the right to perform religious ceremonies as long as they did not disturb public order (Skazkin 1981, 420).

In Central Asia, the adoption of these decrees was followed by the confiscation of waqfs. This step provoked so much outrage that Moscow later ordered Turkestan Communists to

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<sup>89</sup> Properties given as endowments to mosques, schools, hospitals etc.

suspend the initiative (Keller 2001, 50). Consequently, waqfs that had been first confiscated in the early years of Soviet Turkestan were returned to the clergy in the 1920s, in the spirit of Lenin's New Economic Policy (NEP 1921-1924) and its liberal stance on personal property (Keller 2001, 41-2). However, Pianciola and Sartori argue that, contrary to popular belief, waqfs had never been requisitioned on a wide-spread basis and that the Turkestan Bolsheviks' attitude was very ambiguous, with state control over waqfs being more formal than actual (Pianciola and Sartori 2007). They therefore portray the 1922 restitution as "a legal and administrative systematization of the status quo" (2007, 493).

Lacking personnel and guidelines as well as facing opposition, Turkestan's revolutionary court system allowed litigants the right to refer to Sharia and adat<sup>90</sup> if the traditional norms did not contravene the interests of the working people (Keller 2001, 38). Muslim courts were not abolished throughout Turkestan until 1927. Even after the new people's courts were set up, many individuals, especially women, were reluctant to use them because of social pressure (Keller 2001, 84). In general, authorities took a relaxed stance on religious institutions until the late 1920s, except for what concerned education. From 1917 to 1920, the number of secular mixed primary schools in Turkestan increased from 576 to 2022 until NEP measures slowed down these efforts (Keller 2001, 40). In 1927, there were still 11 medresses in the Khujand district together with 99 secular schools (Abashin, K. Abdullaev, R. Abdullaev and Koichiev 2011, 103).

The liberation of women from the patriarchal oppression imposed by feudal and capitalist societies was an important aspect of the socialist project, and the promotion of women's rights was an integral part of the political platform of the Bolsheviks from the very beginning. Indeed, laws promoting women's rights to education, to divorce and to abortion<sup>91</sup> were adopted in the early years of the Soviet Union. In Central Asia and in the Muslim regions of Russia, the promotion of women's rights had twin objectives: to ensure the equality of rights for men and women, but perhaps even more importantly, to undermine the Islamic clergy and religious traditions. In Marxist rhetoric, Central Asian

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<sup>90</sup> Local, pre or extra Islamic customary Law.

<sup>91</sup> However, Stalin reverted the law on abortion in 1936 (Northrop 2004, 9). The right to abortion was reinstated in 1955 (Savage 1988, 1030).

women were identified as a ‘surrogate proletariat’<sup>92</sup> because of their subordinate position within the patriarchal structure of both the society and the family. Therefore, women had to be liberated (Northrop 2004, 12). This is how Soviet authorities started their campaign propaganda campaign, which culminated with *Hujum*<sup>93</sup> on the symbolic date of March 8, 1927 to mark Women’s International Day. Agitation campaigns and public unveiling, as were organized from time to time by the Women’s Committee (*Zhenotdel*<sup>94</sup>) of the Central Asian Bureau, proved not to be very effective and direct confrontations of women and men only triggered anger. In the Thirties, some communists were condemned as being too lenient in the fight against Islam, although at the same time, others were accused of being too zealous, especially in regard to Hujum, and therefore held responsible for discrediting the Soviet authorities by fostering discontent (Kolarz 1960; 25-6). This kind of recrimination is typical of Soviet rhetoric and is found throughout the decades. The ‘success’ of the unveiling campaigns was marked by series of back and forths. Until the late Forties, public opinion censored women who would not wear the paranja in many regions of Central Asia. In Tajikistan in 1948, there were cases of women wearing it while receiving awards for their ‘communist labour’ in the cotton harvest (Ro’i 2000, 544). However, by the Fifties, the clergy had ceased to insist that women cover their heads, contending that it was not necessary (Ro’i 2000, 254).

Due to their own weak organisational capacities, as well as popular discontent and the clergy’s social and political importance, the Bolsheviks returned to what Keller refers to as “the strategy of Catherine the Great”, that is, “control through co-optation”. Reformist Muslims were allowed to establish Muslim Spiritual Administrations, *Makhama-i Sharia* (in some places known as *Nazorat-i Diniya*<sup>95</sup>) in Ufa, as well as some loosely-organized religious administrations throughout Turkestan in 1922 (Keller 2001, 61). The mandatory registration of these bodies allowed the authorities to control the activities of a co-opted clergy and, in their own terms, “to cultivate the loyal part of the national intelligentsia and

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<sup>92</sup> Massell (1974) was the first to use this term.

<sup>93</sup> Sometimes spelled *Hudjum*. That word can be translated as ‘assault’, in the sense of an attack against the traditional organization of the family and the society.

<sup>94</sup> *Zhenotdel*, later called *Zhensektor* is a contraction of ‘zhenskii’, which is the adjective ‘female’ and ‘otdel’ which means ‘department’. It was closed in 1934 but in Central Asia, due, among other things to the veil issue, it remained until 1937 (Northrop 2004, 9).

<sup>95</sup> It is interesting to notice that in 1989, Sadur wrote that there was ‘no information available about its faith in our literature’ (Sadur 1989, 434) and did not write much else than the fact that it was replaced by the SADUM in 1943.

the left wing of the clergy” (Keller 2001,62). In Bukhara for instance, moderate clerics who cooperated with the Soviet authorities (Keller 2001, 75) dealt with everyday life matters such as the high price of marriages and funerals and managed to establish limits on prices charged by clerics.<sup>96</sup> Again, these measures did not bring conclusive results. It was not until after further consolidation of the Republic in 1924<sup>97</sup> that stricter measures were enforced. A 1929 report on the state of the clergy in the newly created Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic relates that the financial situation of the clergy had been undermined, even though people continued to rely on them to settle disputes and to provide counsel on personal family or health matters (Keller 2001, 204). Before the Thirties, the pressure on religious communities was constant but diffuse, compared to the more radical actions against religious figures and believers that would be taken by the Soviet authorities later during the period known as the “Great Stalinist Purges,” in 1930-1939.

#### **4.2.3 Full-fledged repression**

Although he personally was a convinced atheist, Lenin<sup>98</sup> was also a fine politician. He acknowledged that: “war must never be openly declared against religion, for such a move would be an unnecessary “gamble of political war” (Marsh 2010, 53). Likewise, Sultan Galiev<sup>99</sup>, a Tatar from Bashkiria and an influential member of the Communist Party in the early years of the Revolution, also warned the Bolshevik Party to be careful in its attack against Islam (Musul'mantstvo) since Muslims perceived their own faith as a religion for an oppressed people who were victims of the economic and political oppression of Western imperialism (Sadur 1989, 433). That advice was followed in the early years, but soon enough there came a time when compromise was no longer necessary. The more the Communist authorities consolidated their power on the ground, in terms of both

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<sup>96</sup> This is an issue that is still widely debated in post-Soviet Tajikistan and even led to the adoption of a law that severely restricts the rites of passage celebrations in terms of money spent and length of guest lists. This issue will be developed in Chapter 5.

<sup>97</sup> The new republics of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Karakalpak were officially founded in October 1924, while Tajikistan remained part of the Uzbek Republic until 1929. The Kazakh Republic, which was previously attached to Russia, was established in 1936.

<sup>98</sup> Marsh suggests that Lenin was an atheist before becoming a Marxist and he was drawn to Marxism largely because of his early opposition to the tsarist authorities, which governed with the support and blessing of the powerful Russian Orthodox Church (Marsh 2010, 36).

<sup>99</sup> Galiev was arrested in 1923, released in 1924, then again arrested in 1937 and executed in 1940 because his calls to unite Muslims of Russia and Central Asia were interpreted as a threat to national unity by Stalin. He has been the first party member arrested for ‘national-deviationism’ (Werth 1990, 177).

organisational and political capacities during the Twenties, the less it was felt necessary to ally with local reformist clergy. At this point, the authorities started to shut down Muslim social institutions completely. Spiritual administrations were closed in 1927 and religious schools, remaining Islamic courts and mosques began being closed or used for different purposes in the same year (Keller 2001, 122-135). The collectivization campaign, started in 1928, created momentum for the complete elimination of waqfs (Keller 153).

By late 1927, local party cells were employing two complementary strategies towards the clergy, official propaganda and a secret campaign of terror (Keller 2001, 139). Citing Larry Holmes: “schools in the 1920s and 1930s were not a suitable instrument for the eradication of cardinal tenets of popular belief. Active and passive resistance from officials, teachers, parents and pupils blocked efforts at change from above” (Keller 2001, 207). Accordingly, the campaign of physical destruction of religious institutions was accompanied by propaganda efforts to convince the population that mullahs and ishans [the oppressors] were profiteers living off the exploitation of poor masses (Sadur 1989, 431). This two-pronged strategy was based on reports from the field, which warned the authorities that brutal interventions could only lead to public outcry. For example, in Khujand in 1927, secular schools were vandalized with portraits of revolutionaries destroyed, and lands were withheld from state inventory following the arrest of five prominent mullahs, while five others left the area, fearing prosecution (Keller 2001, 145). These are but a few examples of direct repression, among many other everyday tragedies that marked two decades. Repression was brutal and substantial and Keller affirms that between 1917 and 1939, 140,000 Muslim clergy were arrested, killed or exiled (Keller 2001, 241).

In 1935, administrative measures were taken to close more mosques. As a result, by around 1941, the number of mosques in the USSR had been reduced to five percent of the pre-revolution total, from approximately 26000 to 1300 (Hiro 1995, 32). For the whole Soviet Union, Pospelovsky talks of a reduction from 50,000 places of worship in 1930 to 30,000 by 1938 and 8,000 in 1941 (1987, 68). It is hard to confirm the accuracy of these numbers because they differ from one author to another. As to Tajikistan, Keller’s archival documents estimate the number of clergymen in Tajikistan in 1929 at 790 (2001, 241). That seems plausible until we look at the numbers provided by Ro’i. His research suggests that

in the late 1940s, there were 150 mazars in the Leninabad Oblast and 500 functioning ones throughout the Tajik republic in the middle of the following decade, served by some 700 mullahs (Ro'i 2000, 371). Reports of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults (CARC)<sup>100</sup> mention that as November 1958, most mazars had been officially closed (378). Perhaps such widely differing numbers can be explained by the fact that there was some kind of an Islamic revival following de-Stalinization and the release of large numbers of prisoners from the gulags (Dudoignon 2011). Interestingly, a 1949 CARC report uncovered by Ro'i mentions that religiosity was not equally distributed in Tajikistan, with the Leninabad and Kulob oblasts showing higher rates of religious practice than elsewhere (Ro'i 2000, 460). Notwithstanding discrepancies between statistics the overall story is one of enormous efforts by the Central government and local authorities to curb religious beliefs and practice.

Despite dramatic numbers on the disappearance of places of worship and repression against the clergy and believers, authorities realized that faith could not be completely eradicated. Therefore, physical restrictions against religion were indeed coupled with ideological programmes meant at turning Soviet citizens into 'enlightened godless subjects'.

#### **4.2.4 Propaganda and education**

Kenez rightfully points out that the word propaganda carries a negative connotation. Indeed, people usually understand propaganda as a Machiavellian attempt to disseminate false information in order to influence or fool people. However, he suggests that, unlike the Nazis, the Soviets were not interested in the techniques or philosophy of mass persuasion, instead, they saw propaganda as part of education campaigns (Kenez 1985, 8). I was quite surprised to hear people in Tajikistan use the word *propaganda* or *agitatsiya* to designate awareness and public information campaigns. In the post-Soviet environment, the term has a rather informative connotation, understood as the action of 'propagating', and not 'brainwashing'.

Wheeler, writing about the establishment of a universal education system in the USSR underlines the importance of the transmission of new Soviet values: "In dealing with the

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<sup>100</sup> Section 4.3.3.2 is dedicated to the role and responsibilities of the CARC. Established in 1944 and renamed the Council for Religious Affairs (CRA) in 1965, it was a governmental body with extended powers attached to the Moscow-based Council of Ministers of the Soviet Union (Akbarzadeh 1997, 74).

Muslim masses of Central Asia, where it was not a question of re-education as it was in Western Russia, but of the introduction of education and political indoctrination where virtually none had existed before” (Wheeler 1964, 139). This statement, while plausible on its face, is to some extent misleading because it tends to attribute a special character to Central Asians, as if propaganda and literacy campaigns were particularly effective since the lack of literacy made the people particularly vulnerable to propaganda. Even if literacy rates were low, there was a semblance of an education system, albeit limited, in Central Asia. In pre-revolutionary Bukhara alone, it is estimated that around 3000 persons ‘belonged’ to mosques and Islamic courts, and there was one religious figure for every 30 citizens, or one for 10 citizens over 20 years old (Sadur 1989, 431). In Kokand in the 1840s, around one thousand students were enrolled at the medresse. Also, the memoirs of a Kokandi poetess, Dilshad, reveal that she taught literary arts to some 890 girls in the course of her long life<sup>101</sup> in Kokand (Dubovitskii and Bababekov 2011, 61). In comparison, in pre-revolutionary Russia, almost three-fourths of the population were illiterate. Approximately 60% of Russian men and 83% women could neither read nor write, and illiteracy rates were even higher in rural areas (Okulov 1983, 174). And as Khalid remarked, Russians too had to be “transformed and modernized” (Khalid 2006b, 250).

Soviet atheism specialists insisted on the educational aspect of atheist propaganda that would lead to the achievement of socialist goals. Kurochkin, a Soviet ideologue, explains how the scientific and materialist atheistic *Weltanschauung* must be reproduced and expanded in every new generation of socialist society (Kurochkin 1983, 144), because according to him the danger of religious renewal was never far away. The following instruction of one Soviet ideologue evokes the need for, and the expected results of, atheist propaganda:

“It is necessary to conduct systematic extensive scientific atheist propaganda, to patiently explain the fallacy of religious beliefs that have arisen in the past due to the people’s domination/pressure under elemental forces of nature and social oppression and their ignorance of the true causes behind natural and social phenomena. It should build on the achievements of modern science, which fully reveals the picture of the world, increases the power of man over nature, and leaves no room for the fantastic religion’s fiction on super-natural forces” (Rosenbaum 1985, 29).

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<sup>101</sup> She was reportedly born in 1800 in Istaravshan (present-day Tajikistan) and died in Kokand in 1905.

The first atheist lessons within the Communist party were drawn up in 1921. Entitled 'Religion and Church', they consisted of 12 hours of lessons per week, divided in six hours of theoretical knowledge and six hours of practical lessons. They established four different orders of atheist education: 1-atheist education within the family and pre-school institutions, 2- atheist education in schools, technical institutes and higher education institutions, 3- atheist education within working collectives, 4- atheist education at the place of living (Bryanov 1986, 7). Soon after the consolidation of the USSR, many atheist publications started being published for the whole territory: 'The League of the Militant Godless' was created at the beginning of the Twenties, but their actions started becoming visible in Central Asia only around 1925 (Sadur 1989, 434). It was not until 1937 that a local branch appeared in Tajikistan. The League at first relied heavily on nonprint forms of propaganda (agitatsiya), since the number of literate people was quite limited (Keller 2001, 208). Soon after the attack on clergy, religious observance started being targeted by law-enforcement bodies (Keller 2001, 173). Consequently, broad propaganda campaigns for Ramadan and Idi Qurbon<sup>102</sup> were designed in Moscow. These campaigns were intended to 1- unmask the counterrevolutionary essence of religion and national chauvinism, 2- increase the membership in the militant Godless, and 3- fulfilling cotton-sowing plans and protect cattle from slaughter (Keller 2001, 207).

I distinguish four recurrent themes in atheist propaganda: 1- religious beliefs are fallacious and exist because men needed them to make sense of the world they lived in, 2- religions encourage submission and are therefore exploitative, 3- historical materialism provides a Weltanschauung that leads citizens to reject religion through education and material progress, 4- religious beliefs persist because of poor education and insufficient material advancement.

After World War II, there was no organization in the Soviet Union solely devoted to atheist propaganda. The League of the Militant Godless was dissolved in 1947, replaced by the newly founded Society for the Dissemination of Political and Scientific Knowledge, which was renamed the Knowledge Society in 1963. The new denomination reflects a change in atheist strategies, from confrontation to dissemination of modern science as a more

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<sup>102</sup> Eid el-Adha in Arabic, the 'Festival of sacrifice'.

effective way to wean people away from religious beliefs (Luehrmann 2011, 8). The intensity of atheist propaganda was not constant over the years, but it never fell into complete disuse. To compare on only one measure, in 1954, 120,000 atheist lectures were carried out across the whole Soviet Union while there were 650,000 in 1970 (Pospelovsky 1987, 100-101).<sup>103</sup>

Beyond propaganda efforts, education and literacy campaigns truly became the capital agent of change. *Agitatsiya* can only give limited results and reach a limited number of individuals, whereas public education can sway a very large and impressionable young audience. Indeed, authorities thought that a high level of social and economic development combined with a materialistic atheistic education would inevitably lead to the transformation of the society, from god-fearing to godless (Skazkin 1968, 479). As Gellner argues, modern education systems serve to inculcate shared understandings and values so that people understand, interact and cooperate with each other in modern, production-oriented societies (Gellner 2008). In August 1930, the adoption of a decree on General Compulsory Primary Education at the all-Union level was echoed in similar laws in each Republic, even though implementation proved difficult in the conservative environment of Central Asia (Keller 2001, 209).

Arabic script, then in use by Uzbeks and Tajiks, was replaced by the Latin alphabet in 1927 and entirely discarded in 1940 in favour of the Cyrillic alphabet (Hiro 1995, 30). As a consequence, people were cut off from the rich pre-Soviet literature and most important, from religious scriptures. Also, Russian language courses became mandatory in 1938 (Johnson 2004, 30). Education and literacy campaigns were conducted with the newly printed Soviet books, which conveyed powerful messages. “The ultimate objective of the communist upbringing is to rid Soviet society of such “negative traits” as individualism, “bourgeois nationalism,” chauvinism, indolence, and “religious prejudices” (Powell 1977, 136-7). Surprisingly, no particular antireligious propaganda was established in the school curriculum in the early years of the Soviet Union as the authorities were confident that “Religion was irrelevant. So was any attack on it” (Holmes 1993, 130). As pointed out

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<sup>103</sup> For detailed figures about the number of atheist publications and lectures over the years, see Pospelovsky 1987 p. 100-105.

earlier, the common belief was that the teaching of natural sciences, enlightenment and improved material conditions would overcome religious beliefs. However, reports about popular discontent started flooding into the office of the People's Commissariat for Education, or *Narkompros*<sup>104</sup>, confirming parents' anger at the removal of icons and religious education in schools. Narkompros favored an approach characterized by tolerance and an absence of confrontation, despite heavy pressure from the League of Militant Atheists, which demanded systematic antireligious education instead of episodic atheist training (Holmes 1993, 132). It seems that none of the players in the field of education were interested in introducing antireligious subjects into the curriculum because of fear of popular aversion, but most importantly, because of scarce educational and financial resources. Instead, the emphasis was put on the fundamentals rather than on antireligious subjects (Holmes 1993, 148).

There were no courses on atheism as such, with the exception of a general social science class in the last year of study. Instead, it was the teachers' prerogative to include atheist rubrics in the other subjects, complemented by extracurricular activities, mainly within youth organizations at the Pioneers and Komsomol Camps. Natural sciences lessons provided particularly good opportunities to present a materialist view of the world, while social sciences lent support to natural sciences. For example, history classes would present the great scientific discoveries as well as the social roots of religion and its association with traditional ruling classes (Dunstan 1993, 160-3). Finally, in 1959, a course entitled 'Foundations of Scientific-atheism' was made mandatory in all fields of study in institutions of higher education (Pospelovsky 1987, 112).

As much as they would have liked to get rid of competing religious ideologies forever, Soviet authorities had no choice but to acknowledge them as an inevitable and undesirable defect which must be dealt with. In fact, atheist literature is filled with conclusions and recommendations about the resilience of religion and suggestions for future adoption of methods to undermine it. Soviet figures from 1937 show that 66 percent of rural and 33 percent of urban dwellers were believers (Pospelovsky 1987, 68).<sup>105</sup> Many of these were

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<sup>104</sup> Narodnyi komissariat Prosveshcheniya.

<sup>105</sup> Interestingly, the *Atheist Handbook* does not disclose any figures about the numbers of believers. Yet, the CARC was collecting data on the number of believers and some scholarly books contain data on that. Perhaps

called: ‘ordinary’<sup>106</sup> religious believers’ (Gaidurova 1969, 12). For instance, Yablokov cites research conducted in the village of Gnilets in the Oryol province<sup>107</sup> and deplores the fact that 41,67% of Orthodox and 34,48% of Baptists did not know anything about the Moral Codex of the Builder of Communism adopted in 1961. Yablokov blames the lack of propaganda efforts (Yablokov 1969, 129).

On the opposite, blaming ‘zealous agents’ was also a common feature of the Soviet leadership. On November 10 1954, the Central Committee of the CPSU adopted a resolution ‘On Errors committed in the conduct of atheist propaganda,’ condemning actions that might be offensive towards believers and clergy, as well as administrative interference in Church affairs (Skazkin 1981, 432). A common critique was to blame zealous propagandists who offended believers by insulting their religion or religious habits. Ro’i mentions the case of local representatives of the CARC who, in the Sixties, were accused by their superiors in Moscow of being either too lenient or ‘administratively’ too zealous (Ro’i 2000, 591).

As with other aspects of Soviet life, Soviet authors mention that propagandists have failed in their education attempts. Okulov mentions that in some cases, ‘pure reason’ could not persuade believers of the “absurdity of their traditional ideas” (Okulov 1983, 175-6). Such discourse survived Perestroika and could still be heard in the late Eighties (Akbarzadeh 1997, 79). Authorities acknowledged the persistence of religious beliefs, but for the most part it was argued that such beliefs were present mainly among only a limited portion of the population, due to structural factors such as gender discrimination, the lack of education and weak atheist propaganda. The typical believers were found to be women, especially older ones living in rural areas. In spite of the socialist revolution which had supposedly liberated women<sup>108</sup>, many of them remained housewives and could not access higher education (Skazkin 1968, 480). Low levels of education were also identified as a cause of

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this omission in the Atheist Handbook can be explained by the fact that disclosure to a broader audience could be seen as a failure by the authorities.

<sup>106</sup> The Russian word is ‘обыденный’ which can be understood as homely, banal or trivial.

<sup>107</sup> Many authors of the collective refer to this research conducted in the village of Gnilets in the Oryol province in 1965. A team of Moscow State University administered a survey to 521 residents (Gaidurova 1969, 30).

<sup>108</sup> Scholars who studied gender issues in the Soviet Union, while acknowledging progresses made, question the effective liberation of women and underline the ‘double burden’ to which women were subjected due to their work outside the house and the continuous household maintenance (Lubin 1981). Poliakov talks about two levels of female status: the state and the familial (Poliakov 1992, 63).

religious resilience. However, personal and psychological factors were also held responsible for the persistence of religious beliefs. In this category were persons who had a weak understanding of social affairs, those of weak character, depressive or unhappy people, and those who had been traumatized such as survivors of World War II (Skazkin 1968, 483). Others who did not fit the description were considered ‘unhappy’ and under the influence of superstitious old women (Gaidurova 1969, 18). There were regular calls for the conduct of special lectures for women. For instance, Dadabaeva, the director of the Scientific Atheism Department of the Philosophy Faculty of the Tajik SSR Academy of Sciences, writing in the newspaper *Kommunist Tadjikistana* in 1980, called for a greater propaganda effort among women. Like others, she blames poor education levels and household work for the superstitious character of women (Ro’i 1984, 32). Despite the fact that in general this was a period of liberalization, the Eighties saw a revival of atheistic propaganda. In Tajikistan alone, 4000 lectures on atheism were held in the first half of the Eighties for a population of 3.8 million people (Ro’i 1984, 30).

Clearly, the tone was very patronizing. If atheistic propaganda accused believers of dividing the world in two, the Good and the Evil, propagandists were no better, characterizing believers as outsiders who were not interested in social, production or political issues (Gaidurova 1969, 18). A very small proportion of believers were found to read newspapers, visit the library or attend lectures, in comparison with non-believers or others labelled as ‘undecided’.<sup>109</sup> Nonetheless, many atheist discourses tended to avoid accusing or demonizing believers. In fact, many of the critical assessments conclude that propagandists failed because their message was insulting to believers. In an All-Union conference of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cult in 1957, participants were told that they had to “distinguish between clergy, who were ‘parasites’ seeking to use religion for their own personal enrichment, and ordinary believers who, according to the Party’s injunctions, were not to be offended in the course of the struggle against religion” (Ro’i 2000, 42). Similarly, using a tone that manages to be both patronizing and sympathetic, Kurochkin tells us that believers are not *that* bad: “Even most believers (who explain their

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<sup>109</sup> For instance, only 5% of believers were attending lectures, as opposed to 48% to 58% respectively for undecided and non-believers (Gaidurova 1969, 30).

religiosity mostly by moral motives), are not guided in their behaviour by religious teachings and do not rigidly associate their plans for the present and the future with the achievement of “heavenly bliss” (Kurochkin 1983, 146). In what is perhaps a sign of softer times, another scholar, Abdulla, writes in 1989 that religion in the society cannot be separated from morality and that “being a believer in a socialist environment shows that Islam does not take away the believer from the world but blesses him for serving the whole society” (Abdulla 1989, 404).

### **4.3 Managing religion**

Within the limited space of this dissertation, I cannot make an exhaustive survey of all the large number of relevant laws and amendments adopted over the years. Instead, I will focus on Constitutional amendments and the Law on religious organizations.<sup>110</sup>

As previously mentioned, the separation of Church and State was quickly formalized by the adoption of decrees by the Council of People's Commissars (also referred to as Sovnarkom or SNK)<sup>111</sup> in 1917 and 1918, which deprived religious organizations (mosques, synagogues and churches alike) of the right to hold property. This early decree would soon be backed by a series of legal, constitutional and criminal provisions, which were written and later revised to reflect varying underlying socio-political conditions over the years.

