

Beyond Oil and Radical Islam: From Classifications to Links of Economy and Religion in Central Asia

Tuesday, April 24th, 2012, 5 pm

The Politics of Culture and the Space for Islam: Soviet and Post-Soviet Imaginaries in Uzbekistan

Lecture by Johan Rasanayagam

What is the space for being Muslim in Uzbekistan? Or for being Christian, particularly for converts from the 'traditionally' Muslim indigenous Central Asian population? Within the Soviet Union religious expression was rigorously regulated and monitored, a situation which has continued after Uzbekistan became an independent state in 1991. Both regimes of governance, in their different ways, have sought to regulate social space and to define 'correct' citizen subjects. The New Soviet Person was to be an enlightened, rational subject who had internalised an ethic of socialist modernity which left no space for religious belief. This has given way to the *komil'inson*, the 'perfect person' constructed in Uzbekistan's 'Ideology of National Independence' as the embodiment of a cultural and spiritual Uzbek authenticity. Postindependence state ideology posits a return to an authentic Central Asian cultural and spiritual heritage, suppressed during Soviet rule, within which a specifically Central Asian Islam is encompassed. This paper examines the distinctive social and political imaginaries produced within Soviet and postindependence state ideologies, and how the latter emerges out of, but is in significant ways also radically a departure from, the Soviet experience. It explores how these imaginaries shape the possibilities for being Muslim. The paper also looks at the space for being Muslim, or Christian for that matter, outside state ideology. Rather than seeing such a space in terms of domination and resistance, I am taking up the concept of 'irony' recently employed by Maria Louw in relation to being Muslim in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan. Where 'resistance' posits an either/or choice, were the subject either surrenders to or subverts a discursive regime, or perhaps simulates acceptance while concealing an authentic subjectivity behind a mask of compliance, irony allows us to talk about the ambiguities of operating within multiple frames simultaneously, without insisting on a stance of either belief or disbelief.

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