#### **4.3.1 Constitutional provisions**

The first Constitution adopted by the Communist Party in revolutionary Russia (not yet the Soviet Union) confirmed the separation of Church and State, as instituted by the 1918 Decree on the separation of Church and State, and guaranteed citizens freedom of conscience (RSFSR 1918). Surprisingly, the 1924 Soviet Constitution does not retain any reference to the separation of Church and State. The second Constitution (1936) does however, with Article 124 guaranteeing the separation of church from the state and the schools. It also guarantees freedom of religious worship as well as providing for the right to conduct *antireligious* propaganda (USSR 1936). In 1977, Constitutional provisions regarding religion were again modified with the addition of Article 52, which stipulates that

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<sup>110</sup> For this, I mainly use Pospelovsky's collection of major laws and regulations as well as Soviet legal documents available online.

<sup>111</sup> It stands for the Russian designation: Soviet narodnyx kommissarov.

citizens of the USSR are guaranteed the rights to follow a religion or no religion and to perform rites, as well as to disseminate *atheistic* propaganda. Article 52 also prohibits the incitement of hostility or hatred on the basis of religious beliefs (USSR 1977). Two points appear particularly relevant here. It declares that citizens have the right to propagate atheist ‘beliefs’ but not religious ones. The Constitution therefore *de facto* prohibits religious proselytising. Also, while the 1936 article mentions the right to conduct ‘antireligious’ propaganda, the 1977 provision refers to ‘atheist’ propaganda. This change of wording epitomizes different political environments and political approaches, from Stalinist confrontation to an emphasis on at least limited tolerance, and to greater reliance on ideological persuasion.

Finally a new article added in 1977 officially brings a moral dimension to the upbringing of children. Article 66 stipulates that: “Citizens of the USSR are to be concerned with the upbringing of children, to train them for socially useful work, and to raise them as worthy members of socialist society. Children are obliged to care for their parents and help them.” This article is tendentious because one cannot easily measure parents’ success in making their children worthy members of the socialist society. Also, it stigmatizes a priori religious parents because their values are implicitly held to be contrary to those of socialism.

#### **4.3.2 Laws and decrees**

Various decrees and laws were adopted to further codify the practice of religion, especially the status of religious organizations rather than individuals, who were being addressed through other means, namely, atheist propaganda and social pressure. As with Constitutional amendments, laws and decrees were frequently subject to change and reflected their respective socio-political times. I will mainly focus on the *Law on Religious Organizations* because it significantly shaped religious life in the Soviet Union, which, needless to say, was not nonexistent but which was greatly constrained. Also, emphasis on this law is justified by the fact that in Central Asia, post-Soviet governments adopted similar laws modelled after this very Soviet law.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> In the fourth chapter, an entire section will be dedicated to the Tajik Law on ‘Religious organizations and freedom of conscience’.

In 1921, the Presidium of the Russian Soviet Republic adopted decrees *On the Exemption from Compulsory Military Service on Religious Convictions, Labour Service of Priests and On the Publication of Religious Literature and Religious Groups, Associations, and Congresses*<sup>113</sup>. Despite its name, the decree contained little reference to religious groups except for its confirmation that religious associations could not hold any legal status and needed approval before printing religious literature (RSFSR<sup>114</sup> 1921).

The 1929 *Law on Religious Associations*, which contained 68 articles, was much more comprehensive than the first 1921 Law adopted by the Russian Soviet Republic, which included only eight articles.<sup>115</sup> I will mention only the most relevant parts of the 1929 law. The application for registration was to be sent to the local committee on religious matters. Criteria for approval were vague, which gave the authorities broad latitude to reject applications. Because religious associations were not considered legal entities, they could not rent facilities, so Article 27 stipulated that prayer buildings had to be leased to believers themselves by the district's Committee of religious affairs, and that any registered organization or group could use no more than one place of worship (Article 8).

Article 17 listed forbidden activities, prominent among which was the organization of youth meetings or study groups. It also outlawed religious charities. Members of religious organizations or groups could not be solicited for financial donations, thereby curtailing *zakat*<sup>116</sup>, except for the repair and maintenance of the prayer building (Article 54). Article 25 of the law declared that all cult properties were nationalized, so that a religious group could not own a building, although it could rent one or build a new one, or be offered a place of worship by the district authorities (Article 10). Article 20 granted religious associations the right to hold local, regional, republican or All-Union religious conventions, but only with the permission by the appropriate level of government. Article 59 and 61 required special permission to conduct religious performances and processions outside the prayer building in the open air, except around the Church, and as long as they did not interfere with traffic (Article 60).

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<sup>113</sup> Ob osvobozhdenii ot voinskoi povinnosti po religiozным ubezhdeniyam, o trudovoi povinnosti sluzhitelei kul'ta, ob izdanii religioznoi literatury i o religioznix gruppax, ob'edineniyax i s'ezdax.

<sup>114</sup> Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.

<sup>115</sup> See RSFSR 1921 and 1929.

<sup>116</sup> An Islamic tax to help support the poor. It can also refer to a collective duty to build or repair a mosque, a medresse.

After a period of relative religious tolerance during the post-war years, the period from 1958 until the Seventies saw renewed persecution of religious elements. This occurred despite the fact that in 1958, the Supreme Soviet adopted a resolution guaranteeing equality to All-Union and Republican legal entities, regardless of social, material and rank status as well as of national, racial and religious background (Belov 1977, 118). Such a provision is commonly found in many such laws, for instance, in the legal framework regulating public education.

Amendments made to the Law in 1975 further codified the registration and functioning of religious associations. Among different political reasons, changes were made to fit the new realities of bureaucratic religious management. Principal among these changes in religious management was the reorganization in 1965 of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults (CARC), the regulating body for state-religion relations, into the Council of Religious Affairs (CRA). Also important was a resurgence of anti-religious propaganda beginning in the early 1970s (Pospelovsky 1987, 112). Going through the details of every amendment seems ponderous, but in sum these changes clearly show a willingness to consolidate the Council of Religious Affairs' grip on the development of religious associations, and confirming the status of the CRA as the "liaison body between the Church and the Soviet government". The nature of the liaison was not purely administrative, of course; the CRA was also reporting regularly to the KGB (Pospelovsky 1987, 118-119). Despite that, one amendment represented a small victory for religious organizations since it contributed to their eventual recovery of a legal status (Pospelovsky 1987, 119).

As previously mentioned, the period following Stalin's death was marked by an increased reliance on propaganda and educational measures (Powell 1977, 139). During the 22<sup>nd</sup> Communist Party Congress in 1961, Khrushchev called for the intensification of scientific-atheistic education for the liberation from religious prejudices and superstitions (Pospelovsky 1987, 81). The Komsomol and the Academy of Sciences were mobilized for this anti-religious campaign. This criminal code was modified to add violations of the principle of separation of Church and State. In 1966, the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) adopted a *Law on the Administrative Responsibility for the*

*Violation of the Legislation of Religious Cults*; similar laws quickly adopted by the other Republics (Skazkin 1981, 422). Restrictions and supervision not only concerned religious practice itself but comprehended other aspects of citizenry that had to be kept from religious influence. For instance, a provision entitled: “The rights and duties of parents or guardians in the upbringing and education of children”, was included in section 11 of the 1977 Law on public education. This provision requires parents to raise children in the highest spirit of communist morality and respect for socialist property (Belov 1977, 126).<sup>117</sup> These laws seemed to have been firmly enforced, resulting in the closing of even more mosques (Tazmini 2001, 65), the interdiction of pilgrimages, and the closing of mazars as well as the prosecution of believers and members of clergy (Ro’i 2000, 41-47).

### 4.3.3 Institutions of regulation

While a significant decrease in religious practice followed the introduction of these measures, repression and propaganda did not result in the complete eradication of religion. Authorities felt they had no choice but to try to channel religious behaviour by establishing religious standards, trying to make them as compatible as possible with Soviet norms. The creation of religious administrations<sup>118</sup> in the post-war period provided authorities the means to achieve this goal by reaching believers and by trying to influence their religious practices. Four such administrations appeared throughout the Soviet Union during the war period: the Spiritual Administration for European Russia and Siberia in Ufa, for the Northern Caucasus in Buinaksk (Dagestan)<sup>119</sup>, for Transcaucasia in Baku and also the Spiritual Muslim Board of Central Asia (SADUM)<sup>120</sup> (Ro’i 2000, 100).

The most common explanation for the creation of these bodies is they were a reward for Soviet Muslims who participated in the war effort (Haghayegi 1995, 26-27) as well as an attempt to give a democratic image to the authorities (Babajanov 2000b, 81). Polat insists that the officialization of Islam was meant to purge Central Asian Islam of its external influences (Polat 2000, 40), whereas Ro’i suggests that Moscow merely accepted the

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<sup>117</sup> This law can be seen as the ancestor of the 2011 Tajik *Law on Parental responsibility in the upbringing and education of children*, which I will discuss in the following chapter.

<sup>118</sup> Other faiths had their own religious administrations but unlike for Muslims, their representation was not territorial. Russian Orthodox, Gregorian Armenian, Evangelist Christian Baptists and Lutherans had representations while Roman Catholics and Jews had no centre (Ro’i 2000, 23).

<sup>119</sup> This directorate was moved to Baku in 1974 (Ro’i 2000, 100).

<sup>120</sup> The latter would become *primus inter pares* (Ro’i 200, 53).

request of a group of Muslim leaders who hoped to bolster their position within the local clergy (Ro'i 2000, 104). Following Ro'i, Dudoignon suggests instead that within the context of repression, the creation of the SADUM contributed to the intensification of personal rivalries, particularly in Sufi circles (Dudoignon 2011, 55). Multiple factors doubtless came into play, but the bottom line may be that the decision to create religious administrations under the influence of the state demonstrated that the regime perceived the clergy and religious communities "as a defeated and controllable enemy" (Keller 2001, 251). The end result was the creation of an official Islam in the USSR that was used to frame religious practices as well as an instrument of foreign policy when dealing with Muslim countries (Fourniau 1994, 118).

Perhaps the creation of these regional bodies also reflects the Soviet scheme of replacing religious identities with objective nationality categories (Arel 2006, 18). As Pelkmans argues, Soviets eventually ethnicized religion by objectifying it and fostering a separate category which people refer to (Pelkmans 2009, 6). Indeed, as Schatz suggests "what distinguished an ethnic Kazakh from an Ukrainian was, among other things, the religious tradition associated with each reified ethnic culture" (Schatz 2010, 253).

#### *Spiritual Muslim Board of Central Asia - SADUM*

SADUM was officially approved by the Supreme Soviet of the USSR on July 31, 1943 and held its first meeting on October 20 of that year in Tashkent. The Spiritual Directorate was headed by a Mufti, with a presidium or governing board and an auditing commission elected by a convention of clergy and believers. It had representatives in the territories under its jurisdiction (Ro'i 2000, 105).<sup>121</sup> The Mufti was elected at the general Kurultai, the assembly of all the Muslim clergy. The Kurultai also elected the presidium, later known as the Council of Ulama, which assisted the Mufti and acted as the editorial board for the *Journal Muslims of the Soviet East*<sup>122</sup> (Akbarzadeh 1997, 82).

Soon after the establishment of the SADUM, Qaziyats were set up in each capital of the other Central Asian Republics. The Qazis represented the highest clerical authority within

<sup>121</sup> In total, there had been four Muftis: Ishan Babakhan 1943-1957, Ziyauddin Babakhan 1957-1982, Shamsuddin Babakhan 1982-1989 and Muhammad-Sodiq Muhammad Yusuf 1989-1993 (Brill Olcott 2005, 357-8).

<sup>122</sup> 'Musulmane Sovetskovo Vostoka' was founded in 1968. By 1977, its circulation increased by five and reached 35,000 copies published in 33 countries (<http://www.islamission.ru/index.php/ru/istoriya>).

each of the republics, and were subordinate to the Tashkent Mufti (Akiner 2001, 29). Republican Qazis were in turn responsible for the appointment of religious clergy in each of their territories (Akbarzadeh 1997, 82). However, local committees of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults had to approve the nomination of each Qazi, based not on whether the candidate's religious training was deemed satisfactory but on whether he was judged suitable from a political standpoint (Ro'i 2000, 30). Clergy members who were too popular or influential tended to be discarded (Luchterhandt 1993, 72).

Babajanov identifies the following general functions of the SADUM: to regulate and control the religious situation, to strengthen the sense of unity, and to promote closer contacts between clergy and ordinary believers, especially in the absence of contacts with Muslims from abroad (Babajanov 2000b). More specifically, Sadur lists the responsibilities of the SADUM as follows:

- 1- To solve problems of religious dogma that concern faith and rituals, which decisions are given in the form of fatwas.
- 2- To provide support to mosques, prayer houses and religious organizations as well as to the Muslim clergy.
- 3- To issue recommendations on the obligations of mullahs and muezzins of mosques accompanied with verifications.
- 4- To dismiss mullahs and muezzins who have violated Islamic principles.
- 5- To study attentively complaints and declarations of the clergy or believers which concern the competences of the Spiritual Administration.
- 6- To publish the necessary literature, appoint muhtasibs<sup>123</sup>, representatives of local offices of the spiritual administration and distribute the funds given to the local administration (Sadur 1989, 437).

In theory, religious education was under the close supervision of the authorities (Sadur 1989, 439; Babajanov 2000, 82-3). From 1948 to 1991, there were only two functioning medresses in the whole of Central Asia, the Mir-i Arab one, opened in Bukhara in 1946 and the Al-Bukhari in Tashkent founded in 1956. In 1971, the Institute for Higher Islamic Studies was established in Tashkent (Epkenhans, 317). There were no official medresse apart from the ones in Uzbekistan, so the opportunities to learn the basics of religion *legally* were nearly nonexistent, since private religious education was forbidden. Also, the pace of theological training in Bukhara and Tashkent was very slow (Akbarzadeh 1997, 76). In

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<sup>123</sup> A person responsible for observing and maintaining religious morality.

fact, these institutions trained a strikingly low number of students; between 1945 and 1970, only 85 students graduated from the Mir-i Arab medresse (Ro'i 2000, 161). Partly as a result of this, the number officially recognized mullahs was far too low to be able to serve the needs of the whole Muslim population and to perform the desired number of life-passage rituals such as weddings, circumcisions and funerals.

Most authors contend that the SADUM was subservient to the influence of Moscow, which perceived the spiritual administration as loyal to the regime (Ro'i 2000, 229). Babajanov points out that the SADUM's structure, which nominally invested the Director with nearly unlimited power, actually reflected authoritarian practices implemented since the very beginning of the Soviet Union (Babajanov 2000a, 153), and the body was in fact closely monitored by the CARC.

The SADUM and Qaziyats enjoyed little popular legitimacy, since the registration of mullahs meant that they were 'sanctioned' (ukaznie) and therefore perceived as being too close to the authorities, on which they depended for their nomination (Sadur 1989, 433). Also, fatwas were regarded as bureaucratic edicts, devoid of any spirituality (Babajanov 2005, 304) since all discourses, publications and messages had to be submitted to state censorship before circulation (Babajanov 2000a, 152). It was also difficult for mullahs and clerics to retain their credibility among believers while straining to reconcile principles of scientific atheism with Islamic scriptures. To take but one example, a 1962 SADUM fatwa ordained that circumcision was not mandatory because it was said to be a pre-Islamic practice (Ro'i 1984, 28).

Here we touch on one of the greatest paradoxes of Soviet and post-Soviet policy. Perhaps it is in fact mistaken to call it a paradox and maybe the good old *carrot and stick approach* best describes the strategies of Soviet authorities. On the one hand, atheist propaganda insisted on the fallacy of religious beliefs. Early portrayals of Islam as a backward, oppressive and sexist religion (Keller 2001) were part of a long-term propaganda strategy to eradicate the influence of religion. This message was repeated over the years, such as in the Atheist's Handbook portrayal of Islam as a religion that encourages selfishness, passiveness and gullibility. Other publications mention that Islam contradicts the principle

of the friendship of all peoples by establishing a division between true believers and infidels<sup>124</sup> (Ro'i 1984, 35). On the other hand, some SADUM publications describe the ideology of Islam in the USSR as one of reason, humanism and progress, and say that Islam favours hard work, human rights, equality of men and women, etc. (Masaliev and Abdusamedov 1984, 80-81). It is possible that the Soviet authorities judged that these publications were harmless, given that most of the literature was only available in mosques and therefore was not accessible to many people. Also, many publications were not even published in languages understood by USSR citizens<sup>125</sup> (Sadur 1989, 439). Dudoignon argues that SADUM's subordination to Moscow did not prevent it from pursuing some of its own interests. For instance, it promoted traditional (non-European) clothing and other non-verbal expressions of Islamic identity, and the restoration of the *adab*, the Islamic code of courtesy and good manners (Dudoignon 2011, 71-2). Ro'i also reports that if the clergy was not openly opposed to the new secular ceremonies, they nonetheless underlined their 'European' character (Ro'i 2000, 696). Also, if the official clergy condemned the habit of holding expensive celebrations for weddings and circumcision parties, it did so because this was deemed contrary to Islamic teachings and not because it was an illusory ritual from the past as official propaganda suggested (Akbarzadeh 1997, 80).

Many religious figures engaged in the unregistered teaching of students. The existence of these secret religious study cells, or *hujra*, was an open secret, winked at by the KGB (Brill Olcott 2007, 30). Babajanov, who provides an excellent account of the internal factions within the SADUM, insists that many local mullahs were quite critical of the SADUM's decisions, opposing many of them and repeatedly defying the body's authority (Babajanov 2000b). In particular, he points to a group of mullahs from the Ferghana valley who opposed Hanafī rituals such as the reading the Koran at funerals and pilgrimages to tombs of local saints, and declared them 'unislamic' (Babajanov 2000b, 83). The attempt of the new Mufti Muhammad Yusuf Muhammad Sodiq, who was confirmed in 1989, to rally the Presidium for the adoption of a joint fatwa condemning the Ferghana group revealed

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<sup>124</sup> Current discourses also make this distinction.

<sup>125</sup> The Journal of Muslims of the Soviet East "Musulmane Sovetskovo Vostoka" was first published in Uzbek (using Arabic script), Arab and English. After, it also came out in French and Persian (Abdusamedov A. and A. Masaliev 1984, 70). That is clearly a sign that this institution was used as an instrument of foreign relations rather than as a means to enlighten USSR's Muslims who could not read these languages.

profound splits between members, opposing *grosso modo* Hanafis and so-called Wahhabis (Babajanov 2000b, 84). The split with the SADUM was perceived by the Tajik Qazi Turajonzoda, however, as a maneuver by external political actors seeking to divide Muslims (Babajanov 2000b, 87).

Hoji Ibodullo Kalonzoda, whose father Mirzo Ibodullo Kalonzoda, held the title of Qazi Kalon between 1961 and 1988, described the institution as a ‘political farce’ where only few people were working<sup>126</sup>. Unfortunately, there are very few accounts of the internal dynamics of the Qaziyat in Soviet Tajikistan, although Dudoignon’s work (2011) does help us get a better idea of what was going on during that period. First, Dudoignon describes socio-linguistic rivalries within the Qaziyat between Uzbek and Persian clergy, who opposed an Uzbekization of Islam within the Tajik SSR during most of Soviet period. This author also highlights the roles of registered and unregistered mullahs in forming religious study cells, or *hujra*, which rightfully contributed to reducing the separation between official and unofficial Islam. Shortly after the creation of SADUM, initiatives to open medresses in Tajikistan, were turned down by the authorities, despite the fact that this initiative was supported by Tajikistan’s Qazi, Salih Babkalanov (Ro’i 2000, 354). There also seem to have been a rivalry between official and unsanctioned imams; Ro’i reports that in 1961 Tajik official mullahs complained that unregistered clergy dubbed their official counterparts as ‘Soviet’ (Ro’i 2000, 285), a term deemed discrediting.

There were 17 to 18 mosques officially registered in the Tajik SSR between the beginning of the Khrushchev era and the end of the Soviet Union (Dudoignon 2011, 59) and many more unregistered places of worship. Official figures from 1987 estimate at 230 the number of holy places in Tajikistan, although that number was denied by the republican authorities, who claimed that it was mostly women and children who visited such places (Ro’i 2000, 382). In addition, in the late Soviet period, the official clergy grew more independent during the general liberalization attendant on Gorbachev’s Perestroika movement, as well as because of the flamboyant personality of the Qazi, Hoji Akbar Turajonzoda. Among other things, the Qazi attempted to gain more control over the nomination of imams and asked the authorities to switch the day off from Sunday to Friday and to forbid the selling of non-

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<sup>126</sup> Fieldnotes, Khujand, July 13 2010.

halal meat. “For the first time in seventy years of Soviet power, the Muslim clergy appeared in Tajikistan as a virtual challenger to the political authorities” (Mullojanov 2001, 235).

### *Council for Religious Affairs*

As we have seen, state-religion relations were under great political pressure from the early years of the revolution. First being under the jurisdiction of the Commissariat of Justice established in 1918, religious issues were later managed by the National Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) in 1922. Religious matters were later transferred to the Ministry of Cults created in 1924, then returned to the NKVD in 1938, until the creation of the CARC in 1944 (Luchterhandt 1993, 55-57). The CARC’s main tasks were:

- 1- To maintain a link between the government of the USSR and the leaders of religious associations on questions of faith that required the intervention of the central government.
- 2- To draft laws regarding religious issues.
- 3- To give instructions and supervise the implementation of such laws.
- 4- To inform the government on the situation of religions in all regions
- 5- To compile and transmit statistical reports on the number of prayer-houses provided by local soviet organs (Ro’i 2000, 12).

Local representatives (upolnomochennyie) of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults were in turn responsible to:

- 1- Maintain an institutional link between religious communities and the state.
- 2- Register prayer-houses.
- 3- Review and submit to the CARC the material concerning the closure, construction or refurbishing of prayer-houses.
- 4- Receive clergy representatives and answer their questions, receive complaints from citizens, follow-up on complaints and inspect prayer-houses (Ro’i 2000, 23-28).

Luchterhandt emphasizes that the pre-1965 CARC sought cooperation between religious associations and the state, resolved local disputes, and presumably earnestly engaged in its role of ensuring freedom of religion. Although the 1965 reorganization under Khrushchev brought little change in CARC's mission and responsibilities, its actions were decidedly more repressive (Luchterhandt 1993, 57). However, Ro’i suggests that the Council did not necessarily favour repressive measures, and he observes that the CRA in fact consistently

urged its local representatives not to shut down illegal mosques but instead to assist in their registration, because this facilitated the control of Islamic activity (Ro'i 2000, 553).

Even though both SADUM and CRA were useful for the authorities, the two bodies were very distinct and pursued different objectives. While the former was an administrative body dedicated to the implementation of the law and the preservation of normalized relations with believers, the latter was a spiritual organisation with its own political agenda, and subject to internal and external fights. Nonetheless, these regulatory institutions greatly contributed to the shaping of religious life and in particular, to the emergence of a specific understanding of state-religion relations.

### **Conclusion**

I would like to close the section on secularization with a discussion of parallel Islam. Among the few ontological debates that divide the community of researchers, the issue of 'parallel Islam', a term borrowed from Soviet sociologists and first introduced by Alexander Bennigsen in 1968 (Poujol 2005, 53), is one of the most salient. The term refers to the type of Islam practised during the Soviet period as opposed to the Islam labelled as 'official', which was promoted and controlled by the SADUM. Parallel Islam was clandestine but supported by a network of underground organizations, mainly Sufi Brotherhoods (Myer 2001, 181). Ro'i, who helped popularize the term, underlines the importance of parallel Islam by pointing out that the number of official mosques in the Soviet Union comprised only 1% of the actual total (Ro'i 2000, 288). By way of comparison, in the Eighties, there were officially 200 'central' mosques<sup>127</sup> in Central Asia (Abdulgani 1989, 405), three of them in Northern Tajikistan (two in Leninabad and one in Proletarsk). Poliakov's expedition<sup>128</sup>, however, estimated the number at around 200, a number at least equal to that from pre-Soviet times (Poliakov 1992, 96-97). In 1982, in Tajikistan, no less than 21 underground schools were discovered (Ro'i 2000, 358).

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<sup>127</sup> The Tajik designation is Masjidi Jomeh (Friday mosque) and Sobornaya mechet' (Cathedral mosque) in Russian.

<sup>128</sup> Sergei Petrovich Poliakov is a Russian ethnographer who published an influential book in the USSR in 1989 about everyday Islam in Central Asia although his research focuses mainly on Northern Tajikistan. His main findings point to the failure of Soviet policies and the continuing influence of the clergy and traditional ideas among the population. For Dewese, Poliakov's work, described as "a disturbingly ethnocentric example of prescriptive ethnography", is the quintessence of a Soviet view of religious life (Dewese 2002, 315).

Numerous testimonies of Central Asians tell of secret performances of religious rites, including Islamic weddings (Nikoh), circumcisions (Hatna) and funerals (Dzhanoza), as well as stories of people praying in caves or among trees, or secretly riding bikes at night to attend religious classes. Such activities placed people at great personal risk, as they could be prosecuted for performing such acts or for attending unsanctioned services<sup>129</sup>. Indeed, contrary to Gellner's opinion in 1991 that in the USSR, "faith has now totally disappeared" (1991, 1), religion did not vanish. Despite the coercion of religious leaders, severe repression of believers and seventy years of persistent atheist propaganda, religious beliefs and rituals lived on, albeit altered. The debate about parallel Islam is in fact a very important aspect of the situation's assessment, because defining and qualifying Soviet Islam helps us understand how Islam would later be manifested at the time of independence. Defining Soviet Islam is a crucial issue because the 'type' of Islam, whether labelled as 'parallel', 'militant' or 'political', in a way determines how we understand the types of interactions that religious actors would develop with the authorities.

The concept of parallel Islam is contentious mainly because many researchers acknowledge that some religious practices were never completely hidden and were often conducted with the complicity of local authorities. In particular, some rituals, such as circumcisions, always remained the norm rather than the exception, even if they were officially condemned. At the local level, many of these manifestations of faith were tolerated, and even party officials often participated.<sup>130</sup> Ro'i concludes that in many places, "the Muslim burial rite in particular was looked upon as a national custom rather than a religious rite" (Ro'i 2000, 694). Poliakov, although to his great chagrin, also acknowledges how deeply embedded the rural religious authorities were in production networks and political life (Poliakov 1992). Rasanayagam, too, mentions that some local Uzbek political leaders worked with unregistered mullahs and other community leaders to mobilise workers (Rasanayagam 2011, 81). Such findings make it difficult to justify the use of the word 'parallel', since the practise of Islam did not run alongside, but rather was intertwined with, local political and administrative realities.

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<sup>129</sup> In Turkmenistan, circumcision was forbidden until 1989 (Poliakov 1992, 56).

<sup>130</sup> This topic is well documented and it is surprising that scholars are not interested in investigating connections between officials and local practices of Islam in the post-Soviet period.

Thus some scholars favour the use of alternative terminology, such as ‘popular’, ‘political’ or ‘non-official’ (Glenn 1999, 91), to describe the type of Islam practised in Central Asia. Olimova, for example, argues that the practice of popular Soviet Islam was a way to cope with atheist policies and withstand the effects of modernization (Olimova 2000, 59). For Bennigsen, Brill Olcott and Olimova the Sufi brotherhoods are to be understood as an organisational system that permitted the survival of militant Islam (Bennigsen and Lemercier-Quellejey 1968, 255; Olimova 2000, 64). In her excellent piece on the roots of radical Islam in Central Asia, Olcott insists on the role of erudites who were trained abroad and who for many years taught clandestinely in the Soviet Union (Brill Olcott 2007, 16).<sup>131</sup> Olivier Roy offers a different perspective and sees in adherence to Sufism, because it was widespread, a cultural marker which is not connected to militancy (Roy 1997, 221) but later uses the term parallel Islam to describe a nascent conservative political Islam in the mid-eighties (Roy 2001, 54-64). Naumkin goes in the same direction and argues that in pre-Soviet times, Uzbeks used Islam as a marker of identity (Brill Olcott and Ziyaeva 2008, 19; Naumkin 2005, 207-9).<sup>132</sup>

It appears difficult to clearly define what Soviet Islam represented. Was it an Islam that has been transformed by its contact with Soviet power? An Islam that went underground? One that was co-opted by secular authorities? What comes out of the above discussion on parallel Islam is that there is no clear distinction between what should be considered “Soviet” and what is more accurately seen as “traditional”. This does not mean that this discussion is sterile, but rather that categories are blurry and distinctions are not easily made. In this spirit, Northrop argues that these two labels “are historically produced, fluid, mutually constructing, and continually shifting categories” (Northrop 2004, 356). For that reason, it seems preferable to approach the Soviet secularization experience in terms of accommodation instead of using a binary perspective opposing passive resignation and resistance.

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<sup>131</sup> Her study focuses on two main figures: Muhammadjan Hindustani from Dushanbe and Hakimjon qari Vosiev from the Fergana Valley in Uzbekistan.

<sup>132</sup> This is one of the conclusions made by Juliette Cadiot in her study of national consciousness which reveals that when asked by surveyors to define their identity, a majority of Central Asians would mention the name of their clan, their village and religion (Cadiot 2007).

## **Chapter 5 – State policies, orientations and official discourses**

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As John Schoeberlein underlined, there is a curious contradiction in the fact that observers and scholars inescapably describe Central Asian governments as ineffective and weak<sup>133</sup> but at the same time, devote a great deal of attention to those same authorities and as a result neglect other relevant social elements (Schoeberlein 2007, 284). While I have also criticised this trend all along, the issue of state power and state policies is inevitable when dealing with religious identities in Tajikistan. State policies do not unidirectionally influence the evolution of the religious field but they certainly contribute to shape religious life due to the numerous rules and laws that regulate religion and religious behaviour. Following Panchenko's recommendation, I investigate the cultural resources used for the elaboration of institutional and public discourses of morality (Panchenko 2011, 119). This chapter underlines the similarities between Soviet and post-Soviet institutions and discourses by illustrating the authorities' attempt to subordinate religious practices and define an Islam consistent with national ideals. In this sense, Tajikistan is no different from other post-colonial states which have "adopted some permutation of religiously neutral and distanced state institutions" which they see as "being foundational attributes of their own independence" (Berman, Barghava and Laliberté 2013, 8). Ultimately, the chapter will also reveal the uncertain separation of state and religion in Tajikistan.

In terms of organization, the chapter will start with a review of relevant constitutional amendments, followed by the introduction of the two most important laws as well as regulatory institutions that deal with the practice of religion. A second part will survey official discourses and present the dominant orientations of the Tajik leadership. Apart from referring to legal documents, I will integrate elements from fieldwork interviews as an attempt to disaggregate state structures and to question the common conception of the state as a unitary actor. There are indeed multiple levels of authority and my intention is to demonstrate that actors' interests and local contexts matter in the implementation and enforcement of laws.

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<sup>133</sup> The International Crisis Group has the gloomiest conclusion of all, going as far as describing the Tajik authorities as "a virtual government in a hollow State" (ICG 2009, 15).

## 5.1 Laws regulating religion and religious practice

### 5.1.1 Constitution

Five articles refer to the issue of religion in the Tajik Constitution.<sup>134</sup>

- Article 1. The Republic of Tajikistan shall be a sovereign, democratic, law-based, secular, and unitary state. Being social oriented state Tajikistan shall provide relevant living conditions for every person. The names “Republic of Tajikistan” and “Tajikistan” shall be equivalent.<sup>135</sup>
- Article 8. In Tajikistan public life shall be developed on the basis of political and ideological diversity. Ideology of any party, social and religious association, movement and a group shall not be recognized as a state ideology. Social associations and political parties shall be established and function within the framework of the Constitution and laws. Religious organizations shall be separate from the state and shall not interfere in state affairs. The establishment and activity of public associations and political parties which encourage racism, nationalism, social and religious enmity, and hatred, as well as advocate the forcible overthrow of the constitutional state structures and the formation of armed groups shall be prohibited.
- Article 26. Everyone shall have the right freely to determine his position toward religion, to profess any religion individually or jointly with others or not to profess any and to take part in religious customs and ceremonies.
- Article 28. Citizens shall have the right to associate. The citizen shall have the right to participate in the creation of political parties, including parties of democratic, religious and atheistic character, trade unions, and other public associations, voluntarily affiliate with them and quit. The political parties shall promote the forming and expressing of will of people on the base of political pluralism and take

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<sup>134</sup> The Constitution was adopted in 1994 and amended in 1999 and 2003. The 1999 Constitutional Referendum extended the presidential term from five to seven years while the 2003 amendments extended the number of terms that a Tajik president may hold office, from one to two seven-year periods (Abdullaev 2005). Rahmon, who was due to leave office in 2006 but was re-elected in the November 06 election. In 2013, he ran for a third term and won the elections by securing 83,6% of the vote (BBC News 2013).

<sup>135</sup> I reproduced in their integrity, excerpts from the English version of the Tajik Constitution available on the Parliament’s website: [http://parlament.tj/en/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=9&Itemid=9](http://parlament.tj/en/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=9&Itemid=9). Therefore, typos are not mine.

part in political life. Their structure and activity shall correspond to the democratic norms.

- Article 30. Everyone shall be guaranteed the freedom of speech, publishing and the right to use means of information. Propaganda and agitation, kindling the social, race, national, religious and language enmity and hostility shall be prohibited. State censorship and prosecution for criticism shall be prohibited. Law shall specify the list of information constituting a state secret.

Article 28 is very significant since it allows the creation and political participation of religious-based parties. This is a unique feature in Central Asia's political landscape since neighbouring countries prohibit ethnic and religious parties. This article is the direct consequence of the UN-backed 1997 peace agreement, which terms imposed a power-sharing deal to opposing factions and allowed the integration of the IRPT into state structures. In May 1998, the Parliament, dominated by the President's Popular Democratic Party, proposed a Constitutional amendment that would have forbidden the creation and participation of religious-based political parties. The move infuriated the opposition and the proposed changes were not adopted (Olimova 2000, 69).

Overall, provisions of the Tajik Constitution are rather standard and do not reveal much about the current dynamics of state-religion relations. It certainly testifies of the Soviet heritage because in reality, a minority of countries explicitly mention the secular character of the state in their Constitution (Fox 2011); those include the five Central Asian countries, but also France and Turkey.<sup>136</sup> Ultimately, even if the state does not endorse an official religion, its neutrality vis-à-vis religious matters is dubious due to numerous laws and decrees that restrict religious practices and because of the trenchant positions espoused by politicians.

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<sup>136</sup> Interestingly, in the South Caucasus, only Azerbaijan's Constitution specifies the secular character of the State while Georgian and Armenian texts mention the exclusive historical mission of their respective Churches.

### 5.1.2 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations<sup>137</sup>

We find in Tajikistan, as well as in the other Central Asian Republics and Russia, a law called *Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations*. Like its earlier Soviet version, the law regulates freedom of conscience and freedom of religion, relations between the state and religious communities, as well as the legal status of religious communities. Over the years, the law became increasingly detailed and restrictive. Originally adopted in December 1994, the law was amended in 1997, 1999 and 2001. It was profoundly redrafted by the Committee of Religious Affairs in 2006 but adopted only on March 5, 2009. Before and after its adoption, the law was denounced by local and international advocacy organizations as one of the most restrictive law on religion in the region (Corley<sup>138</sup> 2009; ODIHR 2006; Ozod 2009).

Among the most significant addition is the preamble that enunciates “the special role of the Hanafi school of Islamic religion in the development of the national culture and spiritual life of the people of Tajikistan” (Tajikistan 2009). The text also serves to establish the Hanafi Sunni branch of Islam as the official religious teaching in the country. On the day the law was voted, Mirzoshohrukh Asrori, Minister of Education, told the Parliament that since all religious institutions in the country were registered as belonging to the Hanafi school of jurisprudence, it should be declared the official religious teaching of Tajikistan (Yudalshev 2009). This decision, combined with the requirement for religious schools to submit their curriculum to the Committee of Religious Affairs for approval, indicate how the authorities intend to reinforce their control over religious instruction. It is particularly interesting to draw a parallel with the establishment of the Imam al-Bukhari Islamic Institute by the Soviet government in Tashkent in 1971 since Brill Olcott tells us that it served as an instrument of enlightenment albeit on a highly restricted stage and that it restored the Hanafi tradition in the region (Brill Olcott 2007, 6).

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<sup>137</sup> Official documents are only available in Tajik and Russian and therefore I did not include them in the Appendix.

<sup>138</sup> Felix Corley is a reporter for the Norwegian Christian NGO, Forum 18. Forum 18 reports on violations of freedom of thought, conscience and belief around the world but focuses on Central Asia, the South Caucasus, Russia and Belarus, as well as on Turkey and China.

While Hanafism has been somehow officialised in medresses, Article 7 stipulates that in order to preserve the state's neutrality towards religious associations, state education is secular and religious teachings in public schools can only have an informative character and not be accompanied by religious performances. The law does not outlaw private religious education but Article 8(4) requires that 'teachers' receive a state authorization. Article 8(5) indicates that students from age seven until eighteen can receive religious education with the authorization of parents. However, as we will see, the *Law on Parental responsibility* contradicts this article and unequivocally forbids minors to take part in religious ceremonies.

In 2006, the first draft of the law generated lots of criticism because of the numerous restrictions to religious practice. The OSCE stated that the new law discriminated against religious minorities. It also noted that it restricted non-registered religious activity, free manifestations of religion or belief, religious activities of non-citizens of the Republic of Tajikistan and the religious rights of minors (ODHIR 2006). Numerous provisions on the regulation of religious practices appear rather intrusive. For instance, the law deals with the number of mosques that can be erected: Article 11 stipulates that Friday (*Jomhe*) mosques can be created in areas with populations of 10,000 to 20,000 people except for the capital where they may be set up in areas<sup>139</sup> populated by a minimum of 30 up until 50 thousand inhabitants. In every village with a population of between 100 and 1,000 people local mosques<sup>140</sup> may be set up, while in the capital, they can be erected in areas with a population ranging from 1,000 to 5,000 inhabitants. Finally, the same article stipulates that the selection of imam-khatibs and imams must receive the approval of the responsible state organ, that is, the Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA). This last provision is a measure that unambiguously violates the neutrality of the state as well as undermines the independence of religious communities. By law, the CRA has no right to interfere with the selection of imams. Local communities are responsible for selecting their own imam through negotiation and deliberation. They then send the decision protocol to the local

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<sup>139</sup> The law is not clear as to what constitutes an 'area'

<sup>140</sup> In Tajik, it is simply called Masjid, which means 'mosque,' and in Russian, pyatokratnaya, literally, 'fivefold mosque'.

CRA which will provide the license.<sup>141</sup> However, it appears that the CRA has a say in the choice of imam-khatibs (Epkenhans 2010, 326)<sup>142</sup>. A representative of the IRPT in Kistakuz mentioned the case of an imam who failed to receive a registration because he studied abroad.

Among other controversial provisions, procedures for the registration of mosques and religious associations have been complicated so that founding members must now provide local authorities with 200 signatures in support of their association.<sup>143</sup> It thus limits the possibilities for small communities, especially non-Muslim groups, to set up an organization; because of the small number of their adherents, they can hardly gather support from the greater community. This is a restriction that is reminiscent of Soviet practices as Soviet authorities considered small groups more suspicious than established religions, because they could not be easily monitored (Bryanov 1986, 54-55). Proselytism per se is allowed since religious communities have the right to inform people about their faith and beliefs but according to Article 23(4), they may not do so in state buildings, schools and private homes, which greatly restrict the capacities of communities to reach out to the public. Finally, Article 9(3) states that public officials, public servants, leaders and members of political parties cannot fund or be employed by religious groups, which creates membership issues for the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan.

Minority groups are not the only ones being targeted by the law. There seems to be a bias against Muslim communities since an entire article (11) details the registration and creation of mosques while there is no mention of other places of worships in the text. Surely, it was perceived as such by members of minority religions. In an interview with leaders of the Baptist Church in Khujand in September 2011, religious leaders declared that they did not feel concerned since Christian communities were not really targeted by the law.<sup>144</sup> Instead, they saw it as an attempt to temper rapid Islamization. There was indeed a certain *laissez-*

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<sup>141</sup> Fieldnotes, Khujand, July 13 2011.

<sup>142</sup> Fieldnotes, Khujand, October 16 2010.

<sup>143</sup> Also, clauses in Article 33 stipulate that existing religious associations which were already registered were required to resubmit all necessary documents to seek a registration under the new terms of the law before the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 2010.

<sup>144</sup> Fieldnotes, Khujand, September 18 2011.

faire regarding their activities. There were a total of 15 functioning Baptist Churches in the country but only six of them were officially registered. For instance, the pastor in Khujand mentioned that the Church in Taboshar<sup>145</sup> had no registration but held regular meetings in their office located right in front of the local KGB office. The pastor in Dushanbe explained this tolerance due to two factors: “First, they want people to stay there. It is also a human factor, they see how people live there and they know we help the community.”<sup>146</sup>

Local conditions can also hinder registration efforts. The pastor mentioned that in some places, local authorities are hesitant to provide legal documents necessary for registration because they are under pressure from a neighbourhood which is hostile to non-Islamic groups.<sup>147</sup> He reckons that most of the time, bureaucrats’ incompetence represents the core of the problem. However, right after the adoption of the *Law on Parental Responsibility* in November, the church in Taboshar was closed down after an intrusive visit of the KGB<sup>148</sup> because of the presence of children.<sup>149</sup> Confusion in the implementation of the law also comes from the fact that religious communities as well as law enforcement bodies are not always up-to-date with legal and administrative changes (Taarnby 2012, 43).

Interviews with members of religious associations revealed that registering a religious association can be arduous. In 2010, the Hukumat refused to register a Baptist church in Chkalovsk even though the Church had been operating without registration for years with the blessing of the previous mayor. Another imam from the region of Mastchox I talked to also said he previously was teaching children but had to stop his activities due to the law. He prepared all documents but was denied registration on administrative accounts. He reported that: “They make problems all the time, they will deny registration for a comma at the wrong place”.<sup>150</sup> The medresse in Buston suffered the same fate although what really

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<sup>145</sup> Taboshar is a small town, 40km North of Khujand. It was renamed Istiklol (meaning ‘independence’ in Tajik) in 2012 (Rafiyeva 2012a). It remains a restricted area due to previous exploitation of uranium and the production of missiles’ parts. Mostly populated with Russians in Soviet times, it now resembles a ghost town plagued with water supply problems, exceptionally high unemployment rates and alcoholism problems.

<sup>146</sup> Fieldnotes, Khujand, September 28 2011.

<sup>147</sup> A Baptist pastor was shot dead in Isfara in 2004. He was allegedly killed by Islamic extremists (Rotar 2004).

<sup>148</sup> Agents were reportedly filming people who were present at the Church but did not arrest anyone. See details of the law on parental responsibility in the upcoming section.

<sup>149</sup> Fieldnotes, Khujand, November 13 2011.

<sup>150</sup> Fieldnotes, Khujand, November 1 2011.

happened remains unclear. The case perfectly exemplifies the complexity of social science research since I collected many different accounts from a one-day visit to the town but lacked information to put all the pieces together. When I visited the medresse in June 2011, it was under renovation and was non-functional. The imam, who used to work there as a teacher, explained that the CRA denied the re-registration due to some administrative issues. He was therefore trying to improve the facilities to welcome more students in the future. However, during my visit, a man who identified himself as the ‘caretaker’ of the medresse came up to me in private and told me I should not trust the imam. He explained that the medresse was closed down because this teacher was unqualified and no one wanted to study there. Afterwards, at the local Hukumat, the representative of the Ideology Department told me that: “They closed the medresse because the conditions there were bad, they had nothing to offer to students. This imam wanted to open his own place, do something for himself and not for the benefit of students.”<sup>151</sup> Notwithstanding the real reason behind the closure, the actors’ narratives indicated that perhaps local power politics were being played out. However, because the case is not an isolated one, it is most probably part of a concerted action to limit access to religious education. Indeed, as of July 2011, there were only five officially registered medresses whereas there were ten in 2010 (Dolina Mira 2010, 14). Also, in June 2011, a special police operation, called “Operation mosques” in the Sughd viloyat led to the inspection of eight local medresses, 93 Friday mosques and 955 other mosques and resulted in the closing of 11 illegal religious institutions (Rafiyeva 2011). A similar operation in the Kathlon viloyat resulted in the closing of 47 illegal schools in which studied almost 400 students (Nazryev 2011).

Altogether, the law appears to be restrictive and in many ways contradicts the alleged neutrality of the state. The recognition of the Hanafi mazhab as the official teaching in religious institutions neglects to acknowledge the presence of minority religions such as Ismailism, practiced by the majority of Pamir’s inhabitants as well as Christianity and other minority religions. The law also gives the state plenty of possibilities to interfere in the affairs of religious associations, once again violating the principle of separation of religion and state. Regardless of the severity of the law, its application seems in some cases to be

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<sup>151</sup> Fieldnotes, Buston, July 8 2011.

depending on local dynamics, either favouring or hindering religious associations. If the *Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations* in many ways regulates the practice of religion, the *Law on Parental Responsibility* directly interferes with the religious life of Tajik citizens even though it does not primarily deals with religion.

In parallel to the law, other judicial measures have been taken to prevent foreign influence. The government has banned several organizations in the last few years. Among them are well-known groups such as the Hizb ut-Tahrir, al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. The last three are known for their terrorist activities but others such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Hizb ut-Tahrir hold fundamentalist views but are non-violent political parties (Karagiannis 2006). Jamaat Tablighi<sup>152</sup> is considered to be a peaceful missionary organization (Balci 2012), while Salafiya, as it is referred to in Tajikistan, is not a group but a theological orientation. The term salafism is derived from the Arabic word salaf, meaning “ancestors” and refers to a branch within Islam, in which the followers strive to practice a ‘pure Islam’ as it was in the times of the Prophet Muhammad. Naumkin attributes Salafism an inherent violent character while other interpretations recognize the multiple orientations of Salafism, from pietistic to Jihadi (Khalid 2005; Taarnby 2012). Salafiya appears to be the post-Soviet version of ‘Wahhabism’ and the authorities use it more and more frequently to describe all kinds of radical Muslims. Finally, Free Tajikistan and Call to Islam are completely unknown to the public as well as scholarly communities.

Over the years, thousand have been prosecuted and condemned for their involvement in one of these organizations. In 2011 in the Sughd region only, 135 persons were condemned to prison on the basis of their association in extremist organizations. Prison sentences tend to be heavy in Tajikistan and the convicted received sentences from five to 30 years (Rafiyeva 2012).

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<sup>152</sup> There are different ways of transliterating the name of this organization Tabligh-i Jamaat, Jamoati Tabligh and Таблиги Джамоат in Russian. I recopied the name as used in the articles I quote.

<b>List of extremist groups banned by the Supreme Court in Tajikistan</b>
- Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)
- al-Qaeda
- Turkestan Islamic Movement
- Jamaat Tablighi
- Free Tajikistan
- the Taliban
- Call to Islam
- the Muslim Brotherhood
- Lashkar e-Toiba
- Hizb ut-Tahrir
- Salafiya

Source: Taarnby 2012, 18-19.

### **5.1.3 Religious education**

In September 2009, a new course on Islam, called Knowledge of Islam (*Ma'rifati Islom*) became mandatory for schoolchildren. Hoji Akbar Turajonzoda<sup>153</sup> strongly reacted to the release of new textbooks saying in a open letter to the media that he was “outraged and appalled” that revelations in the Koran were presented as some sort of political agreement reached between the prophet and tribe leaders in Mecca. “Even Soviet-era textbooks, which were openly atheistic, didn’t deny historical facts like our current authors do.” He accused old-fashioned Soviet-era atheist government officials to take part in a wide government campaign to restrict the increasing influence of Islam in Tajik society (Najibullah 2008c). Members of the Council of Ulemas also expressed their regret that the Ministry did not consult religious leaders for the elaboration of the new textbooks (RFE/RL 2009). Ultimately, religious classes were cancelled only few months after they were introduced and replaced by a course called ‘History of the Tajik people’ (Radio Ozodi 2011). In the course of fieldwork, I asked school principals, teachers and students a number of times as

<sup>153</sup> Hoji Akbar Turajonzoda comes from a family of influential clerics in Tajikistan.

to why religious classes were removed from the curriculum but no one could tell for certain why they stopped.

The number of religious education institutions has not ceased to decrease over the years. In 2003, the Islamic Institute in Dushanbe as well as 21 medresses were responsible for providing religious teachings (ICG 2003, 17). In 2010, there were still ten medresses in the Sughd region but many were closed down in 2011 (Rafiyeva 2011). Finally, in the summer of 2013, the authorities suspended five of the country's six remaining medresses, which were all located in Sughd. The CRA invoked that they failed to provide proper documents for registration (RFE/RL 2013). As such, the Medresse Abu Hanifa in Dushanbe, a joint project between the Tajik and Swiss governments, is now the country's only functioning medresse.



The Sheikh Maslikhatdin mosque, mausolee, and the site of the future medresse, viewed from the Panjshambe bazaar in Khujand. PHOTO TAKEN BY AUTHOR.

The Ministry of Education is responsible for approving the medresses' curricula, which should include secular topics and languages in addition to Islamic courses. Medresses do not receive any state funding but tuitions fees are not very high in comparison to Universities.<sup>154</sup> Students can enter after completing the 9<sup>th</sup> grade.<sup>155</sup> After following a three-year course, male students receive a diploma, as teacher and imam-khatib. Female students

<sup>154</sup> Tuition fees at the Khujand medresse are 100\$ per year whereas University fees can reach 1000\$ depending on the institution.

<sup>155</sup> The equivalent of secondary 3 in the US and Canada.

receive an attestation that they finished a 2-year course at the medresse.<sup>156</sup> However, the Ministry of Education does not recognize the diplomas issued by medresses. If most men have the possibility to be employed in a mosque, women cannot expect much from their degree. In fact, it seems that many girls who study in medresses do not do so to increase their employment opportunities but simply “to study Islam more deeply” (Commercio 2013, 22) and many women suggest that they do so to become good mothers (Commercio 2013, 18). Women at the IRPT insisted that contrary to popular interpretation, the Koran actually encourages women to get educated since women should hold important positions in society and not only stay at home. Yet, they were very keen to mention to me that my studies were important because it meant that I would later be able to raise my kids the right way.<sup>157</sup> As a matter of fact, the Director of the medresse in Khujand admitted that many girls do not complete the whole training because they are not allowed to finish their studies once they get married.<sup>158</sup>

The Tajik Islamic State Institute is an institution of higher education that was established with the support of a special state fund in November 2007 following an ukase of the Tajik President on October 30 (Rahmon 2007a). The decision was to broaden the curriculum of the Tajik Islamic University Imama at-Termizi, created in 1991, by including secular topics such as humanities and mathematics (Asia Plus 2007). In March 2009, a Presidential ukase renamed the Islamic Institute as the Imomi Azam Tajik Islamic Institute (Asia Plus 2009).<sup>159</sup> In 2010, it switched from being under the authority of the Ministry of Education of Tajikistan to the authority of the Committee for Religious Affairs. In 2010, it also received full recognition from the Ministry of Education and diplomas are now recognized by state authorities in the same way as diplomas delivered from secular universities (Tursunzoda 2012). Therefore, students, especially women, can expect to find jobs in schools or state agencies more easily. As of January 2013, there were 1342 full-time

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<sup>156</sup> Fieldnotes, Khujand, July 16 2010.

<sup>157</sup> They also wished me as many kids as there are in a football team, after suggesting that I would eventually convert to Islam. Fieldnotes, Khujand 7 2010.

<sup>158</sup> Fieldnotes, Khujand, July 16 2010.

<sup>159</sup> In Tajik: Imomi Azam Abuxanify Numan ibn Sabit. This coincides with the announcement that the Year 2009 in Tajikistan was dedicated to the Great Imam, ‘Imomi Azam’ or ‘Abu Hanifa’, a medieval Islamic thinker and founder of the Sunni Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence (Yudalshev 2008).

students and 585 studying by correspondence. The Institute has 156 teachers, including five foreigners (Islam News 2013b).

Limited access to religious education certainly contributes to the popularity of foreign Islamic institutions. However, many religious figures as well as political figures complain that the level of theological knowledge is very poor and that this encourages students to pursue their studies abroad (ICG 2003, 17; Todzhiddinov 2011). Even the Consultative Council of the Muftis of the CIS is of this opinion and suggested that the Council should take measures to raise the level of education of religious leaders (Isazade 2013).

Perhaps more importantly, mullahs are not necessarily equipped to answer the questions and provide guidance to young people who have ‘modern’ spiritual concerns (Rahnamo 2004). During the numerous focus groups and roundtables on radicalism I attended in the course of my fieldwork, the poor knowledge of ‘self-taught’ imams and consequently, the lack of respect they inspire, were identified as a one of the main reasons as to why people fall for radical leaders. In comparison, ‘foreign-taught’ individuals appear more articulated and knowledgeable.

The shortage of qualified and respected clerics encourage a growing number of Tajiks to pursue their studies in different Islamic countries. In the summer of 2010, I asked the Director of the Sheikh Maslikhatdin medresse in Khujand, Orifjon Baiizoyev, whether or not he saw differences between the Islam taught in Tajikistan and in foreign countries. In his opinion, there was no need to go abroad because true Hanafī Islam was taught in Tajikistan. On the contrary, he said, “when you go abroad, you are spoiling your own traditions and the Hanafī mazhab. Foreign sheiks teach their own mazhab, they provide food and money but their teachings are different and when our students come back, they have changed and conflicts arise”. He suggested that some of the pupils study abroad as ‘partisans’, implying that they monitor other students’ whereabouts. Baiizoyev mentioned that when they come back, the KGB asks them where they have been and why etc. “It’s the right of a government to ask where its citizens have been what they have been doing and what they plan to do next.”<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Fieldnotes, Khujand, July 16 2010.

The authorities' inclination to control religious education exceeds national borders and a year later, movements of Tajik students abroad have severely been curtailed. Concern over foreign education became especially salient after a Presidential speech in August 2010<sup>161</sup> in which Emomali Rahmon urged parents to "bring their children home" since according to him: "Most of them will become extremists and terrorists, because those schools don't only teach religion" (Najibullah 2010). Beyond fears of radicalization, the *Law on Freedom of Conscience* actually stipulates that Tajik citizens may pursue religious studies only after receiving religious education in the Republic of Tajikistan and with the written consent of authorized state bodies on matters of religion and education (Article 8(6)). Following the President's plea, Tajik authorities forced the return of hundreds of Tajiks who were studying in foreign medresses or Islamic Universities.<sup>162</sup> Families of students were allegedly pressured by security enforcement agencies to urge their offspring to come back (Mirsaidov, Rasul-Zade and Dikaev 2010), after which some of them also had to face prosecution (RFE/RL 2011c). Returnees and their families were promised help to find a job or a position in an educational institution but it seems that promises were not kept. A year later, disillusion was palpable. There were reportedly 2413 Tajik citizens studying in Islamic countries<sup>163</sup> in 2010. As of September 2011, almost two thousand students were back in Tajikistan. According to head of the Department of Education of the Committee on Religious Affairs Idibeka Zieaeva, of those returnee students, 129 were enrolled in the local educational institutions, 67 in public schools, 57 in various universities and only eight in medresses (Todzhiddinov 2011).

#### **5.1.4 Law on Parental Responsibility in the Upbringing and Education of Children**

Years of rhetorical attacks and warnings against extremist elements finally led to the elaboration of this controversial law that deals with the education of children. On many occasions, the President has denounced foreign religious education and its perverse effect on radicalization (BBC Monitoring 2007, Najibullah 2010). Lutfiya Roibova, a representative of the regional Department of Education accused imams "to inculcate pupils

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<sup>161</sup> Already in 2007, he had blamed "parents who bring their child to a half-educated mullah, and with a stick he tells them to learn the Koran by heart" (BBC Monitoring 2007).

<sup>162</sup> Tightening measures rose to the point where the authorities prevented in extremis aspiring students from boarding a plane at the Dushanbe airport prior to its departure to Iran (Najibullah 2010).

<sup>163</sup> Though not necessarily enrolled in religious programmes.

with superstitions” (Orzu 2010). Abdudjabbor Rahmonov, the Minister of Education between 2005 and 2013, was especially virulent in his condemnation of parents who send their children to study with mullahs (Asia Plus 2010b). Such discourses are pervasive in Tajikistan and carry a negative tone that is reminiscent of Soviet anti-religious propaganda.

The Law was adopted on August 3, 2011 and came into force on August 6 (Yudalshev 2011c). It happened to be right at the beginning of Ramadan and the bad timing was considered doubly offensive by many detractors.<sup>164</sup> To some, this law is a sign that policy-making in Tajikistan has reached high levels of absurdity (Bayram 2011). In an interview with members of the IRPT in Khujand, one man in his early thirties expressed this opinion in such terms: “People in power are proud to say that we have 3000 years old traditions yet they think that we don’t know how to properly raise our children.<sup>165</sup> Did they really have to adopt such law? It’s ridiculous.”<sup>166</sup> As we will see, the law covers numerous aspects of parenting skills as well as freedom of movement and worship.

Article 8, entitled ‘Parental education duties’ is the one that sparked the strongest critique.<sup>167</sup> Its most contentious provision forbids parents to let children participate in the affairs of religious associations at the exception of those who are officially enrolled in religious education institutions. In the opinion of many, this article not only contradicts other national laws but the Constitution as well as international legal texts (Yudalshev 2011a). Responding to critiques made by the US delegation at the 870<sup>th</sup> OSCE Permanent Council Meeting, Tajik authorities stressed that the unstable situation in neighboring countries requires that the government address “violent extremism and radicalization” and that “the proposed law, by setting a minimum age for attending the mosque, can effectively protect

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<sup>164</sup> Albeit, the government claims to have received 4000 comments of support for the law (Tajikistan 2011c). It is plausible that an important portion of the population supported the initiative given that popular discourses often refer to the loss of values among the youth. Mavjuda Mirchopoeva from the CRA in Sughd expressed this concern by saying that civility was really an issue and that people were not as respectful of authority, laws, and elders as much they were before. Fieldnotes, Khujand, July 13 2011.

<sup>165</sup> The leader of the Parliamentary Committee on Education, Marxabo Dzhabborova, declared in an interview that the law was necessary because: “millions of parents do not pay attention to their children” (Hamidova 2011).

<sup>166</sup> Fieldnotes, Khujand, June 28 2011

<sup>167</sup> The Communist Party of Tajikistan seems to have been the only opposition party in favour of the new legislation. The Communist leadership commented Article 8 in such terms: “We have students who leave aside their studies to hurry to the mosque, the state must necessarily respond to this” (Yudalshev 2011b).

children from the growing religious pressure to which they have been subjected during the past few years” (Tajikistan 2011c).

The Head of the CRA in Khujand, Mavjuda Mirchopoeva described the law as a truly “national law”. Commenting on the prohibition for minors to attend religious services, she said that: “instead of wasting their time at the mosque, children should do something more educative. Anyway, they can still read the Koran at home.” In contrast, a representative of the CRA in Isfara brought up the topic of the controversial law by showing me some passages of both laws on freedom of conscience and parental responsibilities, which contradict each other. He expressed regrets that young people could not receive proper Islamic education, something that, in his opinion, could prevent radicalization. In any case, he thought that people would find other ways to be taught “secretly, just like we did in Soviet times.”<sup>168</sup> This state representative is the only one interviewed who openly criticised the law. Interestingly, he is one of the few apparatchiki to hold an Islamic degree, which he received in Tashkent in 1986.

Yet, even at the CRA’s Central Office in Dushanbe, the Head of the Department of Education, Saiivali Khimmatov, agreed that the law on Parental responsibilities contradicts the one on Freedom of conscience and he did not know why the Parliament adopted such law. In any case, he underlined that children can nevertheless study the Koran at home. Finally, when I asked the Head of Shuroi Ulamo in Sughd about Article 8 that prohibits children from participating in religious ceremonies, he did not disagree nor approve but said that it was still possible to lobby even if the law had been adopted.<sup>169</sup> Interviews reveal a lack of consensus among stakeholders who do not necessarily agree with directives but won’t necessarily try to provoke changes.

Moreover, my observations indicate that the enforcement of the prohibition of children to attend religious ceremonies was not done systematically. In Khujand, it was carried out in very few places and seemed to have been limited to Khujand’s Sheik Maslikhatdin main mosque. Whereas the Baptist Church in Taboshar was shut down due to lack of proper

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<sup>168</sup> Fieldnotes, Khujand, August 16 2011.

<sup>169</sup> Fieldnotes, Khujand, October 25 2011.

registration, the one in Khujand was not visited by police forces even three months after the adoption of the law and many children were present at the Sunday mass when I attended the service in November. However, stories on the monitoring of mosques circulated at this period and few cases were reported in the media (Islam News 2012b). Overall, it seems that authorities were not able to allocate sufficient resources to systematically control Sughd's thousand of places of worship and monitor children's whereabouts.

Other controversial articles include provisions about the transmission of 'national values'. In particular, Article 8 invites parents or tutors to give children names with 'national consonance' and holds parents responsible for raising children 'in the spirit of the love and respect for the Motherland and national values'. This is reminiscent of Article 66 of the Soviet Constitution that stipulated: "Citizens of the USSR are to be concerned with the upbringing of children, to train them for socially useful work, and to raise them as worthy members of socialist society." Other articles are greatly interfering with parenting. For instance, parents should forbid children to carry cell-phones to school, wear jewellery, and let children under twenty years old<sup>170</sup> go out at night in 'entertainment centres' such as internet cafes and bars. There is no doubt that the law is patronizing but the law is so intrusive that authorities can hardly fully implement it.

## **5.2 Institutions of regulation**

In Tajikistan, the presence of institutions such as the Council of Ulemas<sup>171</sup>, heir to the Soviet Qaziat and the Committee of Religious affairs clearly illustrate the institutional continuity with the Soviet period<sup>172</sup>. The Council is more concerned with the spiritual aspects of religious life and training whereas the Department is a governmental body enforcing the laws regulating religious practice. Independent on paper, these institutions are not perceived as such and often criticized for following the official party line.

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<sup>170</sup> Even though the legal age is eighteen.

<sup>171</sup> In Tajik, 'Shuroi Ulamo', in Russian 'Soviet Ulemov'.

<sup>172</sup> Similar institutions are found in all Central Asian republics as well as in Russia.

### 5.2.1 The Council of Ulemas and the Islamic Center

Appointed Qazi Kalon (Supreme judge of the Qaziat) after the dissolution of the SADUM in 1988, Hoji Akbar Turajonzoda<sup>173</sup> was dismissed in 1992 (Epkenhans 2010, 327). It led to the reorganization of the institution in a Muftiate in 1993, and the nomination of Hoji Fathulloh Khon Sharifzoda at its head. In January 1993, Rahmon transformed the Qaziat in a Muftiate and nominated a pro-government cleric at his head. This decision can be interpreted as a first step for the control of religious affairs in the republic (Akbarzadeh 1997, 98). After the brutal murder of Sharifzoda and his family in January 1996, the institution went through another transformation and the Muftiate was renamed into the Council of Ulemas in June 1996 (Akiner 2003, 119). Hoji Amunullo Negmatzoda has occupied the function of President of the Council from 1996 until his death in 2010. In October 2010 the Council elected a new Mufti, Saidmukarram Abdukodirzoda, a 47 year-old graduate of the International Islamic University in Islamabad, who had previously worked as the Head of Religious examinations at the CRA (Hasanova 2010a).

The twenty-seven members of the Council have the responsibility to guide the population in accordance to the fundamentals of the Hanafi tradition, to regulate Islamic institutions, to train and attest imams, to oversee the import of religious literature in the country, to develop education curricula, and to nominate the Qazi who serves for seven years. The Council is also the only legitimate organ to emit fatwas<sup>174</sup>. The Islamic Center (*Markazi Islomi*) is the administrative counterpart of the Council of Ulemas. It includes the General Assembly of the Founders, the Presidium of the Islamic Center, the Council of Ulemas, the President of the Islamic Center, the first deputy chairman, vice-chairman, secretary and other administrative staff. It is responsible for monitoring the country's medresses and the

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<sup>173</sup> Head of the Muslim administration before independence, he made energetic attempts to revive religion by founding the medresse at-Termizi in Dushanbe and supporting the opening of hundreds of local mosques (Akiner 2003, 100). He was dismissed after joining the opposition in 1992. He then served as Deputy Chairman of the Islamic Party of Tajikistan and participated in peace talks as a representative of the United Tajik Opposition. When the peace agreement was signed, he assumed the position of Deputy Prime Minister given from 1998 until 2005. From 2005 to 2010, Turajonzoda was a member of the National Assembly (Majlisi milli), the upper house of parliament (<http://islamnews.tj/persones/>).

<sup>174</sup> Fieldnotes, Khujand, October 27 2011.

Islamic University. The Head Office is in Dushanbe but there are regional offices in the three provinces as well.<sup>175</sup>

In the early 2000s, the government started to express its concern over the qualification of imams as well as over the issue of their political affiliation. In August 2002, together with the Council of Ulemas, the State Committee on religious affairs imposed religious tests on imams to assess their knowledge and prove their fitness for the job (Blua 2002). On April 3 2006, the government organized a seminar for imams of Friday mosques in Dushanbe to teach them about the various sects of Islam (US Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor 2006), most of which have been declared illegal over the years. Yet, it appears that testing was not consistent over the years and tests administered only sporadically (Najibullah 2007c). However, after years of discussion around the qualification of imams, a training centre for imams was established within the Islamic Institute in 2012 (Islam News 2012d). There are surely lacunae in Tajik clerics' religious knowledge. It is estimated that almost 90 percent of rural clergy do not have any formal religious education (Epkenhans 2010, 328). The imposition of tests definitely gives the authorities yet another opportunity to dismiss undesirable elements (Islam News 2011b). In Sughd after the first round of testing in 2011, only 45 imams out of 991 failed the test (Mirsaidov 2011).

The government is keeping a close eye on the activities of the mosques and imams are expected to convey messages of patriotism and unity instead of radical ideas (Rahmon 2007b). In 2011, the Council of Ulemas announced a 'soon-to-be-released' list of 52 topics, prepared in collaboration with the CRA. The initiative was allegedly motivated by the desire to support imams-khatibs with poor knowledge of Islamic scriptures to deliver their sermons.<sup>176</sup> However, in November 2011, lists were still not distributed (Islam News 2011a). It appears that the CRA is increasingly interfering in sermons. In May 2013, imam-khatibs were instructed to explain and retransmit a Presidential speech dedicated to issues of domestic and foreign policy (Russia Today 2013). In January 2014, the CRA announced the introduction of uniforms and dress codes for imams. The CRA and the Council of

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<sup>175</sup> For the organigram, see <http://islamnews.tj/ulema-council.html>

<sup>176</sup> Interview with the Regional Head of the Shuroi Ulema in Sughd. Fieldnotes, Khujand, October 25 2011.

Ulemas approved the uniforms. The uniform consists “of a grey satin shirt, trousers, a turban, and a long powder-blue robe highlighted by traditional white embroidery on the cuffs, lapels, and front trim” that will include “national elements” (Najibullah 2014).

Disavowal of the Council and accusations of connivance with the state authorities are common in Tajikistan and facts could hardly rebuff these accusations. The Council of Ulemas did not oppose most restrictive measures infringing the free practice of religion such as the ban of hijabs in schools, of beards and Islamic dresses in the Islamic Institute, and the prohibition for people under eighteen to attend Friday prayers. In some case, they received the Council’s approval through fatwas. One of the most controversial fatwas forbids women to pray in mosques. It was adopted in 2004 on the basis that mosques do not have the necessary facilities to allow men and women to pray separately (Aliev and Sindelar 2004). It is true that traditionally, women had not attended mosques in Tajikistan but separate praying spaces for women can be organized. In an address to the nation, Rahmon called on women to obey the fatwa and properly raise their children to ensure the country’s future. “We can’t hide the fact that we are not allowing our children to learn a profession, to study technology.” Insisting on the importance of education and training for the well-being of the Nation, he mentioned that: “We can’t build the Rogun hydro-energy plant<sup>177</sup> because of this. For three years, we have been negotiating the purchase of three Boeing, but we can’t buy them because we have no pilots” (RFE/RL 2004). This resonates with the Soviet discourse on the importance of education for science and technological progress. A passage from a book called *The Atheist Education of Students* is evocative: “Soviet students represent the social force of our society, of distinguished high ideas and scientific level and they can accomplish a lot for the future improvement of the effectiveness of workers’ atheist education” (Bryanov 1986, 3).

Leaving aside a certain willingness to marginalize faith, the decision certainly has something to do with conservative values that remain prevalent in Tajik society. Indeed, during a visit at the Islamic Center in Dushanbe, the Head of Department for International

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<sup>177</sup> Every Tajik family was officially asked to buy shares for a minimum of 3000 somoni (450 US\$) (Fergana.ru 2009) but fieldwork revealed that many were forced to. The project, which would greatly improve Tajikistan’s energetic independence, has stalled due to a fierce dispute with neighbouring Uzbekistan which fears a negative impact on its own downstream irrigation system (Marat 2010).

Relations explained to me the fatwa in the following terms: “The prophet himself said that women should pray at home. They should take care of the house. If a woman goes to the mosque, who will look after the kids? Something can happen to them while she is away, it’s better if they pray at home”.<sup>178</sup> Despite a thorough implementation of the law, there are still few opportunities for women to pray in religious facilities. There are the prayer rooms in the head and regional quarters of the IRPT as well as Ismaili ‘Prayer houses’<sup>179</sup> and Friday mosques welcome women in their facilities during special celebrations, like Idi Qurbon for instance, where a special room for women is arranged in Friday mosques.

In April 2011, the Council announced its intention to issue a fatwa that would ban SMS-divorces<sup>180</sup> (RFE/RL 2011h). Mainly used by Tajik migrants living and working in Russia, SMS-divorces represent a growing socio-economic problem in Tajikistan. In 2013 alone, more than 1,700 women sought help from the Committee on Women and Family Affairs and the Council of Ulemas to resolve such litiges. Yet, in January 2014, the Council announced that it could not stop the phenomenon and announced that it was not contrary to Sharia (Radio Ozodi 2014).

Though it did not issue a fatwa on the subject, the Council did not disapprove of the government’s campaign against hijab<sup>181</sup> (Najibullah 2007a) and even suggested that foreign-made hijabs reflected a tradition alien to Tajikistan and that they are ‘too tight’. Instead, they recommended women to wear Tajik ‘traditional clothes’ that meet Islamic requirements (Najibullah 2008b). The standpoint adopted by Tajik Islamic clerics is ambiguous to say the least but understandable because of its subordination to governmental authorities.

The implication of the Council of Ulemas in political intrigues became even more obvious with the eruption of a public dispute involving the Mufti and the Turajonzoda family. On December 9 2011, the Mufti Saidmukarram Abdukodirzoda accused the Turajonzoda brothers of performing the Ashura, a Shiite religious celebration, in their popular Muhammadya mosque in Turkobod. As such, they were accused of violating the terms of

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<sup>178</sup> Fieldnotes, Dushanbe, September 26 2011.

<sup>179</sup> Jamatkhana in Tajik.

<sup>180</sup> In Sunni Islam, men can divorce their wives by merely saying “talaq” - an Islamic term for a declaration of divorce – three times.

<sup>181</sup> I will discuss this issue at greater length in the following chapter.

their own Sunni religious association. Alerted by this accusation, the CRA then looked into the affairs of the mosque and as a consequence revoked the license of the imam-khatib Muhamadjon Turajonzoda and nominated one of his assistants to the position only one week after the incident allegedly took place (Islam News 2011d). The mosque was shut down for three months in December 2011 (Islam News 2011f) and its status was downgraded from a Friday to regular local mosque after being reopened (Islam News 2012e). The Turajonzoda brothers denounced this as a politically motivated accusation due to the fact that the eldest brother Nuriddin is vocal about his opposition to the government<sup>182</sup> (Islam News 2011c).

As the Turajonzodas' case demonstrates, the affairs of the Council of Ulemas and the Committee of Religious Affairs are so intrinsically connected that it seriously questions the Council's independence. Khalid argues that the Islamic Center is "completely subordinate" to the government (2007, 186-187) and many critics have also denounced its subjection (ICG 2003). Responding to such critics, a member of the Council Ismail Muhamadzoda and imam of the main mosque in Gissar, stated: "Luckily God has sent us a president like Emomali Rahmonov. Thanks to our president, Tajik Muslims enjoy full rights" (Rotar 2006). Yet, Saiivali Khimmatov from the CRA claims that the Council of Ulemas is independent and works in collaboration with the CRA. For instance, in the preparation of prayer guidebooks for imams, the Council gives recommendations and the CRA approves.<sup>183</sup> Still, the interconnection is undeniable and interestingly, authorities do not deny the control exerted over the Council. It is in fact presented as a necessary measure to protect Islam against deviances (International Alert Summer Camp June 21 2011). On that matter, the words of the President of Tajikistan, Emomali Rahmon are meaningful:

"The state in the framework of the acting legislation has authority to oversight activities of religious organizations in order to protect peace, stability, noble birth and cultural values of the people in the country. The direct obligation of the Islamic Center and the Council of Ulemas of Tajikistan is to consider their sermons and moral admonitions. Therefore, it is the obligation of the concerned state government bodies to consider the cases when such sermons and moral admonitions contradict to the Constitution and other acting laws of Tajikistan" (Rahmon 2007a).

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<sup>182</sup> He had been warned already in 2008 to not make 'anti-democratic' speeches (Asia Plus 2008).

<sup>183</sup> Fieldnotes, Dushanbe, September 23 2011.

Cooptation of the clergy is reminiscent of past practices and shows how the clergy can be mobilized to convey the ideology proposed by leading political circles. It is through the control over their training, assignment and their speeches that the State can communicate preferred religious beliefs and orientations.

In the OSCE-led survey, only 8% of respondents declared that they would turn to representatives of the Council of Ulemas if they faced a problem of religious nature (Taarnby 2012, 38) as opposed to 42% who would turn to local mullahs. The Council does not appear to be well connected to local clergy members as well as to parishioners' realities. Epkenhans suggests that: "The Islamic Centre does not engage local and regional religious leaders in order to facilitate a debate on doctrinal normativity, religious practice and eventually the role of Islam in Tajikistan's society" (Epkenhans 2011, 84). The Consultative Council of the Mufti of the CIS also acknowledged that religious authorities should strengthen their relations with citizens, especially youth, as well as intensify their dialogue with regional, local and state authorities (Isazade 2013).

In Sughd, most people I talked to knew who the regional Head of the Council of Ulemas was. Yet, the Council's presence and involvement in the community appeared to be negligible and limited to sporadic television appearances on special occasions such as the Ramadan, Idi Fitr and Idi-Qurbon. When I asked an IRPT member from the Bobojon-Gaffurov district what he thought of the role of the Council, he declared that it was there "to manipulate people" into adopting certain behaviour that are not even Islamic, for instance, rejecting the hijab. He compared the lack of legitimacy of the current religious leadership to the one of SADUM. He recalls that Soviet-era mullahs were often 'set-up' by KGB who were taking their pictures with people who were drinking alcohol and which were then published in newspapers to discredit the Islamic clergy. He said: "And now this Musuzoda [Hoji Hussein Musuzoda] sometimes finds himself sitting among people who drink and does not even care!"<sup>184</sup>. He reported another anecdote involving Musuzoda at a meeting in the regional Hukumat, during which the death of a former colleague was announced. According to tradition, the cleric should have said a few words about the deceased but Musuzoda did not intervene, which apparently created a malaise in the

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<sup>184</sup> Fieldnotes, Khujand, October 16 2010.

audience. Like the SADUM in Soviet times, the Council of Ulemas does not enjoy much legitimacy, nor respect from religious leaders and appear to be disconnected from local religious life. Presumed cooptation definitely impedes the confidence the population might have in the spiritual authority.

### **5.2.2 The Committee for Religious Affairs**

The Committee for Religious Affairs<sup>185</sup> is a governmental body enforcing the laws regulating the registration of religious communities, religious education and private religious practices. Advocacy organizations report that the Committee of Religious Affairs stands as an executive body and that real policy is formulated in the President's office (ICG 2003, 15, Epkenhans 2010, 326). As part of a ministerial reshuffling following the November 2006 Presidential election, the government dissolved the State Committee for Religious Affairs (SCRA) and established the Department for Religious Affairs (DRA) under the Ministry of Culture. The SCRA's Chairman was appointed Deputy Minister of Culture (Epkenhans 2010, 325). In May 2010, it became an independent body as a result of two separate developments: the fusion of the Department for religious affairs with the one on culture and traditions and the nomination of Aburahim Kholikov as Chairman. It is represented by the Central Office in Dushanbe as well as by departments in the three provinces and in various towns and jamoats.<sup>186</sup> There are three directions: 1- regulation of traditions, 2- religious expertise/audit of religious literature and 3- religious institutions.<sup>187</sup> The Committee for Religious Affairs operates according to two laws on *Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations and on Traditions, Celebrations and Ceremonies*, to the extent that this law regulates traditionally religious ceremonies such as weddings, circumcisions and burials. This law also raised a lot of criticism because of its strict regulation of social and traditional gatherings. For instance, it specifies the maximum number of guests for celebrations, rites that be performed, what gifts can be offered etc.<sup>188</sup> Before the adoption of the law, Rahmon criticised the fact that rites were often not

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<sup>185</sup> The Committee has its own website: [<http://www.din.tj/>]

<sup>186</sup> Interview with Mavjuda Mirchopoeva, Head of the Department of Religious Affairs in the Sughd Region, fieldnotes, Khujand, July 13 2011.

<sup>187</sup> Fieldnotes, Dushanbe, September 23 2011.

<sup>188</sup> Weddings can have up to 150 attendees, while burial ceremonies can be organized strictly on the fourth day and serve 80 guests one meal only. Celebrations for the return of pilgrims and birthdays can only be celebrated in private (Tajikistan 2007).

conducted according to the provisions of Sharia but instead represented an arrogant display of wealth (Rahmon 2007). This is a position that recalls Soviet criticism of religious celebrations as mentioned in Chapter 3. In Central Asian societies, people are known to organize oversized costly ceremonies<sup>189</sup> and families often feel pressured to conform to social norms. As a result, many get loans or send family members, mostly men, to labour migration in order to cover the expenses of such costly celebrations. Overall, many citizens welcomed the law since it relieves many families from an important financial burden.

The resolution on the creation of the CRA displays an extensive list of responsibilities for the Committee that is too long to be reproduced here in totality.<sup>190</sup> In my interviews with representatives of the CRA, the main responsibilities that were mentioned were: the registration of mosques and medresses and the organization of the annual pilgrimage to Mecca. In Soviet times, less than a dozen individuals were allowed to perform the Hajj every year. Today, Saudi Arabia's annual quota for Tajikistan, which is of nearly 5500 persons, is always reached. While in most countries, the pilgrimage is arranged through private accredited travel agencies, in Tajikistan, the CRA organizes and plans the whole journey for a fixed amount of around 3500\$ (RFE/RL 2011b). Depending on their place of living, pilgrims depart in charter flights from Dushanbe, Kurgan-Tyube and Khujand. In 2011, the CRA started to impose a uniform to pilgrims: a light blue knee-long blouse and trousers with a Tajik flag sowed on it (Tursunzoda 2011).

The future implementation of a measure concerning the salaries of imam-khatibs confirms the executive character of the CRA. In July 2013, at the occasion of a special meeting between the President and stakeholders involved in religious issues, the President asked the CRA to think of a way to remunerate imams in order to avoid their dependence on foreign revenues (Rahmon 2013). The measure will concern 265 imam-khatibs (Islam News 2013c). The Head of the CRA, Abdurahim Kholikov, supported the initiative. In his opinion, it does not contradict the laws of Tajikistan since according to the Constitution and

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<sup>189</sup> Before the adoption of the law, weddings ceremonies could easily be held with 500 guests.

<sup>190</sup> Official documents are only available in Tajik or Russian and therefore I did not attach them to the dissertation.

the *Law on Freedom of Conscience*, the state has the right to help religious associations (Asia Plus 2013b).

### 5.3 Official discourses

Duhamel writes: “If there is a dominant virtue that best describes post-Soviet elites, thus it should be their self-adaptation capacities to new junctures” (Duhamel 1995, 94). The growing popular interest for Islam could not be ignored by political elites of the new states who started to promote and instrumentalize their country’s Islamic past and values. If this approach was undertaken by other Central Asian leaders right after independence<sup>191</sup>, the Tajik political elite ventured in this path only once the country’s political situation stabilised. Tajik leaders first strongly opposed the wave of interest in Islam at the eve of independence and tried to discredit the nascent Islamic opposition.<sup>192</sup> Yet, the post-civil context forced the integration of the Islamist party into power structures and had a great impact on the way the governing elite handled religious matters. The elite then acknowledged the magnitude of religious symbols as well as the necessity to regulate the expression and practice of religion in order to better establish its authority. As Babajanov beautifully stated: authorities “began to play at being religious” (Babajanov 2002, 312). The following section is an attempt to highlight the broad ideological orientations in the authorities’ rhetoric. It mainly focuses on presidential speeches for two reasons. First, the President’s ascendancy is undeniable and over the years, power has become increasingly concentrated in the hands of the President’s entourage (Epkenhans 2010, ICG 2009). As we have seen, Presidential discourses are generally followed by changes in the legislation. A cult of personality has slowly been built around the President<sup>193</sup> and his speeches are invariably retransmitted in totality on Tajik television and broadly reported in

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<sup>191</sup> For instance, Islam Karimov, President of Uzbekistan, quickly associated himself with the religious revival. In a symbolic and meaningful gesture, he placed his hand on the Koran at his inauguration as a President in December 1991. He was also the first Central Asian President to perform the Hajj (Akbarzadeh 1997, 27).

<sup>192</sup> While Qahor Makhamov was still President of the Tajik Supreme Soviet, some deputies described “reactionary Islam” as “the most determined enemy of the people” (Hiro 1995, 197).

<sup>193</sup> The adoption of controversial decrees, such as one banning gold teeth and students’ use of cell phones and student driving to school, led some analysts to compare Rahmon to former Turkmen eccentric President Saparmurat Nyazov (ABC 2007).

newspapers.<sup>194</sup> The omnipresence of Presidential discourses combined with a culture that tends to praise paternalistic figures (Liu 2003) substantiates claims that these discourses influence popular thinking. This overview is far from being comprehensive and a thorough semantic analysis of Presidential speeches over the years could certainly reveal much about changing state orientations and policies.

As an attempt to marginalize the role of Islam and the Islamic opposition in state politics (Marat 2008, 56), official discourses tend to capitalize more on Tajik history than on Islamic values<sup>195</sup>. Indeed, the nationalist turn taken by Tajik authorities in the last years has led them to focus on the history of the Samanid Empire<sup>196</sup>, as a symbol of the first Tajik statehood. In Dushanbe, a giant statue of Ismoil Somoni has been one of the capital's highlights since 1999. In Khujand, the tallest statue of Lenin in Central Asia which was overlooking the Syr-Daria river, was relocated to a nearby park in 2010 and replaced by an equally tall magnificent statue of Ismoil Somoni in 2011.<sup>197</sup> Historical roots of the Aryan civilization, and to a lesser extent, of Zoroastrianism are also championed. Interestingly, Laruelle tells us that those discourses also find their roots in Soviet historiography (2007, 54). The year 2003 was dedicated to Zoroastrianism but this heritage did not spark great interest from the public (Marat 2008, 59). Concomitantly, the year 2006 was announced as the year of the Aryan civilization, which emphasized the importance of the Tajik Nation in history: "The fate of Aryans, whose true ancestors, as some other nations of the world, is we -Tajiks - is an amazing and vivid pages [sic] in the history of humanity" (Rahmon 2006). Although hard to assess, the omnipresence of nationalist discourses in schools and official narratives suggests that they have a real impact on the way people conceive Tajik history (Laruelle 2007, 52).

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<sup>194</sup> This is one of the reasons why people find Tajik television rather boring. People would rather watch Uzbek television when within reach or Russian television via satellite for those who can afford it. A 2007 survey shows that 76% of Tajik respondents claimed to watch Russian television regularly or fairly regularly (Fierman 2012, 1086).

<sup>195</sup> Rahmon published several books about the history of Tajikistan. In 2002, he released "Tajiks in the Mirror of History" in four volumes and in 2006, a new book called "The Independence of Tajikistan and the Revival of the Nation" was published in five volumes.

<sup>196</sup> The Samanids represent the last Aryan dynasty at the East of the Syr-Daria. They reigned from around 800 to 900 (Roux 1997, 235).

<sup>197</sup> The grandiose statue is surrounded by mosaics retelling Tajik history and by an impressive set of fountains. A light and water show on summer nights constitute a popular city attraction.

Performing the Hajj in 1997 was the first symbolic religious gesture undertaken by Emomali Rahmon. Also that year, Emomali Rahmon was proud of having supervised the translation and publication of the Quran in Tajik (Rahmon 1998). Yet, Emomali Rahmon rarely directly refers to his own beliefs and does not appear to be very religious.<sup>198</sup> When Islam is evoked, it is presented as an integral part of Tajik culture. In Rahmon's words: "Separating the Islamic faith from the national culture and separating national culture from the postulates of the faith is a mistake" (Chigrin and Hamdam 2009, 12). In his Presidential inaugural speech in November 2006, Rahmon underlined the importance of maintaining a secular state and swore an oath, in the name of Allah and of the land, to serve the destiny and well being of the Tajik people today and in the future (Rahmon 2006). Every year, presidential speeches underline and congratulate citizens at the beginning and end of Ramadan and at the occasion of Idi Fitr and Idi Qurbon.<sup>199</sup> References to religion are not only made at these special occasions and visits to schools and inaugurations of hospitals can be used as a pretext to talk about the values of the nation but most likely to warn people on the dangers of extremism.

When Islam is invoked, it is invariably connected to the fate of the Nation. Regular topics include the possibilities given by independence so that Tajiks could finally freely practice their religion (Rahmon 1998). More than a decade later, the relation between Islam and independence seems to have reverted. It is rather the revival and protection of national values that contribute to the strengthening of state independence (Rahmon 2013). The Year 2009 was dedicated to the Great Imam, 'Imomi Azam', Abu Hanifa, which according to the President, gave an important impetus to the self-awareness of the people and the further development of Islamic culture as well as contributed to the prestige of Tajikistan on the world stage (Rahmon 2010a). However, references to religion should not shroud the secular nature of the Tajik state, which is consistently evoked. The July 2013 speech in front of an assembly of clerics is unambiguous and reiterates in passing, state involvement in religious

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<sup>198</sup> A video in which Emomali Rahmon is seen looking drunk and singing at his son's wedding in 2007 surfaced on Youtube in June 2013. As a result, the authorities shut down the country's Youtube access for several days (Pallaev 2013).

<sup>199</sup> These are called Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha in Arabic, the former marks the end of Ramadan and the latter is the 'festival of sacrifice'. The Government recognizes two Islamic holy days as state holidays (Tajikistan 2007).

affairs: “Religious consciousness of the nation, national and religious traditions are all part of state policy in the field of religion and must be objectively considered in the framework of science and secularity” (Rahmon 2013). Though it is not clear what exactly the President means by this, an obvious parallel with the Soviet “scientific study of religion” comes to mind. Similarly, while talking about the teaching of Hanafism Hoji Ibodullo Kalonzoda, a prominent Soviet-trained Khujand cleric, mentioned that: “We live according to religious traditions but we don’t know what is Hanafism. We must demonstrate scientifically that this school [of Islamic jurisprudence] is tolerant, not like others for example, Hanbalism, which is radical. Dudoignon has in fact highlighted traces of Soviet historiographical culture among religious actors’ work, including Ibodullo Kalonzoda’s work (Dudoignon 2004).

Despite celebrating national religious values, the President constantly warns against the danger of extremism connected to false religious values. However, there are recurrent themes in the discourse of danger, especially foreign influence to which those who study abroad and pilgrims are subjected (BBC Monitoring 2007, Najibullah 2010, Rahmon 2013). In what appears to be renewed attacks against the IRPT in anticipation of the November 2013 Presidential elections, Emomali Rahmon gave a warning against the dangers of using the name of Islam to supposedly defend believers’ rights and the virtues of Islam. According to him, it fosters social divide and recalled that the “artificial politicization of Islam” had tragic consequences in Tajikistan (Rahmon 2013). At this occasion, members of clergy also attacked the IRPT by proposing to force the party to remove the word ‘Islam’ from its name because religion is sacred and should not be mixed with politics (Asia Plus 2013c).

Finally, like in Soviet times, “Muslimness” is also used to promote itself abroad and establish foreign relations on the basis of the Islamic connection. In 1992, Tajikistan joined the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC). In 2010, the OIC named Dushanbe the Islamic capital of the year and the President described this as “a recognition of the real status and image of our country in the international arena, particularly among Islamic countries” (Rahmon 2010b). Tajikistan is also a member of two regional religious

organizations: the Consultative Council of Muftis of Central Asia<sup>200</sup>, which brings together muftis from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, created in 2007; and the Consultative Council of Muslim Leaders of the CIS<sup>201</sup> created in 2009 (Curanovic 2013, 340). Although they hold annual meetings and discuss issues of regional concern<sup>202</sup>, these institutions seem to have a rather symbolic role and are very little known in Tajikistan.

Official discourses state that the progress of Muslim countries and the lives of Muslims represent a priority in the regional and international strategic plans of Tajikistan (Rahmon 2006). While on a visit to Qatar to conclude several economic agreements including the building of a new mosque in Dushanbe<sup>203</sup>, the Tajik President underlined the Islamic values uniting Tajikistan to the rest of the Muslim world. He insisted that rich Muslim countries should serve as development models for the others and that mutual cooperation should lead to economic development as well as to the prevention of common threats such as terrorism, extremism, drug trafficking and “other reactionary phenomena” (Khovar 2007). The issue of the role of Islam in fostering international relations represents a topic in itself and I can only offer an overview. Like in domestic politics, there is on the one side a willingness of the regime to promote its Islamic heritage for the establishment of bilateral and multilateral relations with Muslim countries and on the other side, a propensity to publicize an Islamic threat in order to justify coercive internal policies as well as position Tajikistan as an important actor in the fight against terrorism.

### **5.3.1 The Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan**

That the authorities pursue managerial Soviet-like policies comes as no surprise. However, less anticipated is the inclination of representatives of the Islamic Party as well as other Muslim clerics towards state regulation. Muhiddin Kabiri, leader of the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan, has recently described the issue of the continuation of Soviet practices in such terms: “We are so used to debate according to different categories that it becomes a

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<sup>200</sup> In Russian, Konsul'tativnii sovet verkhovnykh muftiyev Tsentral'noi Azii.

<sup>201</sup> In Russian, Konsul'tativnii sovet musul'man SNG.

<sup>202</sup> The Council planned to discuss concrete measures such as printing material and broadcasts to downplay radical ideas that come from abroad (Newsru 2013).

<sup>203</sup> The new mosque, with an estimated capacity to hold 150,000 worshippers, will supposedly be one of the largest in the world outside of Saudi Arabia. Seventy percent of the funding is provided by the state of Qatar and thirty by the Tajik State (Kilner 2011). As of June 2013, the mosque was almost completed.

problem. We have built our religious institutions on the basis of different religions. And that is why inside our very Tajik State, we should start defining with our own categories and religions” (Islam News 2012a). In the above-statement, Kabiri acknowledges the remaining Soviet influence but does not question the State’s involvement in defining religiousness. Similarly, at a conference on state-religious dialogue, held in Dushanbe in December 2011, clerics and representative of the Islamic Party demonstrated their commitment to State’s engagement in regulating religious issues. This is also what emanated from the discussions I witnessed during numerous workshops and roundtables; the state is expected to get involved. It is seen as a solution to ease social tensions, especially in terms of religious education, which is perceived as a glaring problem in Tajikistan. There seems to be a unanimous position among clerics, IRPT and NGO representatives and education professionals that improvement in religious teachings is a solution to a plethora of social problems.

### **Conclusion**

Brill Olcott’s 1994 assessment that in Central Asia “the relationship between Islam and the state remains as tense as it was in Soviet days” (Brill Olcott 1994, 154) is still relevant in 2013. We observe, in continuation with Soviet practices, a great subordination of religious institutions to the authorities and state apparatus. While some measures seem to indicate a certain promotion of religion, others show that authorities try to undermine the influence of religion, especially, religious education. Like in Soviet times, regulatory institutions are not only responsible for organizing relations between the community of believers and the State but also to promote a ‘traditional’ and ‘legitimate’ Islam as opposed to a radical, foreign Islam. The establishment of Hanafi stream of Sunni Islam as the legitimate Islam in the country is one example. Today’s management of Islam testifies of a political dynamic that goes beyond the path dependency scheme and their role is more prominent because religious issues have become so pervasive. Constitutional provisions assert the separation of state and religion in Tajikistan. Yet, state practices testify of a great involvement in religious affairs. Even the Head of the CRA has recognized that the state cannot entirely be separated from religion (Islam News 2013c). In fact, Tajik secularism would stand as an extreme version of Kuru’s concept of “assertive secularism” defined as a political principle

according to which “the state excludes religion from the public sphere and plays an “assertive” role as the agent of a social engineering project that confines religion to the private domain” (Kuru 2007, 571).

Continuity is also rhetorical in the sense that leaders carefully underline the threatening character of religion. Yet, whereas the Soviets tried to limit as much as possible the development of an Islamic identity, Tajik authorities are using the institutions to both circumscribe and steer the Muslim identity towards an Islam defined as national while using figures of the past (Olcott and Ziyaeva 2008, 22). We have seen that discordant voices, for instance, those of the Turajonzoda brothers are silenced. Paradoxically, continuity also implies the persistence of similar problems such as the clergy’s lack of legitimacy due to the great proximity with the State apparatus. The codification and criminalization of a number of private religious practices is also reminiscent of the Soviet period. And like in Soviet times, many unregistered places of worship and study continue to exist clandestinely. The difference is that the Tajik authorities do not have the necessary material and financial means to fully implement authoritative laws. Furthermore, widespread corruption prevents the proper application of the law. Finally, it has been shown that the application of rules and implementation of laws can depend on local circumstances, people and interests. Police visits to mosques and routine checks don’t appear to be systematic and the implementation of the law seems to depend on personal conviction, interests<sup>204</sup> or on local connections and dynamics.

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<sup>204</sup> My ‘interrogation’ by a Khujandi policeman related in Chapter 3 is a good example.

## Chapter 6 – The religious and the secular: contested political spaces

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We hear that they are fighting for Islam, but why? 97% of our Republic is Muslim, so why fight over that?  
MIRZOHUDJA AHMADOV

There are officially 97% of Muslims in this country. But what kind of Muslims are they? The kind who smoke, drink and wear mini skirts?  
KHUJAND BUSINESSMAN

Mirzohudja Ahmadov, a former commander who fought with the Tajik United Opposition (UTO) during the civil war, was commenting on the clashes between military forces and militants in the Rasht valley in the fall of 2010 (Tutubalina 2011).<sup>205</sup> The question sounds simple but it touches on the crucial issue of the place of religion in society and the malaise it creates. Ahmadov's implicit observation is that problems should not arise if one nation shares one faith, as it is (nearly) the case in Tajikistan. Laliberté argues that the literature on secularism tends to focus on the religious diversity of Western societies and often fails to acknowledge the great variety of non-institutionalized religious practices (Laliberté 2013, 225-226). Indeed, in Tajikistan, religious diversity is not defined by the cohabitation of different confessions but rather by diverse interpretations of what it means to be religious. As it was outlined in the previous chapter, the public manifestation of faith represents a problematic issue for the authorities who try to curb it with laws, decrees and discourses of fear. Just like the Soviets did before them, current authorities are trying to frame and limit religious practices within boundaries they consider harmless and beneficial for the community and their own leadership. The problem that Ahmadov points out is that there is no consensus over what those boundaries represent. The current chapter illustrates this disagreement by presenting what can be broadly regarded as popular post-Soviet narratives about religion that I collected during fieldwork within the broader population and IRPT circles. Although the focus will be on those I label as 'strict believers', whose behaviour goes against the 'party-line', I also evoke popular opinions of those I refer to as 'secular-

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<sup>205</sup> Some parts in this chapter can be found in an article published in *Studies in Religion/Études religieuses*. See Thibault 2013 in the bibliography.

minded people'<sup>206</sup>, whose opinions are closer to the authorities' in order to illustrate how social tensions unfold at the local level. As Asad rightfully pointed: "Any discipline that seeks to understand "religion" must also try to understand its other" (Asad 2003, 16).

The previous chapter highlighted the importance of the Soviet legacy in the authorities' management of religious issues. The question to ask now is what does the Soviet legacy have to do with religious revival in Tajikistan? This chapter shows that some believers draw their religious identity from Soviet moral and social codes and that it should be seen as a strategy to cope with changing socio-economic realities. Panchenko argues that New-Age religious movements in Russia inherited their "peculiar moral culture" from Soviet collectivist practices with their "utopian expectations, and totalistic forms of social control" (Panchenko 2011, 120). I argue that religious beliefs have effectively offset the Soviet holistic ideology, characterized by its control of economic, social and to some extent, personal life of Soviet citizens. Yet, as I argued in Chapter 3, people do not simply perpetuate pre-existing circumstances, they accommodate and manoeuvre between available socio-political and personal repertoires. As Louw suggests, people "interpret them [circumstances], contest, negotiate and nuance them, re-imagine them, protest against them and accommodate to them, as they strive to create a satisfying existence" (Louw 2007, 10). The current chapter also underlines that feelings of socio-political alienation have a major impact on the redefinition of religious identities. Finally, remaining consistent with the overall objective of the thesis, this chapter uses interview material to articulate the two underlying ideas of the thesis; the existence of blurred lines between the Soviet and post-Soviet orders, and between religious and secular realms.

The chapter opens with the presentation of the main protagonists and brings to light their respective coming to faith experience. This part also aims to put their religious identity in context by discussing their conceptions of justice, of morality, and of the social order. Secondly, I present the hijab ban, an issue that best reveals how social tensions articulate

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<sup>206</sup> Though they refer to them as 'secularists', I use Pelkmans and McBrien's definition of people who "though they did not apply the term 'secular' to themselves, they increasingly identified themselves in contrast to those they labelled as 'religious' and denied the keeping of any religious observance" except for their belief in God and participation in life-cycle rituals (Pelkmans and McBrien 2008, 89).

around religious issues. Finally, a third part analyses the connection between Islam and democracy and the role of the IRPT in articulating the two concepts.

### 6.1 Coming to Faith

As discussed in the Introduction, there is no doubt that religious practice is on the rise. This section aims to go beyond the statistical figures to depict this process from an individual's perspective. The focus is on 'born-again' believers who lived a secular life before 'discovering' faith and adopting a lifestyle based on religious principles. I defend the idea that people who have distanced themselves the most from the Soviet ideology and embraced a rigorous religious lifestyle might do so because of the affinities of religious and Soviet moral codes.

Overall, the term born-again has mostly been used to refer to Christians in the United States but its use remains controversial even in the American context.<sup>207</sup> As for the literature on born-again Muslims, it is dominated by studies focusing on Western Muslims, the most obvious example being *Globalized Islam* by Olivier Roy. Seldom used to depict Central Asian Muslims, Rashid uses it when referring to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan founder, Juma Namangani (Rashid 2003, 138) and Karagiannis to describe Hizb ut-Tahrir members (2006, 15). The act of labelling and defining who is a born-again is a delicate undertaking due to the very intimate nature of the topic. Born-again is a qualifier I use in order to assess one facet of religious development in Tajikistan I observed during my fieldwork, that is, the fact that some Tajiks left behind a rather secular life to live according to Sharia<sup>208</sup> or canonical laws<sup>209</sup>. Interestingly, many men who described themselves as strict believers contrasted their current pious behaviour to their previous 'sinner's lifestyle' defined as: "drinking<sup>210</sup>, smoking and fooling around with women" (*ya pil, kuril i gulyal*).

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<sup>207</sup> Slightly different versions of a same question led to quite different results in two surveys conducted the same year in the United States. 35% of respondents of a Gallup survey answered yes to the question: "Would you say that you have been 'born again' or have had a 'born-again' experience-that is, a turning point in your life when you committed yourself to Jesus Christ?" whereas 56% of respondents did when asked the shorter question: "Would you say that you are a 'born-again' Christian?" (Dixon, Levy and Lowery 1988, 34-35).

<sup>208</sup> Quite interesting is the fact that Poliakov, a Soviet ethnographer, qualifies a society based strictly upon Koranic principles as 'Wahhabism', a term that holds a very negative connotation in the Soviet and post-Soviet context (Jones Luong 2003, 337). Furthermore, Poliakov stated that he knew of no groups or ideological currents in Central Asia that would match this definition (Poliakov 1992, 4).

<sup>209</sup> I also included Christians.

<sup>210</sup> A scholar I talked to at a conference in Dushanbe jokingly said that Tajiks should be divided between drinkers and non-drinkers.

In contrast, women referred to the fact that they did not know God and therefore were neither praying nor wearing a hijab. Aged more or less between 30 and 50, the interviewees<sup>211</sup> I will introduce had been educated and socialized in Soviet times. While some had taken part in religious rites before, their involvement in religious life was limited and had more to do with social habits than spiritual engagement. More importantly, they now see themselves as being different individuals since they started living a life based upon strict religious precepts.

I use the term ‘conservative Muslims’ or ‘strict believers’ interchangeably to describe religious behaviours that correspond to a lifestyle based on strict religious principles, instead of ‘radical’ or ‘fundamental’ since these terms imply a notion of danger or threat that is not necessarily existent. Abashin suggests that “the differentiation between ‘traditional’ and ‘fundamentalist’ Islam is just as dubious and politically charged as the opposition posited between ‘official’ and ‘unofficial’ Islam in the Soviet Union, which originated out of concerns over regional stability and conflict” (Abashin 2006, 268). Most emerging Islamic movements are certainly extremely conservative, perhaps fundamentalist, in the sense given to that label by Olivier Roy<sup>212</sup>, but not necessarily extremist nor violent. Depending on their opinion on Islamic faith, Tajiks rather use the term ‘believer’ (*veruiushii*) or in some cases the pejorative term ‘fanatic’ (*fanat*) to describe someone who live under Sharia. However, I find that simply referring to ‘believer’ leads to greater confusion because many persons describe themselves as believers, in the sense that they have faith in God, and only a minority of them actually live a life based strictly on religious principles. Therefore, born-again and strict believers refer exclusively to those people who have (re)discovered faith and live their life according to strict religious principles.

Born-again is a term that seems particularly appropriate to define my interlocutors due to the conception of the Tajik, and in fact Central Asian identity, being seen as inseparable from an Islamic identity. Scholarly literature has clearly underlined the association between cultural identity and religion, and this matches my own field observations. In the course of

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<sup>211</sup> These people, eight in total, represent my main interlocutors who fit in the ‘born-again’ category but I will introduce narratives of other people as well along the chapter.

<sup>212</sup> Olivier Roy’s conceptualization of fundamentalism implies a critique of the state, a request for the supremacy of Sharia in the Constitution and the right to oppose decisions in the name of Sharia (Roy 2002, 50-1).

my fieldwork, I often received strange looks and heard disapproving remarks whenever I referred to ‘conversion to Islam’ to describe people who became religious, in Russian (*on/ona prinyal/prinyala Islam*), literally, (he/she took Islam). Whether they were practising Muslims or not, most Tajiks considered conversion as a tautology because Tajiks are born Muslims and therefore cannot convert. In 1973, the mullah of Tashkent’s Shaykh Zaynuddin mosque proclaimed that “only he who will publicly declare in front of all believers, in the mosque, that he no longer accepts Allah’s commandments will cease to be considered a Muslim” (Kendzior 2006, 536). The correlation between ethnicity and religion survived the Soviet secularization process and perhaps, as Pelkmans suggested, the Soviet “ethnicization of religion” actually contributed to reify this association (Pelkmans 2009, 6). Conversely, the conversion of fellow Tajiks to other religions, such as Christianity, is perceived very negatively and is strongly condemned. Pelkmans suggests that conversions to other religions provoke such passionate reactions because “the ethnicization of religion meant that conversion acts had social consequences that reached far beyond specifically theological concerns” (Pelkmans 2009, 6). In 1994, Tajik Mufti Fathoullah Khan Sharifzade published an article in the journal *Religia i Nauka* stating that it was inadmissible for a Muslim to quit his religion and convert to another one. Nevertheless, he made it clear that he was ready to welcome Christians who wished to convert to Islam (cited in Peyrouse 2003, 293). In Tajikistan, the discourse connecting Islam and the national identity is pervading both individual and political narratives. This is an idea often asserted within political circles as the authorities have tried in the recent years to shape a national identity based on the values of Hanafism, elevated to the rank of a quasi-national religion. For Abdulloh Rahnomo, a Tajik political scientist close to the IRPT, using terms like ‘Islamization’ and ‘Islamic factor’ is nonsense in the Tajik context as one cannot talk about an Islamic factor in a society that is composed of 99% Muslims.<sup>213</sup>

### **6.1.1 The born-again**

The individuals I introduce here do not represent the majority of Tajiks but a growing minority of people (Dinorshoeva 2012) whose life choices fuel social tensions. They stand out by their appearance as they dress according to Islamic codes; long ample clothes, long

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<sup>213</sup> Fieldnotes, Dushanbe, November 30 2011.

beards, and small hats for men while women wear ample conservative dresses and hijabs. They thoroughly fulfill religious duties as stipulated in the Koran; pray five times a day, fast during Ramadan, go out to places that are halal, for instance restaurants that do not serve alcohol and where waitresses do not wear “European clothes”, and whenever possible buy food and goods from “good Muslims”. All of them, except the two women, had performed the Hajj and in some cases more than once. One couple I met, Mera and Iskandar, were living in a polygamous marriage as permitted by Sharia. Though they were very conservative and tended to surround themselves with similarly religious people, they were very courteous to me and I never felt that my gender, religion or ethnic origin represented an obstacle to our relationship. Their attitude contrasted with that of very conservative people I had encountered briefly in Isfara, where for instance some men would avoid not only talking to women but also looking at them.<sup>214</sup>

### *Mera and Iskandar*

I met Mera and Iskandar<sup>215</sup>, a couple in their early forties, at a local bazaar in June 2010. From the very beginning, they were very keen in trying to convert me to Islam - the “ultimate religion” - and constantly trying to get me married to one of their friends. Mera is the second wife of Iskandar; they were introduced to each other by a common friend and talked to each other very briefly before concluding a Nikoh in 2008.<sup>216</sup> Mera had been divorced for few years, had three children; although only the youngest one lived with her. Mera studied to become a caregiver to work in kindergarten, but was not working in her field because the salary was too low. Iskandar first got married when he was in his twenties and has four children from his first marriage. Iskandar had been trained as a carpenter and woodcarving artist but did not have a regular job and was surviving on scarce low-paid contracts. When I met them, they were selling religious literature and CDs at the main bazaar but eventually had to close down their small shop and find a different occupation. Their financial situation was very precarious. When we met again in the summer 2011,

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<sup>214</sup> I once asked Iskandar to comment on this and he replied that he should be behaving like those men to avoid temptation but was not because he was a “bad Muslim”. Fieldnotes, Khujand October 5 2010.

<sup>215</sup> They were introduced in Chapter 3.

<sup>216</sup> Arranged marriages are the norm in religious and secular families alike. Sometimes, a conversation between the bride and groom is all is required to seal the deal but in few cases, couples get to know each other before accepting the wedding proposal.

Mera had moved from the apartment where she used to live alone with her son to the house of her husband, together with the first wife. Cohabitation, interjected with episodes of jealousy and tensions, was not easy but they were managing “with the help of God because jealousy between wives is *haram*”.<sup>217</sup>

In 2010 when I first asked Iskandar if he had been raised in a religious family, he replied positively but in the summer of 2011, he said that his family had not been very religious because it was impossible to be a believer in Soviet times. He explained that his father became religious only after they performed the Hajj together a few years ago. He himself discovered Islam late in his twenties after an uncle invited him to the mosque during Ramadan. He admitted that he used to drink, smoke and fool around before he became a believer. I had the impression that he was not comfortable discussing this issue since his answers were short, despite him usually being very talkative. Mera had come into faith suddenly when she became the second wife of Iskandar. She started praying and wearing a hijab only once they got married. The sudden lifestyle change was a source of tension between Mera and her parents. Though I never met them, she described them as secular intellectuals who had a hard time accepting that their daughter would become a second wife and wear a hijab. Recalling her first unhappy marriage, she conceded that her previous husband was disrespectful, unfaithful and had bad habits (again smoking and drinking). Although cohabitation with the first wife was difficult, she perceived that her marriage to Iskandar was both spiritually and personally liberating; for they were living in faith and yet she was more socially active than ever. In fact, she recalled that in her previous marriage, she used to be a reclusive housewife whereas she was now working outside the house and socially active as Iskandar and her were often going places.<sup>218</sup>

When I asked Iskandar if he missed the Soviet period, his answer was unequivocal: “Not in the slightest bit! We did not have any freedom back then and did not have the liberty to make choices about our personal life. We were getting up, going to work and that was it. Now I’m free to do whatever I want.” At first, I did not find his answer particularly puzzling and it was during a subsequent conversation that it came to me that despite his negative opinions about the Soviet system, his religion-centred worldview was perhaps

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<sup>217</sup> Fieldnotes, Khujand, September 3 2011.

<sup>218</sup> Though Mera was socially active, her husband seemed to be the one making decisions. Iskandar once told me that what he considered to be a woman’s most important quality was obedience.

modelled by the very system he despised. In yet another attempt to convert me to Islam, Iskandar once said: “there are three types of food (*pitanie*) in the world; material food for the body, intellectual for the mind, and spiritual for the soul. Without one of them, a person feels incomplete.” In order to find inspiration, Iskandar advised me to start fulfilling the duties of a Muslim such as praying and wearing a hijab, saying it would not be difficult because I already dressed conservatively. He then added the following warning: “but you will see, Islam is a very limiting (*ogranichenaya*) religion, there are rules for everything in Islam; about how to eat, to dress and even how to appropriately go to the toilet etc.”<sup>219</sup> Indeed, Islam and its codes of conduct appear to mark boundaries and set up rules that dictate personal and social behaviour. Like other Holy books, the Koran separates Good from Evil, provides daily, weekly and yearly schedules, dictates food habits, offers guidelines for managing marital relations, for conducting business etc. If Sovietism was a totalizing ideology, Islamic codes of conduct are equally holistic. Religion provides a sense of morality, “an embodied disposition, one’s everyday way of being in the world” (Zigon 2011, 10). I don’t want to dichotomize Iskandar’s allegiance between Soviet and Islamic codes. I don’t want to insinuate that Iskandar felt ‘complete’ in Soviet times, since he does not seem to have been particularly interested in communism or politics. It can be seen as a quest for life directions, a strategy to cope with the disintegration of a social order. As Iskandar said, spiritual food, obviously lacking in the political discourse in post-Soviet Tajikistan, is provided by religion.

### *Jamshed and Tolib*

Mera and Iskandar had two friends, Jamshed and Tolib with whom I also had the chance to have lengthy discussions. I met with Tolib three times in 2010 but not in 2011 since he had gone to Russia for work. I met one on one with Jamshed in 2011 a couple of times in his office but ultimately decided to stop seeing him after he made me a serious marriage proposal.<sup>220</sup> Jamshed, a close friend of Iskandar, was a divorced businessman in his mid-thirties. He and Iskandar were running a rather unsuccessful matchmaking agency located

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<sup>219</sup> Fieldnotes, Khujand, September 3 2011.

<sup>220</sup> Arguing that I could not marry him because I was not a believer he answered: “It does not matter if you smoke and drink, this is the influence of Satan and it will go away eventually. When you will convert to Islam, faith will grow into you.”

at Khujand's main bazaar. He also had other commercial activities and unlike his friend Iskandar, he was in an enviable financial situation. Also raised in a secular family, he became religious a few years ago. Jamshed was straightforward when talking about his coming to faith. He recalled that while sitting on the street, a Russian man gave him a Bible. He started reading it, says he believed it all and then went to the library to read more about Jesus. After noticing his reading, a woman asked him: "Do you know what you are going to become if you read this? You are going to be a Christian" and gave him a Koran instead. He summarized his conversion experience as such: "I used to live among Russians and I was thinking like them but now I've changed, I think and act like a Muslim."<sup>221</sup>

### *Hoji*

Another of my interviewees, Hoji, was very self-reflective about his own religious shift.<sup>222</sup> Hoji, a very pious Muslim in his mid-Forties 'discovered' Islam about ten years ago. Hoji lived in a large house with his wife and their three year-old daughter and had been estranged from his brothers and sisters. He worked as an upper-middle manager in a governmental organization but was also doing some business and appeared to be well-off. Yet, piety made his life as an administrator in a governmental institution particularly difficult because of his colleagues' mistrust. They could not understand why he suddenly turned into a 'fanatic'. Remembering the days when he used to live a secular life (also depicted as drinking, smoking and fooling around) he recalled feeling completely lost after his second divorce, felt lonely and useless and had problems figuring out the meaning of life. He turned to religion for answers, and found them. Notwithstanding his personal experience, he interpreted the growing popularity of Islam in Tajikistan as the fact that the Soviet system provided people with an objective in their life, that people's lives were more or less determined by the system and that after independence, people found themselves without guiding mechanisms. He said: "a person needs to find a purpose in life. Before, the Soviet system provided us with one and now religion does".<sup>223</sup> On that matter, back in Soviet days, Smith recalls the "sense of dismay" experienced by Soviet migrants to the West, confronted to missing institutions that set the "parameters for an individual's

<sup>221</sup> Fieldnotes, Khujand, July 3 2011.

<sup>222</sup> Farangis (see next paragraph), an acquaintance of mine who was working with him, introduced us.

<sup>223</sup> Fieldnotes, Khujand October 24 2011.

behaviour and that give direction and provide security” (Smith 1984-85, 329). At the Islamic Party headquarters in Khujand, many women in their early forties whom I met briefly at the Islamic Party headquarters in Khujand in the course of my numerous visits also described feeling lost for most of their life that they spent “looking for answers”. Islam provided them with the answers they needed. They also recall changing radically after they “discovered” Islam.<sup>224</sup> In one case, the woman’s decision to live in faith shocked her family, which she described as ‘communist nobility’, referring to the fact that multiple generations were actively involved with the Communist Party.<sup>225</sup>

### *Farangis*

Farangis is a divorced mother in her mid-thirties.<sup>226</sup> She was raised in a secular family with whom she moved back with when she divorced. Though the rest of the family was not very pious, her faith did not cause any problem with her family, who fully accepted her life choices. Farangis said she started questioning her previous lifestyle when she came in closer contact with her colleague, Hoji, to whom she paid great respect. It is also then that she started attending religious lessons with a *bibi-otun*<sup>227</sup> from her neighbourhood. She said that she had been praying five times a day before and that the main change consisted in swapping her European clothes for Islamic ones. As it will be outlined later in the chapter, she faced many problems at work because of her hijab.<sup>228</sup>

### *Musin*

Musin is a man in his late Thirties who owns a shop in a village in the Gonchi district. Musin said he started practising while being a migrant worker in Russia few years ago. He lived in Moscow together with other Tajik migrants who studied at the Khujand medresse so they knew the Koran and taught others. Musin was considered too zealous by some

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<sup>224</sup> Interestingly, one woman who knew I was Canadian told me that she used to be a hockey fan but that she was no longer interested because “thanks God, after I converted, I changed 100% and became different (*drugim*)” Fieldnotes, Khujand, July 7 2010.

<sup>225</sup> Fieldnotes, Khujand, November 15 2011.

<sup>226</sup> I came in close contact with her because she is the sister of a friend of mine.

<sup>227</sup> Although *bibi-otuns* is an Uzbek word, people in Sughd, heavily influenced by the Uzbek language use it instead of the Tajik denomination: *bibi-khalifas*. These women play the role of unofficial female mullahs but can also act as healers (Fathi 2006). Though their teachings are not registered, therefore, illegal, female study circles are common in Tajikistan.

<sup>228</sup> Fieldnotes, Khujand, October 19, 2011.

acquaintances in his neighbourhood who told me that he was “strange” when he came back from Russia. I first met him during the summer of 2010 when I visited his shop but I did not have the chance to talk to him on that day. I was impressed and also intimidated because of the quantity of Islamic gear in the shop but especially by the very loud huge flat screen TV that broadcasted a prayer from Mecca. The local imam who happened to be his friend later introduced me to him. Musin was a very pious man who recalled living a fairly secular life before. In his family, only his grandmother was “reading the prayers”. He expressed the idea that Soviet rule had been very detrimental to religion. In Soviet times, he said: “people wanted to know about Islam but they could not, Muslims were like people being starved. After we became free, people started building mosques and reading the Koran but Islam had been destroyed”. According to him, the current situation was 100% better now because “the civilization is moving forward quickly; building mosques, studying religion.” Musin acknowledged that the USSR was good to some extent, for instance, “for its universal social programs, schools, and healthcare system but it was awful for religion. Some people remember that things were good in Soviet times but we don’t need *that* kind of good. People should think about eternal life.”<sup>229</sup>

### *Khairullo*

Interestingly, another of my interviewees, Khairullo, a secular man in his fifties also used the spiritual food metaphor to describe evolving social dynamics but in a totally different way. In his opinion, people were turning to religion because of harsh living conditions: “people freeze at work, they come home, their house is freezing, there is no gas, no electricity<sup>230</sup> and in some cases, not much to eat. It makes people angry, they look for answers elsewhere but people don’t need spiritual nourishment; what they need is heat, electricity and something to eat”.<sup>231</sup>

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<sup>229</sup> Fieldnotes, Khujand, August 26 2010.

<sup>230</sup> Because of power shortages in the fall and winter, the national electricity company, Barqi Tojik, proceeds to electricity pruning in all regions of Tajikistan, at the exception of the capital. Some regions receive only four to five hours of electricity a day, two hours in the morning and two in the evening. A Tajik NGO called ‘Union of consumers’ even set up a website called barknest.tj (literally ‘there’s no light’) that assesses power shortages by region.

<sup>231</sup> Fieldnotes, Khujand, September 23 2010.

### 6.1.2 Surviving the chaos by nourishing the spirit

Foreign observers often fail to grasp the symbolic violence; the magnitude of traumatic experiences, and amounts of suffering that followed the USSR collapse (Heathershaw and Megoran 2011). Not only was the country being torn apart, the process resulted in a dramatic decline of living standards and great feelings of insecurity. This was even more evident in war-torn Tajikistan where poverty and hunger threatened large portions of the population who relied on foreign food supplies to survive. Trying to make sense of the 2010 so-called ethnic violence in Southern Kyrgyzstan, Noah Tucker poses the problem in such terms: “How we can measure or disentangle the traumas of the collapse of Soviet-built and sustained economy—and the collapse of the order of things that came with transition—from the ethnic antagonism that now exists and the sense of disorder and disorientation that I hear so often here” (Tucker 2011). The current political situation in Tajikistan is generally stable but the economy remains in a state of disarray. Migrant workers are holding the country together thanks to the often unpleasant and sometimes perilous work they do in Russia.<sup>232</sup> Migration also brings a plethora of social problems; families live apart and break apart. An increasing number of women are abandoned by their husbands who stay in Russia and many women are left without financial support. Most of the time, the divorce is announced via a phone text message (BBC News 2012).<sup>233</sup> Corruption is widespread and affects all sectors of society; people pay bribes to find spots in kindergartens, schools, to get University diplomas, to avoid fines, to get construction permits, to get jobs, even in the private sector.<sup>234</sup>

Nostalgia for the USSR constitutes a research topic in itself and my point here is not to prove that Tajiks are nostalgic for the USSR but to illustrate how people long for the security and stability that the Soviet Union provided. While not aiming to go back in time

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<sup>232</sup> Economic exploitation of migrant workers is widespread and not a week goes by without newspapers reporting the beatings and murders of Central Asian migrant workers. Also, in October 2013, hundreds of Russian citizens participated in an anti-migrant march in Moscow (Balmforth 2013).

<sup>233</sup> This issue was first raised on p. 126.

<sup>234</sup> There are too many examples to report but the following two cases illustrate the problem and the negative consequences for the country's future since competence and skills are not properly rewarded. For instance, a personal acquaintance of mine was a recent graduate of the Faculty of Foreign Languages (English program) at Khujand State University but could not hold a simple conversation in English. Corruption is widespread in all academic branches, including Medical schools. Also, an experienced trilingual, yet unemployed flight attendant told me he was asked to pay 6000\$ when he applied for a job at one of the two local airlines companies.

and reinstate an oppressive system, people certainly feel abandoned and live with the impression that they cannot rely on official structures to support and help them move forward. As mentioned before, Soviet propaganda was definitely positive; economic progress and material comfort were evidence of an ongoing progress. McMann's research shows that current state involvement and responsiveness in Central is considered deficient in comparison to the services the Soviet state provided (McMann 2007). Perhaps more importantly, the point is to emphasize that beyond material security, there is an unsettling feeling that the world they used to live in is gone. As Louw suggests, people feel "alienated from social worlds they had formerly invested in, and which they felt had been active in shaping their very being" (Louw 2007, 15). Yurchak's famous title perfectly captures that idea "Everything was forever, until it was no more" (Yurchak 2003).

In this section, my aim is to illustrate this disorientation and insecurity and discuss how faith and the religious behaviour it entails are used as a strategy to survive the chaos. Indeed, changing religious dynamics "should be seen in light of the dislocations wrought by postsocialist change and the advance of free-market capitalism" (Pelkmans 2009, 2). The matter concerns both issues of order and opportunities, of repertoires and ideological frames. As Roberts suggests: "Muslim communities in Central Asia find themselves stuck between the desire to revive religious practices, the legacy of Soviet atheism, and the forces of globalization and capitalism" (Roberts 2007, 352). For Louw, 'Muslimness' in the post-Soviet context is comparable to a morality in the making rather than a fixed concept and "is able to give people meaningful answers as they struggle along, trying to cope with a changing social world" (Louw 2006, 336). It will become clear that some of those strategies refer to "moral authority alternative to those prescribed by socialism and nationalism" (Abramson and Karimov 2007, 319), which inevitably makes some believers feel that they do not fit in because they do not correspond to the type of Islamic identity promoted by the authorities.

### *Socio-political alienation*

Iskandar, Tolib and Jamshed were members of a circle of friends who met regularly. Their circle was informal, based on friendship, united by faith and acted like a solidarity circle. Calling each other brothers, they were helping each other to deal with personal and

financial issues. For example, Mera was hired by one of the brothers to work at his small pierogi stall while the wife and two children of one of the brothers, who was in prison at the time, temporarily occupied her apartment. Iskandar and Jamshed had also set up a small business together, so their friendship also included commercial activities. I once asked Iskandar if he was always proselytizing the way he was doing to me. He said he needed not to because everyone in his surrounding was a believer. He replied with a question: “Do you hang out with drug addicts? No, you hang out with people like yourself, who are intellectual, interested in politics etc. The same is for me, I hang out with people like myself.” Similarly, in the Gonchi district, I met with members of a brotherhood built around the village mosque. A group of men in their early forties were meeting regularly to study the Koran, write and read poetry. Together they rebuilt the village mosque “in the ‘Tajik tradition and not like the ‘European-style’ mosque in Khujand”.<sup>235</sup> In daytime, they were transporting goods bought in Khujand to their village where they would be sold in their respective shop.

Similar dynamics exist within Christian communities I visited in the city of Khujand. The minority nature of the congregation amplifies their sense of unity but they look outward because of their proselytizing activities. They set up community events open to the public (e.g. the Evangelical Baptist Church of Khujand was provided free meals for the community on certain days and offered special consultations for alcoholics and drug addicts). The Korean *Sonmin Grace* Church organizes free language classes in its Khujand office and once a year free medical treatments conducted by visiting Korean doctors. In the city of Buston, the Presbyterian Church also offered computer and English languages classes. Yet, material interests do not explain the main reason for the popularity of these churches (Pelkmans and McBrien 2008). Religious attachment provides a sense of community, a social network of mutual aid that to some extent replaces the social net that existed in Soviet times. For Peyrouse, the difficulty experienced by some individuals to cope with the disintegration of social structures, leads them to compensate for this change by regrouping into ‘situational networks’ (Peyrouse 2003, 306). Religious affiliations are not unique in terms of solidarity because there is in Tajik society a great deal of support networks, not only family ties, but neighbours, acquaintances and clans. But religious

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<sup>235</sup> Fieldnotes, Gonchi district, July 4 2010.

circles certainly represent special units where faith is the common denominator for forming a circle. These people would probably not have formed a supportive circle had they never met at the mosque. Scholars reckon that new non-traditional religious groups have emerged in the Ferghana Valley, involving wealthy businessmen who discuss religion and economic matters in local mosques. This represents a way of using religious capital to support one's business, "of employing local traditions to advance modernization" (Shozimov and al. 2011, 283). These authors suggest that this phenomenon is not observed in Hizb ut-Tahrir circles. Yet for Karagiannis, liberal economic policies clash with the Islamic values of solidarity and Sharia as a way to organize society, which explain to a certain extent why the radical ideas of the Hizb ut-Tahrir are appealing to some people (Karagiannis 2010, 94).

All strict believers expressed strong dissatisfaction towards politics and the lack of respect for religious freedom in Tajikistan. In fact, their religious practice and professional activities caused them problems with the authorities. When I first met Mera and Iskandar, they were renting a tiny booth at Khujand's Panjshanbe bazaar where they were selling local religious literature, CDs and DVDs as well as religious accessories such as prayer mats, perfumes, prayer beads, etc. In August 2010, they were told to start selling non-religious goods otherwise they would be shut down. This is ultimately what happened since they did not have enough money to buy new goods. This situation rendered them particularly bitter since nothing in the law forbids selling Islamic CDs and books. Like the alleged anti-hijab campaign in bazaars that will be evoked in the following pages, here again, political orientations appear to trickle down from the top and affect the private sphere. Perhaps this is not the result of clear directives coming from above but self-censorship from the bazaars' direction to avoid any problems with the authorities. But in the end, the result is that religious rights are curtailed even though there is no legal framework to back up the enactment. Moreover, in the summer of 2010, the police detained Iskandar for a whole day for allegedly officiating a Muslim wedding during which a man took a second wife. He reported that he had not been physically hurt during his detention but that police officers had "beaten him with words".<sup>236</sup> Overall, strict believers felt discriminated against for not fitting in the mould of Muslimness proposed by the

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<sup>236</sup> Fieldnotes, Khujand, September 19 2010.

authorities, which caused them problems, but also resentment. Their dissatisfaction with the current political situation in Tajikistan was combined with a feeling that there was very little opportunity to change the situation via electoral or legal decisions.

### *Justice and morality*

The magnitude of socio-economic problems and widespread corruption left people disillusioned by state affairs. Even Tajik nationalists will admit that even though corruption also existed under Soviet rule, there was more justice and fairness in everyday life transactions. For instance, people recall that there were official channels to express grievances in regards to a job, an apartment or land and officials often ruled in favour of the claimant.<sup>237</sup> Now, a sense of profound arbitrariness and unfairness infects conceptions of social and economic relations. When Hoji talked about the problems he was facing at work, mainly that his faith was bothering his colleagues, he said the following: “Do you know why they don’t like religious people? Because we are honest, I refuse to give or take bribes and that bothers them. What are *they* doing for their country? They only thing they want is to keep the money for themselves and drive Bentleys”.<sup>238</sup>

Strict believers connect current problems to the lack of piety among the population. Referring to the authorities pressure over religious symbols, Tolib said: “The Koran stipulates that women should wear a veil and men a beard, but in this country, Muslims cannot even serve their God as they want. That is why things are going so wrong in Tajikistan.”<sup>239</sup> Similarly, Iskandar mentioned that the Koran says that there is no necessity to have a full Islamic government: “if we were good Muslims, God would give us a good leader.” Also, he explained that God had its own army, and saw in the natural catastrophes and shootings happening in the United States, “a punishment for the unjust wars they were waging.”<sup>240</sup> For many of my interviewees, Sharia contained all the necessary guidelines for the establishment of an ideal and just political society. Some of it was motivated by the fact that they were bothered by the liberal lifestyle; Iskandar for instance was upset that women dressed in short skirts and that alcohol was available in every corner store. Yet, others did

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<sup>237</sup> Fieldnotes, Khujand, July 6 2011.

<sup>238</sup> Fieldnotes, Khujand, October 24 2011.

<sup>239</sup> Fieldnotes, Khujand, September 30 2010.

<sup>240</sup> Fieldnotes, Khujand, September 3 2011.

not mind ‘walking among’ non-practising Muslims but regretted the fact that their faith was hindering their personal, social and professional life. A member of the IRPT in Khujand expressed her wish to live in an Islamic country not because she opposed the separation between state and religion but because in an Islamic state, no one would bother her because of her hijab: “people in power they don’t understand us.”<sup>241</sup> Indeed, many strict believers felt alienated from socio-political affairs. Tolib was really upset about the authorities behaviour toward Muslims and accused the government of hindering religious practice with its strict regulations:

“Those who sit on the chairs, they don’t care about Islam. What have I done to this government? Nothing, and they bother me. They deprive me from my right to be a Muslim. They want us to be a certain type of Muslims, half-Muslim, but I don’t want to be the kind of Muslim they want me to be.”<sup>242</sup>

Local human rights activists are equally concerned about human rights infringements and the quasi-absence of social justice. However, they look for ways to enforce the current laws and mechanisms to implement the rule of law. But many strict believers feel that such opportunity does not exist. Tolib, for example, outlined the worthlessness of Tajik laws: “You can talk about violation of rights as much as you want, stand here with an enormous sign saying: ‘Here, Human Rights are violated’ and even use a gigantic megaphone to scream it but nobody will listen to you. Do you know what the Constitution is good for? To go to the toilet.”<sup>243</sup> An Isfara pensioner also expressed his disillusion of the system and favoured Islamic punishments (i.e. cutting hands and whipping like in Saudi Arabia because it sets an example for the wrongdoers and others). That is why, according to him, crime rates were very low in the Saudi kingdom. When his 35 years old daughter expressed her fear of one day living in an Islamic Republic, on the contrary, the father saw this as a positive thing, because it would bring some order in the country. He was worried of social decay, condemning discotheques, for instance, and thought the Western way of life should not be taken as an example. On many occasions, he expressed anti-American feelings and

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<sup>241</sup> Her own brother had been imprisoned for two years after he returned from a study trip in Iran. Fieldnotes, Khujand, November 5 2011.

<sup>242</sup> Fieldnotes, Khujand, October 15 2010.

<sup>243</sup> Fieldnotes, Khujand, October 8 2010.

his dislike for unfettered capitalism but praised the Soviet Union for its social and economic achievements.<sup>244</sup>

At the Baptist Church in Khujand, discourses were very similar. During a sermon, the pastor told worshippers: “We live in a corrupt world and we cannot escape it. It is our responsibility to protect children from society’s bad influences; computers, forbidden sexual activity, and alcohol.”<sup>245</sup> Likewise, as the second citation at the beginning of the chapter exemplifies, many religious people regard with disapproval the youth’s lifestyle, especially clothing habits and call for conservative values. In this regard, Agadjanian highlights the fact that like religious prescripts, the Soviet moral system was quite traditional and conservative with few opportunities for individual expression, a strong collectivist emphasis and regulation, restrained sexual freedom, and an emphasis on family-oriented values and behaviour” (Agadjanian 2011, 17).

Iskandar too was arguing that the country needed tougher laws such as those contained in the Sharia: “When a thief is caught, he has his hand cut. You can be sure he will never do it again and this serves as an example for the others”. At times, Iskandar’s opinions on crime and justice were reminiscent of the Soviet’s conception of punishment and rehabilitation. When discussing the harsh sentences given to alleged members of Hizb ut-Tahrir in Tajikistan, he thought this was unfair. Instead, he thought they should be given short terms and be provided with consultations with a good imam, who could bring them back on the right track.<sup>246</sup> This is evocative of the Soviet judicial principles: “Article 20 of the Fundamental Principles of Criminal Legislation of the USSR and the Union Republics states that Soviet criminal punishment serves three humane purposes: the chastisement of the convicted criminal himself, the re-education and correction of the criminal, and a warning both to the convicted criminal and to all other persons not to commit similar crimes in the future” (Osakwe 1976, 439).

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<sup>244</sup> Fieldnotes, Isfara, August 13 2011.

<sup>245</sup> Fieldnotes, Khujand, November 13 2011.

<sup>246</sup> Fieldnotes, Khujand, October 20 2011.

### *Social tensions*

Strict believers see faith as a guarantee for a social and just order and a way to ensure harmonious relations within the community during a time when people feel that arbitrariness and greed determine socio-economic relations. Indeed, some people consider religious people as being very honest because they fear God. At the bazaar for instance, ‘good Muslims’ buy from other ‘good Muslims’ because they know the prices will be reasonable. A family of Russians living in Khujand I got to know well were also buying from their favourite ‘God-fearing Muslim’ seller at the Panjshanbe market. On the ground, the differentiation between practising Muslims and non-practising leads to tensions. Khairullo, whom I introduced earlier in this chapter was particularly sensitive to this and told me of tensions at the bazaar where he saw for instance merchants advising customers to buy their carrots from ‘good Muslims’ and to not buy ‘sinful carrots’ (*greshnie*) from other non-practising merchants.<sup>247</sup> Khairullo, who identified himself as a believer, was very critical of religious-looking people about whom he said half were just faking it to look good in front of others because of the social pressure. He did not understand how someone’s status could be lifted so quickly after performing the Hajj: “One drunkard (*alkash*) goes to Mecca, comes back and he is suddenly so respectable?” Khairullo’s distrust is indicative of an existing trend. Indeed, pilgrims withstand a high position in society and many ordinary believers perform the Hajj every year. Their return is an occasion for the family to set up big returning parties for the Hojis, though such parties are forbidden according to the *Law on Traditions, Celebrations and Ceremonies*.<sup>248</sup> Celebrations last many days during which the extended family, friends, and the whole neighbourhood are coming to the house to congratulate the Hojis, receive their blessings, eat and socialize with other guests.<sup>249</sup> Large posters or carpets are made at the effigy of the Hojis and the whole process is generally video recorded by a professional cameraman. Overall, as many as 200 persons can visit the returnees’ house and such celebrations contribute to raise the prestige of Hojis who can prove their piety as well as show off their wealth. Indeed, such celebrations are quite

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<sup>247</sup> Fieldnotes, Khujand, July 6 2011.

<sup>248</sup> Article 12 of the law stipulates that ceremonies can be celebrated strictly within the family circle (Tajikistan 2007).

<sup>249</sup> I was invited to take part in two such parties in 2011, one in Khujand and one in the Mastchox district.

expensive because every guest is fed and given a present brought back from Mecca.<sup>250</sup> Though pilgrimage is one of the five pillars of Islam, it is considered an obligation only if people have enough financial means to do it. In reality, many people take loans to cover the expensive fees for the holy trip (\$3500), a practice many consider a sin.

Because of such distortions of Koranic scriptures, believers and secular-minded people alike condemn what they consider to be ‘fabricated’ religious behaviour. In particular, secular people underline the paradox of mounting religious practice and the current lack of social and economic morality: “Society has never been so religious but immoral behaviour, such as cheating and stealing, has never been so prevalent. On the contrary, faith is supposed to improve morality”.<sup>251</sup> For such people, this is the proof that many religious-looking people are not genuine and doing it just for the show. For Khairullo, “people should be judged according to the good they make, not because they go to the mosque.”<sup>252</sup> Likewise, observant Muslims doubt some of their co-religionists’ devotion. Female IRPT members often told me they encountered lots of people who “pretended to be religious” but were behaving very badly.<sup>253</sup> Similarly, Kalonzoda the imam-khatib of Nuri Islam mosque was doubtful of the sincerity of some regulars of his mosque who appeared “too selfish to be worthy of good Muslims”.<sup>254</sup> Abashin’s analysis of a religious conflict in the early nineties in the Mastchox region testifies to the dynamics at play between parties trying to impose their authority as providers of Islamic knowledge. He evokes the rivalry between different regional lineages that led to them accusing their opponents “of greed and hypocrisy” and insisting “upon their own version of ‘correct’ Islam and ‘orthodoxy’, and tried to present themselves as ‘real’ Muslims” (Abashin 2006, 269).

## 6.2 The hijab and beard controversy

Iskandar: Salam Hélène! Everything is good?

Hélène: Salam Iskandar! Yes everything is fine, thanks.

Iskandar: How come everything is always fine with you?

Hélène: I don’t know. It’s just like that.

Iskandar: Well, I know why. It’s because you are not a Muslim!<sup>255</sup>

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<sup>250</sup> Ironically, many of those religious goods i.e. praying beads or scarves, are made in China.

<sup>251</sup> Fieldnotes, Khujand, October 11 2010.

<sup>252</sup> Fieldnotes, Khujand, July 6 2011.

<sup>253</sup> Fieldnotes, Khujand, November 5 2011.

<sup>254</sup> Fieldnotes, Khujand, November 21 2011.

<sup>255</sup> Telephone conversation, September 30 2010.

This remark came unexpectedly. At the time, I found it rather funny and only later grasped a deeper meaning describing the malaise one can feel being a [Muslim] believer in today's Tajikistan. As we have seen in the previous chapter, the Tajik legal framework has become increasingly obtrusive for strict adherents and ordinary believers alike. The country may have 97% Muslims, but the multiplicity of interpretations at the local level regarding the place of religion in the society reveals a complexity of social and political interactions that can fuel tensions. None of the issues connected with the practicing of religion better illustrates the thin line between religious and secular realms better than the debate surrounding the hijab ban. I will first introduce the legal and discursive aspects of the hijab ban, present the perspectives of the IRPT and contrast them with accounts from ordinary citizens in order to be able to represent even if partially, the multiplicity of positions regarding the place of religion in the society. This discussion will also allow me to contrast and nuance the positions of strict believers to those of secular minded people therefore highlighting social tensions at the local level.

The proportion of veiled women in Tajikistan is unknown but they represent a growing minority. Women wear hijabs that cover their head and neck with either ample dark robes or with 'traditional' Tajik dresses understood as the long and loose colourful dresses worn over loose pants, completed with a light kerchief. Overall, I have seen only three women in all of Tajikistan who were wearing niqabs. Mera, who was not a fan of such attire, argued that no one in Tajikistan could wear that because "people would stare and gossip too much".<sup>256</sup>

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<sup>256</sup> Fieldnotes, Khujand, October 5 2011.



Girls and women in 'traditional' clothes at the Panjshanbe bazaar in Khujand. PHOTO TAKEN BY AUTHOR.

The negative campaign against the hijab started in the mid-2000s and became more aggressive over the years with cases of veiled women being harassed in public spaces. One of the most prominent forerunners of the anti-hijab campaign was the Minister of Education from 2005 until 2012, Abdudjabbor Rahmonov. Not long after his nomination, he stated that wearing the hijab and other religious symbols “is unacceptable in secular schools and violates the constitution and a new law on education” (Rotar 2005). Similarly, in April 2007, Emomali Rahmon condemned the behaviour of girls wearing the hijab as well as inappropriate clothes such as miniskirts and plunging necklines at school. Few days later, the Education Minister carried Rahmon's initiative further, officially prohibiting the Islamic hijab as well as inappropriate clothes in schools (Najibullah 2007a). In 2008, the Education Minister ordered male students at the Islamic University of Tajikistan to wear suits, ties, shave their beards and announced the introduction of teacher uniforms and the ban on headscarves (Najibullah 2008a). Attacks against the hijab reached a new level in the fall of 2010, when the Education Minister, who was addressing a crowd of students at the inauguration of a new school in Dushanbe, condemned parents who send their children to study with mullahs as well as women who wear the hijab, going as far as to call these women “monkeys” (Asia Plus 2010b). At the beginning of the school year in 2010, the hijab ban was widely discussed in the media, especially since a number of veiled girls were

denied school attendance (Rasulzadeh 2010). The anti-hijab campaign even expanded to public spaces, with women working at bazaars in Tajikistan's main cities complaining that authorities were pressuring women who wear the hijab (Asia Plus 2010a). On that matter, the deputy head of the Kulob main bazaar said that officials "merely advised women to wear "national clothes" (RFE/RL 2010f). In the summer of 2010, Mera and Iskandar also reported rumours indicating that 'Hukumat people' visited the main bazaar in Khujand and took the names of the women who were wearing hijabs and those selling religious literature.<sup>257</sup> As those bazaar stories demonstrates, the hijab issue involves not only the national or local authorities, but engages a variety of civil actors, even bazaar directors.

In 2010, it appeared that the decree on the hijab ban in state facilities and schools had not been applied unilaterally but depended on a multiplicity of factors: the type of school, school directors' position on the issue, teachers' own views, relations within the neighbourhood and with the local Hukumat. In the city of Khujand, it was still possible to find private schools where some pupils and even teachers were wearing hijabs. In 2011, during a visit to Mastchox, a region known for its religious conservatism, I was told that many girls were going to school with their hijab, which they took off only when school board representatives or staff from Khujand were visiting. Yet, one school director I spoke to in Khujand in 2011, reported that the year before, police officers raided his school with rolling cameras to document if students were wearing the hijab. The measure was obviously meant as a warning because no further action was taken. In 2011, Farangis who was working for a governmental service in Khujand was still allowed to work with her hijab despite having to suffer the taunts of many of her colleagues. Indeed, they were often making fun of her; when she refused to go to a wedding party where she knew they would serve alcohol, one of her colleague qualified her decision as 'stupid'.<sup>258</sup> She was finally dismissed at the beginning of 2012 for refusing to take off her veil and has been unemployed since.

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<sup>257</sup> Fieldnotes, Khujand, October 8 2010.

<sup>258</sup> Fieldnotes, Khujand, October 19 2011.

In 2010, the CRA Chairman denied that there was any measure taken to stop women from wearing hijabs in public spaces and declared the same in regards to accusations that men with beards were also being harassed. Interestingly, he added that growing a beard represented an Islamic tradition and therefore they had no right to forbid it, which leaves an understanding that the hijab is not considered an Islamic tradition (Hasanova 2010b). Indeed, there were many reports that men also started to be subjected to pressure over their religious looks, especially the beard. Reports started to make the news in 2010 when the police held nearly 30 Dushanbe residents over concern for their beards. The police declared that the problem with bearded men was that the pictures on their official identification documents did not match their current appearance, which is why the police can detain them for identification (Shodiev 2011). Another case that received much publicity in Tajikistan is the one of Parviz Tursunov, a member of the football team Khair from a Dushanbe suburb. Tursunov has been barred from taking part in a national championship because of his beard (RFE/RL 2011f).

In Sughd there were also quite a few reports that the police harassed bearded men and some stories were rather extravagant and perhaps exaggerated. I heard about a first case in 2010, which was presented as the “authorities’ fight against Islam”. An IRPT representative from the Bobojon-Gaffurov district mentioned an incident in Istaravshan in which an IRPT member was stopped at a checkpoint by Road Safety officers who made fun of him because of his beard and allegedly burned part of it with a lighter<sup>259</sup>. Another case took place in the Gonchi district in the summer of 2011. In September 2011, one man in his late thirties reported to me that in his home village near Gonchi, some police officers had recently caught young guys in the streets, brought them to the hairdresser, and forced them to have their beards cut. He then added: “This is so wrong”.<sup>260</sup> A month or so later I visited the village and asked the young local imam as to whether or not the story was true. He confirmed that the police came to visit him and a few other local informal leaders but said that they were not threatening them and that the Head of Police was a good and understanding man. The chief police officer told them to be careful of those who might be

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<sup>259</sup> Interview, Bobojon-Gaffurov district, October 16 2010.

<sup>260</sup> Fieldnotes, Dushanbe, September 28 2011.

too zealous and to keep their beards short. Interestingly, the imam did not see this as a problem and said: “ I think its better to keep it short. It’s not very pleasant for others when one has a long beard, it’s not very hygienic”.<sup>261</sup> As we can see, positions are contrasted. While the imam was very compliant, the fellow villager who first told me the story seemed very bitter. It is easily conceivable that the imam avoided criticising the police in front of me. When I asked him and his father (who was the imam before his son was designated) about local problems regarding the hijab ban in schools, they claimed there were not any problems because very few girls are wearing the hijab. Interestingly, the young imam’s wife was not wearing it but his sisters were. However, later in the conversation, they mentioned the fact that some local women complained to the police that some men were pressuring them to wear Islamic clothes. They were very critical of this kind of religious pressure and said that it was against Islamic principles to force religious behaviour upon someone. On many other occasions, both father and son expressed their faith in the system and in their leaders, praising Rahmon who performed the Hajj and had the Koran translated into Tajik. The son insisted on the necessity of obeying authorities for maintaining order: “If I am not going to obey my father, what is going to happen to our family? If ones does not obey authority, he goes away from Islam.” The father, a man who studied Islam clandestinely in Soviet times, was the most optimistic: “Our current laws don’t forbid anything regarding religion. I studied those laws and there is not a word against religion in them. We should follow them.”<sup>262</sup> He seemed fairly satisfied with the freedom he enjoyed as a Muslim, even praising the President for building new mosques and medresses and for translating the Koran into Tajik. For him, the path taken by Tajikistan was by far superior, in terms of freedom of religion, to the one of neighbouring countries, especially, Uzbekistan.<sup>263</sup> The pastor of the Baptist Church in Dushanbe expressed the same respect for the law, stating the law on religious organizations was necessary to protect the secular character of the state and was in fact the most permissive in the former Soviet Union.<sup>264</sup> Musin, who was a close friend of the Gonchi imam, had two daughters who were respectively in fourth and sixth grade, and a son who was four years old in 2010. So far, his

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<sup>261</sup> Interview, Khujand, July 30 2011.

<sup>262</sup> Interview, Gonchi district, July 4 2010.

<sup>263</sup> This is an opinion that appears to be shared by a large proportion of the population.

<sup>264</sup> Fieldnotes, Dushanbe, September 28 2011.

two daughters had been allowed to go to school with their hijab. When I mentioned the renewed warnings of the Education Minister regarding the hijab ban, Musin mentioned that he would have no problems complying with the law because “if they adopted this law, it means it was needed because they know better.”<sup>265</sup> He would therefore allow his daughters to take off their hijab, but only to go to school.<sup>266</sup> Although it was contrary to his faith, Musin complied with the law. I first interpreted this as an interesting mixture of religious and secular behaviours since Musin’s position on the hijab ban symbolized the porous character of categories. But in the fall of 2011, I met Musin again at the Panjshanbe bazaar and we discussed the *Law on Parental responsibility* that forbids children to attend religious services. In contrast with his reaction about the hijab ban the year before, he was very upset about the new law and said he was defying it by bringing his son to the mosque nevertheless.<sup>267</sup> So what I interpreted as compliance to the law in 2010 was perhaps the sign of differentiated importance given to the religious practices of girls and boys.

In 2011, I have met quite a few University students who were compliant with the law and taking off their hijab at the gate and putting it back at the end of the day. Even though they were split between religious observance and their desire to pursue their studies, they did not have the impression that they were betraying their faith. Yet, this is a compromise that not everyone was willing to make. Hoji for instance, strongly reacted when I mentioned such cases and suggested that these girls should drop out of school. When I asked him what he would do when his daughter would be of schooling age<sup>268</sup>, he said they would move to another country because he would not betray his religion.<sup>269</sup>

The hijab issue reveals deep divisions in the Tajik society as to not only what it means to be Muslim but also as to what it means to be a Tajik. A lot of secular-minded people like Khairullo expressed their incomprehension of young people who live by strict religious rules: “they cover themselves, they sit at home, they drink tea and no alcohol, they don’t listen to music, why are they doing this to themselves? They should go out and enjoy life”.

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<sup>265</sup> This attitude actually fits Liu’s assessment of paternalist frames of authority in Central Asia. Among other things, he highlights a “tendency to believe that as ordinary people, they are not able to fully understand issues of government, much less voice consequential opinions or press for effective changes about them” (Liu 2003, 232).

<sup>266</sup> Fieldnotes, Khujand, August 26 2010.

<sup>267</sup> Fieldnotes, Khujand, October 14 2011.

<sup>268</sup> His daughter was only three years old but was already wearing a hijab because her parents wanted her to get used to it.

<sup>269</sup> Fieldnotes, Khujand, October 24 2011.

Others go further than that and base their opposition to the hijab on its foreign character, alien to Tajik culture. For instance, in a heated debate taking place between representatives of different political parties in Khujand, a Democratic Party representative who also happened to be a historian and school Principal, said he regretted that young people dressed in Arabic clothes because Islam was not the true religion of Tajiks since it had been imposed on them. Instead, he considered Zoroastrianism to be the true religion. He also complained about the ‘European’ outfits worn by young females and called for them to dress in ‘national clothes’.<sup>270</sup>

The hijab controversy concerns more than just the redefinition of religious practices, but of the national identity. An IRPT member from the Bobojon-Gaffurov district raised an interesting contradiction in the hijab ban: “They say they want women to dress in traditional clothes but what really is traditional? It’s the *paranja!*”<sup>271</sup> Indeed, one could agree that he is right since it is a piece of clothing that Central Asian women have been wearing for centuries before Soviet authorities forced them to take it off in the Thirties. What the authorities and secular-minded people refer to as traditional clothes is in fact a Soviet creation that has been reified as traditional Tajik. Interestingly, just like with the *Hujum* (unveiling campaign) in the Thirties, women’s clothing is an incarnation of the desirable national behaviour, as well as men’s beard to a lesser extent. Interestingly, men’s clothes are less often evoked. Most Tajik men dress in regular shirts and pants, outfits that do not seem to betray national traditions despite their ‘European’ origin. Going beyond the Tajik context, the hijab issue really exemplifies the difficulties of Nation-building in post-Soviet countries. Indeed, the reference and usage of pre-colonial legacies is tricky because what authorities look for in their country’s past does not necessarily fit in the nationalist secular socio-political programme they are promoting.

### **6.3 The role of the Islamic Revival Party**

When I first met Iskandar at the bazaar, I noticed that he was wearing an IRPT t-shirt on the back of which was written the following slogan (in Russian): “Instead of emptiness-Faith” (*Vmesto pustoty–Vera*), which definitely matches the ideological vacuum argument. In the

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<sup>270</sup> Fieldnotes, Khujand, September 16 2011.

<sup>271</sup> Interview, Bobojon-Gaffurov district, October 16 2010.

absence of a mobilizing national discourse, the IRPT indeed sees itself as a provider of ideology. In fact, the party also sees itself as a buffer that can offset radicalization processes. Ilhom Yakubov, President of the Youth Committee of the IRPT's regional branch in Sughd mentioned: "Can you imagine the kind of situation we would have in Tajikistan without the IRPT? Our party is moderate and we are here to prevent the youth from joining radical underground groups."<sup>272</sup> This was even acknowledged by the representative of the ruling party in a speech at the occasion of the IRPT's Congress in September 2011.<sup>273</sup>

The IRPT opposes the Salafi circles<sup>274</sup> as well as the Jamaat Tablighi<sup>275</sup> movement that have emerged and gained in popularity in the last few years. In an interview with news agency Radio Free Europe, Kabiri declared: "We don't support the extremist view of the Salafi movement. We also oppose the Jamoati Tabligh group, which is promoting elements of foreign culture in the name of Islam, such as the so-called religious dress code and beard. It gives a completely wrong impression about Islam" (Najibullah 2009). Opposing the court ruling that declared the Jamaat Tablighi a terrorist organization, Hoji Akbar Turajonzoda has urged the IRPT to make efforts to remove it from the list of terrorist organizations, arguing it is peaceful and non-political (BBC 2009a).

When I asked Ilhom Yakubov why he joined the IRPT in the first place, he replied: "Democracy is part of Islam and I want to defend it."<sup>276</sup> Despite being an Islamic-oriented party, the IRPT deals with worldly issues, such as democratic freedom, protection of human rights, fight against corruption, education etc. "Our party also focuses on raising awareness about respect of human rights, not only about Islam, we actually talk more about politics and other topics, liberty and rights than religion," said Yakubov. Because of their never-fading popularity, the IRPT has been subjected to increasing pressure in the last few

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<sup>272</sup> Fieldnotes, Khujand June 10 2010.

<sup>273</sup> I was invited to attend the quadrennial Congress held in Dushanbe on September 24-25 2011.

<sup>274</sup> Salafism was declared illegal in January 2009 (IWPR 2009).

<sup>275</sup> There are different ways of transliterating the name of this organization Tabligh-i Jamaat, Jamoati Tabligh and Таблиги Джамоат in Russian. I recopied the name as used in the articles I quote.

<sup>276</sup> Interview, Khujand, June 02 2011. Though he did not mention it, the fact that his father was the previous chairman of the Party's regional branch certainly played an important role in his decision to become politically active.

years.<sup>277</sup> It started with the eviction of IRPT members from executive positions and was followed by insidious political pressure such as repeated accusations of propagating extremism (Blua 2002, Asia Plus 2013c), a suspicious fire that destroyed the IRPT's women's mosque in Dushanbe in 2010 (Yudalshev 2011c), suspect aggressions toward party representatives; one severely beaten up in the capital (RFE/RL 2011g) and one killed in Khorog in 2012 (Asia Plus 2012a), and political pressure during the last presidential election (Asia Plus 2013d). Despite difficulties, the party enjoys a membership of about 40,000, half of whom are women (Islam News 2012f).

Despite being vocal about the hijab ban, the IRPT tries to downplay the Islamic character of the issue, and Kabiri in an interview with Radio Free Europe stated that: "For us, the hijab issue is about human rights. It's about freedom of choice, which is guaranteed by our constitution. The Education Ministry or any other bodies have no right to ban the hijab anywhere" (Najibullah 2009). At the national level, the Party offered financial assistance to Davlatmo Ismoilova, a Dushanbe University student who engaged a lawsuit against the authorities regarding the hijab ban. Though she was ready to go up to the Supreme Court, her case did not go very far since her request was judged inadmissible by the local court (Najibullah 2009). The IRPT branch in Sughd received more than a hundred complaints from desperate parents (Rasulzadeh 2010).<sup>278</sup> Representatives of the IRPT's Women Committee in Khujand commented that many girls came to the Party's Headquarters looking for help in resolving the problem of the hijab ban. Members of the IRPT's Women's Committee argued that the hijab ban not only hinders freedom of faith and access to education but also violates the Constitution.<sup>279</sup> The issue was indeed framed as a human rights issue more than a religious one. Ultimately, the Party could not be of much support to those families without going against the law. In fact, the Party hired a very competent English teacher who could not find work because of her hijab to teach bi-weekly English classes at the Party's headquarters. Though the Party was not directly involved in any judicial pursuit, they were very vocal about this issue, invoking it at every political gathering in which they took part.

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<sup>277</sup> As discussed in the Introduction.

<sup>278</sup> Ferghana News reported that some girls threatened to commit suicide if they were not allowed to school with their hijab.

<sup>279</sup> Interview, Khujand, July 07 2011.

Correspondingly, Mera and Iskandar mentioned the impact that the hijab ban could have on the education of women, which, they said, was valued in Islam. Yet, in reality, Iskandar did not seem to attach much importance to women's education. When I asked Mera about how she learned the Islamic scriptures she said that she had not been studying and that she relied on her husband for teaching her the prayers. Moreover, Iskandar and Tolib once told me that women only possessed 50% of the intellectual capacities of men. When I expressed doubts, they explained that it was written as such in the Koran and assured me that scientists had proven it already. Also, according to them, the fact that Parliaments all over the world were in majority dominated by men was yet another proof that women were intellectually inferior.<sup>280</sup>

The Party's position on secularism is unambiguous, at least, at the official level. Commenting on the possibility of establishing an Islamic Republic if the IRPT was to win the elections, the Party Chairman Muhiddin Kabiri stated that: "Our party complies with our country's constitution, which backs the [secular] system in Tajikistan. Our Sunni Hanafi sect of Islam does not support the idea of theocratic governments." (Najibullah 2009). Speeches given at the 11<sup>th</sup> Congress went in this direction and the most 'radical' ideas were not expressed by IRPT's leadership but by foreign guests, mainly, the founder of the original Islamic Revival Party in Astrakhan, Geidar Jamal and Russian journalist Maxim Shevchenko. Jamal, a Shiite, is a well-known yet controversial figure in Russia because of his radical leftist, Marxist-inspired Islamic political views. His speech, which collected the loudest applauses, was crammed with references to Kafir<sup>281</sup> powers oppressing Muslims, the Zionist threat, the lessons of the Caliphate and the importance for Sunni and Shia Muslims to unite.

In November 2011, I attended a meeting organized by the IRPT to discuss Constitutional matters. Representatives of all political parties attended except for the ruling party, the Popular Democratic Party. At some point, the discussion moved to the topic of the compatibility of Islam and democracy, which led to a heated debate after IRPT members suggested that the Islamic Caliphate was an early example of democratic ruling. At the

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<sup>280</sup> Fieldnotes, Khujand, October 8 2010.

<sup>281</sup> Denigrating Arabic term used to refer to unbelievers.

local level, popular discourses on those issues are at times also different from the IRPT's party lines.

The Party's regional branch in Sughd counts 13,000 members.<sup>282</sup> It is very dynamic, mostly because of the involvement of women in the Party's activities. The Party organizes weekly mixed political and religious lectures, offers language classes to men and women, and provides a prayer room for women, which is the only official one in the Sughd region. Once after a religious lecture at the Party's headquarters where the majority of attendees were women, one female representative asked me what I thought of "their women", before I had time to reply, she proudly said: "We are the ones who are going to make the revolution!"<sup>283</sup> Finally, the Party also takes an active part in the region's political affairs, organizes press conferences and seminars on a variety of topics such as education and suicide.<sup>284</sup> In 2007, 2,500 car owners from Isfara sent an open letter to the Chairman of the IRPT to request help in the protection of their rights (Shozimov and al. 2011, 282). Also, the IRPT has been very vocal on the scandal surrounding the opening of a toll road between Dushanbe and Khujand in 2010.<sup>285</sup> Clearly, the concerns of the IRPT go beyond religious matters.

When I asked Yakubov the reason behind the popularity of the Party in Sughd, he mentioned that Northern people were spared most of the fighting during the war and unlike people in Dushanbe and Kathlon, they were not afraid to get involved politically.<sup>286</sup> Rather, Schatz suggests that the IRPT's popularity in the North is tributary of the regional power shift that occurred during the civil war and Northerners grew more alienated from the centre of power (Schatz 2010, 260).

Iskandar who was a passive member of the IRPT was confident that in the event of an electoral victory of the IRPT, the Party would slowly implement Islamic laws and believed in the possibility to one day live in an Islamic Republic. Contrary to his friend Iskandar,

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<sup>282</sup> InterviewFieldnotes, Khujand, June 2 2010.

<sup>283</sup> Fieldnotes, Khujand, September 2 2011.

<sup>284</sup> The number of suicides in the province increases every year. In October 2012, 222 cases of suicide had been reported over the first nine months of that year. That represents 34 cases more than in the same period in 2011 (Rafiyeva 2012b).

<sup>285</sup> The government of China financed the construction of the road and the Tajik government expects to repay its loans with the taxes provided by the activities of the private company operating the road. Innovative Road Solutions (IRS), the company operating the expensive road, is registered in the British Virgin Islands and its ownership is a "trade secret" (Mirsaidov 2010).

<sup>286</sup> Fieldnotes, Dushanbe, September 22 2011.

Tolib was not supportive of the IRPT and did not even agree with the very concept of an Islamic party.<sup>287</sup> This kind of position is often associated with either neo-fundamentalists or Salafis who reject partisan Islam and are more concerned with individual expressions of faith and see in the application of sharia the solution to social and political problems (Roy 2002). In general, secular people did not show great interest or animosity toward the Party but admitted not being very familiar with it. When I asked people to give their opinions about the IRPT, a typical answer sounded like: “Said Abdullah Nuri<sup>288</sup> was a great man, he made peace with the President but I don’t know much about the new leader, Muhiddin Kabiri.” Others questioned the very necessity of an Islamic Party in Tajikistan. Echoing Akhmadov’s remark, an imam in the Gonchi district considered religious parties useful in European countries where many religions co-existed but did not see the necessity of having a party that promotes Islam in a predominantly Muslim country. He added that: “Anyway, our President is there to promote and protect Islam”.<sup>289</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The first intention was to offer a rare societal perspective on the significance of religious revival and expose its multiple facets. I suggested that the Soviet holistic ideology had been offset by Islamic values in certain milieus. Evidence from the narratives and life experiences disclosed in this chapter reveal an interesting connection between Soviet values and religious beliefs, especially for what concerns issues of social justice, care and order. Yet, as Luerhmann explains: “Mutual influences may be so manifold that the causal question of what came first or which side is a reflection of the other is less important than insights into the shifting balance of power between secular and religious institutions and the contribution of each side to helping people live through wider historical changes” (Luerhmann 2011, 17). Similarly, Grahame suggests that: “The concrete experience of individuals can thus be viewed as a terrain structured by these generalizing relations but not wholly swallowed” (Grahame 1998, 353). This is why it was important to understand the

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<sup>287</sup> For example, Hizb ut-Tahrir, does not recognize national States, refuses to engage in national politics but calls Muslims to work for the establishment of a world Caliphate governed by Sharia [<http://www.hizb-ut-tahrir.org/index.php/EN/>].

<sup>288</sup> Chairman of the Party from its creation until his death in 2006.

<sup>289</sup> Fieldnotes, Gonchi district, July 4 2010.

political and economic context that structures the debate over the place of religion in society and leads to the creation of feelings of alienation.

Peyrouse suggests that religiousness should be seen as a resurgence of religious institutions and not as a revival of faith among individuals, that there is no break in the religious feeling but a change in its political expression (Peyrouse 2003, 301-303). As it appears from the discourses outlined above, one important aspect of their renewed faith is the connection people make between religious liberties, Islam and justice. Faith appears to be emancipating and despite the numerous limitations and even if people get into trouble because of their strict religious practices. Indeed, the chapter shows that Islam and Islamic values are seen as an way to find a sense of justice in the absence of a legitimate channel for expressing discontent. In other cases, faith is envisaged simply as part of one's spiritual life and does not hold political intentions. Other narratives have shown that the categories of religious and secular behaviours can also be porous. While some feel discriminated against for their religious beliefs, others believe that the current leadership is providing an adequate environment for Islam to flourish and religious beliefs to be manifested.

On the one hand, religion is limiting as it imposes strict codes of conduct concerning social and personal behaviour in daily life, which matches a desire for social order in a difficult economic environment plagued by widespread corruption. The economic collapse is clearly not the main cause of increasing religiosity, but it certainly adds to the sentiment of disorientation felt after the independence. On the other hand, faith is also liberating. By this, I mean that believing in fate and relying on God's will relieves the individual from responsibility over his or her own personal destiny and in the conduct of worldly affairs, much like the Soviet totalitarian system was. Religious affiliation also provides a sense of community and mutual assistance that compensates the sense of disorientation and dispossession following independence.

The fact that religion did not disappear despite being intensely pressured for decades<sup>290</sup> not only tells us something about resilience but allows the questioning of what we consider religious or not. What constitutes a religious behaviour? This chapter has shown that there

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<sup>290</sup> Stark, a proponent of the religious economy school, suggests repression nourishes religious beliefs: "In making faith more costly, they also make it more necessary and valuable. Perhaps religion is never so robust as when it is an underground church" (Stark 1999, 267).

are great discrepancies about what it means to be Muslim and the place religion should have in society. Some try to build an aura of respectability through religious practice, few reject non-believers while others doubt the sincerity of believers. The idea was not to measure the depth of people's faith but to expose how people judge others based on their religiousness and sincerity. In many cases, those judgements provide ground rules; moral standards that help people interact with others and manage their everyday lives.

## Chapter 7 – Conclusion

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The 20<sup>th</sup> century was the century of atheism; the 21<sup>st</sup> century  
will be the century of Islam.

REPRESENTATIVE OF THE IRPT'S WOMEN'S COMMITTEE

In 2004, Cummings conducted a literature review of recent essays about the development of Islam in Central Asia and was left with this question: “is radical Islam a consequence of socio-economic dissatisfaction (and thus can be mitigated through development) or is it defined by its existential aims (and thus cannot be satisfied through material change)?” (Cummings 2004, 72). I hope to have demonstrated that the answer lays between Cummings’ alternatives, though I avoided using the word ‘radical’, which is politically charged. In contrast, Roy refers to Islamism to talk about the increasing importance of Islam in Tajikistan. He suggests that Islamism was born with the IRPT, which he qualifies as a movement led by modern intellectuals who see Islam as a political ideology capable of holding the state together (Roy 2001, 56). By insisting on “modern intellectuals”, Roy touches on a crucial aspect of the politico-religious discord. As the citation at the beginning suggests, strict believers consider that the atheist and secular policies that have shaped Soviet and continue to influence post-Soviet governments’ political orientations, belong to another era. For instance, many IRPT members complain that the current leadership and representatives of the state apparatus are still driven by an atheist outlook and disconnected from society. Ilhom Yakubov of the IRPT in Khujand summarized this opinion very well:

“They have a 20<sup>th</sup> century mentality. They don’t understand us but we understand how and why they think the way they do. They have been educated in the Soviet system, they call themselves believers but they are not. They think religion is something of the past and that traditions should be forgotten but they are themselves of the past! Let me give you an example. When I sent my application to the regional Hukumat for the elections last year, they told me to send a fax! Fax, isn’t it a 20<sup>th</sup> century technology? Who uses fax these days when you have the Internet? People at the Hukumat don’t have computers and don’t even know how to use them. How can they possibly understand society? 98% of our society is Muslim but they don’t want to acknowledge it.”<sup>291</sup>

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<sup>291</sup> Fieldnotes, Khujand, June 28 2011.

The imam-khatib Kalonzoda also acknowledged a generational gap and the impossibility for current leaders to see things differently since they are “half-Soviet, just like me and her”.<sup>292</sup> He conceded: “I’ve been telling her to wear a hijab<sup>293</sup> for the last ten years but she can’t do it. Now ask a twenty years old girl to take off her veil, she will never agree to it, even for money. The new generation is clearly different”.<sup>294</sup> This dissertation has demonstrated that the generational gap in religiosity is not as pronounced as it was suggested by the quotes at the beginning of this chapter. It did so by highlighting the fact that the religious revival also involves members of a generation that has been socialized in Soviet times and which has not been concerned with religion until very recently. It would be interesting to pursue research and try to uncover the differences between people who were born right before independence and spent their youth and young adult life in a secular-oriented environment, within which religious beliefs were barely tolerated, and members of a generation which grew up in an environment within which religion is valued and used as a source of morality by many.

From the beginning, the main intention has been to explore the connection between Soviet legacies and the religious revival in Tajikistan, which could be seen as contradictory. I favoured a theoretical approach, which I labelled ‘neo-institutionalist ethnography’, that acknowledges the agency of political actors while not neglecting the ideational frames that structure their actions. I suggested that the Soviet ideology, in particular, its atheist policies and holistic collectivist ideology, continues to influence policy-making, as well as people’s understanding of the proper place of religion in society, and influences the redefinition of religious identities. The research proposition corresponded to a lacuna in the current literature on religious revival in Tajikistan that has neglected to investigate individual manifestations of faith. The research traced the Soviet legacy and its impact in the making of moral choices and redefinitions of the self. Most significantly, the research has demonstrated the different meanings given to religious practice and the porous boundaries of religious and the secular realms.

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<sup>292</sup> The conversation reported here took place in the presence of Moallima, who is a familiar of the imam. Both were in their mid-fifties.

<sup>293</sup> She used to wear a ‘traditional’ scarf.

<sup>294</sup> Fieldnotes, Khujand, August 10 2011.

The literature review stressed the importance of lowering the level of analysis and of investigating the popular aspects of religious revival. To paraphrase Khalid, how can we speak of political Islam in Tajikistan if we do not understand what Islam means for the people in Tajikistan? Of all the publications on Islam in Tajikistan, few offer detailed narratives of what Islam means for people on the ground. I stressed the relevance of an ethnographic approach for the study of religious politics since it offers a way to accommodate human agency (Schatz 2009, 11) of both the researcher and the people from whom we seek knowledge. A research that requires one to grasp the strength, nature, and effects of religious beliefs and practices touches on very intimate aspects of one's life. Therefore, I expected that my interviewees would be reluctant to address those issues. I was in fact surprised to see how responsive and enthusiastic people were when they discussed their religious experiences and feelings with me. This can be interpreted as a sign that they highly valued religion and were at ease with their religious self. As I argued in Chapter 6, religion regulates most, if not all, aspects of the life of strict believers. The possibility to produce thick descriptions provides scholars with incentives to engage in ethnographic fieldwork. Anthropologists have long been engaged in ethnographic research but political scientists have yet to jump into what is a promising body of innovative research on Islam in Central Asia. By using investigative approaches that require prolonged observation, acceptance, and trust-building, scholars are better equipped to make sense of socio-political dynamics.

This project required a detailed account of the Soviet secularization process in order to understand how it informed the understanding of religion in society in Tajikistan. I hope to have persuasively conveyed the idea that former Soviet societies were not particularly malleable. Scholarly and public opinion tend to see the Soviet socio-political project as something spectacular and unique, in opposition to the historical development of secularization in the Western world. It emphasizes its totalitarian dimension and its brutal societal transformation while neglecting the agency of socio-political actors (Yurchak 2003, 482). If the Soviet social engineering project was indeed phenomenal, it is better understood as an accelerated modernization process rather than as an exceptional endeavour at odds with the development of the Western liberal societies. Still, in the Soviet

case, state involvement in socialization and education was so overwhelming and coercive that it was successful in imposing certain behaviours and inhibiting others for several decades. But we cannot simply talk of the imposition and assimilation of social norms; it is rather the transformation and appropriation of these values that contribute to shape today's religious dynamics. I have argued that rather than resignation and resistance, the concept of accommodation better reflects Soviet peoples' reaction to modernization and the resilience of Soviet values.

I thoroughly investigated what other scholars had already ostensibly tackled; the perpetuation of legal, administrative and coercive Soviet-style state attitudes towards religion. While comparing Tajikistan's religious policies with previous Soviet policies, the emphasis was on formal rules as well political discourses that pervade the politico-religious field in Tajikistan. The research exposed both the resilience of Soviet values as well as the structure of state control over religious life. However, while the Soviet-style authoritarian institutions are maintained, the authorities seem incapable to propose a unifying and inspiring secular message and struggle to contain a socio-political effervescence that draws on Islamic references. In sum, the state apparatus has no "social project" other than its own reproduction. However, this process seems distant and elusive for a certain population, which sees Islam as a source of inspiration for the making and remaking of identities.

Yet, my intention was to demonstrate that the state is not a homogenous block. In particular, discrepancies in the application of the law and, in some cases, of police interventions, have demonstrated that local contexts and dynamics matter. Moreover, not everyone sees the state as aggressive and predatory. Although this has not been the main focus of my investigation, I have shown that a portion of the population actually supports state policies, even clerics. In fact, a significant portion of the population, traumatized by the horrors of the war, is willing to accept authoritarian practices as long as the country remains stable (Zürcher 2011, 86). Yet, the war ended seventeen years ago and current young adults can barely remember wartime. This might be a game changer in the near future.

The concept of ideological vacuum has been used to portray the instability created by the sudden repudiation of an ideological and socio-economic project that had held a nation together for decades. It encompasses a sense of disorganization and a feeling that social

relations are arbitrary and unfair in contrast with Soviet times.<sup>295</sup> What I have tried to emphasize is that the holistic and collectivist values of the Soviet repertoire continue to play, albeit unconsciously, the role of normative reference – even for religious people who despise Soviet atheism. I have argued that the redefinition of religious identities is triggered by a multiplicity of factors but insisted on the effects of the ideological vacuum and the sense of dismay that followed the Soviet collapse. The shockwave was felt all over the former USSR but it was aggravated in Tajikistan as the country quickly descended into civil war. We must recall that my research has been conducted in Tajikistan's most Sovietized and industrialized region, and that it has not directly suffered the horrors of the war. Nevertheless, the region is experiencing rapid Islamization. I suggested that a strict adherence to a religion could be interpreted as a sensemaking strategy as it provides the necessary guidance to evolve in an environment marked by poverty, corruption, and limited political liberties. Islam replaces the State as a source of meaning because it offers better tools to cope with an unsettling environment.

The conclusions also demonstrate that, like in Soviet times, it is arduous to establish a clear demarcation between religious and secular realms as these overlap constantly, depending on individual definitions of appropriate religious behaviour. I conceptualise this shift as the crossing *and* creation of boundaries between the religious and the secular realms (Pelkmans 2009, 14).<sup>296</sup> These shifts are motivated by a desire to define new moral standards. The research also demonstrated that the effect of social pressure must also be considered, as some people either feel pressured to adopt a religious behaviour and wrap themselves in the respectability of Islamic values. Narratives also showed that levels of religiosity contribute to social tensions between those who identify as secular or as moderate believers on the one hand, and those who live by strict religious principles on the other. Tensions are not due to the growth of religion per se, but by the fear that it inspires to the secular segments of society. For most moderate believers, strictly observant Muslims are duped or victims of fanaticism. And unlike them, they see absolutely no compatibility between Islam and democracy and no space for individual freedom within a hypothetical Sharia-based society.

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<sup>295</sup> Even though the Soviet political and economic system was also characterized by informal rules and transactions (Yurchak 2003; Ledeneva 2006).

<sup>296</sup> Pelkmans uses it in reference to conversions from Islam to Christianity but I find this definition also pertinent to qualify porous categories of religious and secular behavior.

Some narratives from the last chapter have shown that strict believers feel politically, socially, and economically alienated. If some expressed support for the establishment of an Islamic state, it has perhaps more to do with resentment against authoritarian practices than the questioning of the secular state (Berman, Barghava and Laliberté 2013, 14). Yet, strict believers claim to offer a new perspective on modernity by redefining notions of equality and social justice from a different, non-Western angle. Indeed, far from being anti-modern, they aim for a pious and moral modernity with all the material and financial benefits that come with it.

If there is one policy-relevant conclusion that this dissertation could formulate, it is to move away from alarmist discourses about Islamic radicalism in Central Asia. While I don't deny the existence of radical groups, I think the threat of an armed insurgency is highly exaggerated. The portrait I painted of contemporary Tajikistan does not depict the rise of extremism but rather a fragile co-existence of conflicting moralities in tough times. Yet, it would be relevant to conduct research on the influence on foreign-educated Tajiks who have different, perhaps more radical perspectives on Islam. As discussed in Chapter 5, while the authorities have used coercive measures to prevent nearly a thousand of its citizens from studying religion abroad, many who have come back have not successfully reintegrated society due to the lack of economic opportunities. With such poor economic indicators and little prospects of improvement, resentment could grow even stronger. In the meantime, labour migrants are keeping the country and its people afloat.

The impact of labour migration also represents a promising avenue of research for the understanding of shifting religious identities. I see two ways by which it might influence religiosity. Firstly, the process of migration itself might influence the redefinition of religious identities. The story of Musin, a village trader from the Gonchi district who became religious while living with devout Tajiks in Moscow, suggests a potential connection between acculturation and/or labour exploitation and religious 'callings'. In a manner, this hypothesis recalls Olivier Roy's study of fundamentalism in Europe. In *Globalized Islam*, Roy describes the difficulties faced by Muslims in trying to assert their identity in a non-Muslim context. Roy suggests that uprooted Muslims, in search of new

identities, are seduced by fundamentalist propositions to establish an imaginary Ummah (Roy 2002).

Secondly, the consequences of labour migration are certainly even more important for local communities *in* Central Asia. As I have mentioned twice in the dissertation, the number of women who are 'left behind' by their migrant husbands is increasing year after year. Left with children, without money, and with few economic opportunities, women sometimes have no choice but to become someone's second or third wife. This might be one of the factors that encourage the advance of polygyny in Tajikistan and in Central Asia. A challenging secular-religious puzzle unfolds here. The question is: what comes first? Is it because Islamic practices permit polygyny that it has become a widespread phenomenon acceptable to many? Or has it become so widespread that it needs to be redefined in Islamic terms that are deemed more acceptable to the communities? The answer certainly lies within a scheme of research which investigates everyday forms of religiosity. As I have argued throughout the dissertation, such topics require the pursuit of research that is not based on fixed categories but that leaves room for imagination and a diversity of perspectives.

In terms of the research's generalization potential, Cefaï mentions that a good ethnographic account proposes an analysis that applies to a particular case, but which aspires to be tested on other cases - not by applying concepts and predefined templates, but by taking them as sources of inspiration, and prospects for observation or reflection (Cefaï 2013, 28). Even if my research is Tajik-centred, potential understandings are not limited to one country because underlying principles may help us understand other similar local processes (Glaeser 2004, 4). The findings of this research indicate that the shortfall of socio-political landmarks and the challenging economic situation contribute to an increase in religiosity. Therefore, other Central Asian Republics, because of their joint history and similar socio-economic situation, should face similar issues. Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan appear particularly suited to the establishment of a comparative study program. However, in Uzbekistan, the situation is somehow distorted due to the ruthlessness of its political system and it has become very difficult to conduct research there. Kyrgyzstan has somewhat better democratic records but like Tajikistan, it has a history of mobilized

political violence and very poor economic indicators. This would predict high levels of religiosity and current research results go in this direction (Karagiannis 2010, Louw 2007).

In conclusion, it seems relevant to broaden the perspective and connect the study of Islam in Central Asia with the rest of the Muslim world. For instance, North African countries also offer interesting comparative avenues. Despite having very different political systems, parallels can be drawn in regards to the regulation of religion. In Morocco, Islam is recognized as the official state religion and the King is the Commander of the believers and yet regulatory institutions, such as the Supreme Council of Ulemas and the Ministry of Habous<sup>297</sup> and Islamic Affairs, are similar to Central Asian institutions in terms of structure and functions. The King relies on a legitimacy that is essentially religious and which dismisses divergent expressions of the Islamic faith (Tozy 2009). The presence of a legal Islamic political party, the existence of an official clergy, a closed political environment, and a perceived strong Islamic opposition reinforce the comparative advantage. Broadening the scope of comparison leads us away from the Soviet legacy narrative and closer to the idea that authoritarianism could be a common denominator in explaining governmental restrictions on religious practices and the emergence of religious conflicts. Such comparisons might reveal that Central Asian states have coped with religious dynamics by using strategies that go beyond the simple reproduction of Soviet norms and which testify to the domestic challenges they face. Examples from non-Islamic states that greatly interfere in religious affairs such as China rules out the conclusion that this is a characteristic of the Muslim World. Indeed, since it came to power in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party has tried to keep the religious elements that might pose a threat under control through cooptation, cooperation or repression (Laliberté 2011). Such comparisons might reveal that in so many contexts, debates around the place of religion in the public and political spheres are often reflections of fundamental struggles for political freedom and social justice.

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<sup>297</sup> In Islam, a term related to land property legislation, also called waqf.

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### **Attendance at special events**

International scientifically practical conference on a theme "Problems of Safety and Stability in the Central Asia" [sic], Konfronsi bainalmilalii ilmiu amalii "Masalaxoi amniyat va subot dar Osioi Markazi", Center for Strategic Studies, Dushanbe, November 30 2011.

International Conference "State and Religions: the Challenges of Secularism", Delegation of the European Union to Tajikistan, Dushanbe, December 06-07 2011.

International Alert Summer School, Degmai, July 2010 and Kairakum, July 2011.

Ninth Congress of the Islamic Revival Party, Dushanbe, September 23-24 2011.