



CONTEMPORARY MODES OF ISLAMIC DISCOURSE IN KYRGYZSTAN: RETHINKING THE MODERATE - EXTREMIST DUALITY

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Islam's growing political, cultural, and social influence in Central Asia has become a major preoccupation of analysts and policymakers since 1991. Much of this discussion, however, has focused on questions related to security, extremism, and terrorism.² A characteristic motif in this literature is the juxtaposition of "moderate Islam" with "Islamic extremism." The struggle between moderates and extremists, in turn, works to shape a broader geopolitical metanarrative in which Central Asia is constructed as a place of instability, violence, and political repression.³ Some have even depicted the region as being faced with the possibility of a Eurasian "Arab Spring" scenario.⁴

Not surprisingly, the actual religious landscape in Central Asia is substantially more complex than this binary admits: rather than a stark division between local moderates and foreign extremists, closer inspection reveals a myriad of different theologies, religious groups and

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² An example of this genre is R. Sagdeev, *Islam and Central Asia: An Enduring Legacy or an Evolving Threat?* Washington, DC: Center for Political and Strategic Studies, 2000. See also S.F. Starr, "Moderate Islam? Look to Central Asia," *New York Times*, February 26, 2014.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/27/opinion/moderate-islam-look-to-central-asia.html>; A. Masykkanova, "Radicalization in Kyrgyzstan is No Myth," *The Diplomat*, June 22, 2016.

<http://thediplomat.com/2016/06/radicalization-in-kyrgyzstan-is-no-myth/>

³ For more on this "discourse of danger," see: J. Heathershaw, N. Megoran, "Contesting Danger: A New Agenda for Policy and Scholarship on Central Asia," *International Affairs* 87:3 (2011), pp. 589-612.

⁴ R. Kaplan, L. Goodrich, "Central Asian Tensions," *Stratfor*, January 30, 2013.
<https://www.stratfor.com/weekly/central-asian-tensions>

movements, and discourses about the proper role of religion in society. In the end, attempts to conceptualize Islam in terms of generalized moderate and extremist variants obscures the very real diversity that exists *within* such categories. The end result is an inaccurate and unhelpful depiction of the role of religion in Central Asia today.

The focus of this brief will be Kyrgyzstan, where government regulation of religion has typically been less severe than in neighboring states, affording greater freedom for debates within the religious sphere to occur openly. Indeed, one of the most striking developments in Kyrgyzstan since the 1990s has been the growth of popular interest in Islam and the increasingly visible participation of Muslims in the public sphere. At the time of the Soviet collapse, however, Kyrgyzstan was widely considered by Western observers to be one of the most secularized republics in the Soviet Union.⁵ Even as late as 1999, one scholar wrote, “At first glance, there is no obvious sign that Islam is the official religion of the Kyrgyz. When you walk in the street of the capital, you feel only the cold breeze of ‘Scientific Atheism’ blowing in your face.”⁶

Such an assessment would make little sense today: even in the country’s cosmopolitan capital, Bishkek, it is common to see people in modern professional attire walking side by side with friends wearing fashionable, brightly-colored hijabs.⁷ Vendors sell Islamic literature on the streets and in public markets, and stores advertise their stocks of *halal* products.⁸ Theologians hold popular seminars in conference centers in the city center, which are attended by hundreds of young men and women, and parents can send their children to any number of Islamic schools.⁹ Consumers can now do business with any of several Islamic banks, and universities, government offices, and even bazaars often set aside space for a *namazkhana*, or prayer room. On Fridays, the streets around Bishkek’s Central Mosque are even more choked with traffic than usual, while the mosque itself is usually filled beyond capacity. During warmer seasons hundreds of men lay their prayer rugs on the ground in the courtyard and perform prayers (*namaz*) under the open sky.

The growing conspicuousness of such conventional markers of religiosity, however, only tells part of the story, and it would be a mistake to interpret these developments as evidence of a general consensus about the role of Islam in Kyrgyzstan today. After all, the so-called “Islamic revival”¹⁰ in Central Asia has never been a uniform phenomenon. Historically, there have always been many competing streams of Islamic discourse and practice in the region. A full accounting of this diversity is well beyond the scope of this paper.¹¹ Instead, what follows is a brief

⁵ A typical assessment notes: “The Kyrgyz received Islam late, and lightly, and Soviet rule left them with a vague conception of being ‘Muslim,’ as much in a cultural as a religious sense.” R. Lowe, “Nation Building in the Kyrgyz Republic,” in T. Everett-Heath (ed.), *Central Asia: Aspects of Transition*, New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003, p. 122.

⁶ M. Gardaz, “In Search of Islam in Kyrgyzstan,” *Religion* 29:3 (1999), p. 276.

⁷ As in many other countries, the practice of veiling has taken on a political dimension in Kyrgyzstan. See N. Schenkkan, Kyrgyzstan: Hijab Controversy Charges Debate over Islam’s Role in Society,” *Eurasianet*, October 12, 2011. <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/64306>

⁸ There are several competing standards for *halal* certification in Kyrgyzstan, a fact which has caused some confusion for consumers. See “Kyrgyzstan: Rival Halal Standards Means ‘Trust with Your Eyes Closed,’” *Eurasianet*, January 15, 2014. <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/67943>

⁹ B. De Cordier, “Kyrgyzstan: Fledgling Islamic Charity Reflects Growing Role for Religion,” *Eurasianet*, December 8, 2010. <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/62529>

¹⁰ M. Haghayeghi, “Islamic Revival in the Central Asian Republics,” *Central Asian Survey* 13:2 (1994), pp. 249-266.

¹¹ To get a sense of this diversity during the post-Soviet era see: A. Khalid, *Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007; M. Louw, *Everyday Islam in Post-Soviet Central Asia*, London: Routledge, 2007; B. Privratsky, *Muslim Turkistan: Kazak*

examination of some of the many cleavages and perspectives that make up the contemporary religious scene in Kyrgyzstan, where the meaning of terms like extremist and moderate is everything but self-evident.

Textualists

Much of the literature on Islam in Central Asia devotes a disproportionate amount of attention to a motley assortment of what are called “Islamic extremist” organizations. At different times this list has included groups like Hizb ut-Tahrir, Tablighi Jama’at, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, the Islamic Jihadist Union, al-Qaeda, and, most recently, the Islamic State. It is worth noting several key points about these organizations, which are in many respects quite different from one another. First, not all of them embrace violence, and those that are violent have had a negligible impact in Central Asia. For example, according to one account, “From 2001-2013, there were three attacks that have apparently been claimed by such groups, with a total of 11 deaths.”¹² Despite their apparent impotence, the fear of violent extremism has nevertheless been seized upon by governments in the region as a convenient justification both for domestic political repression and as a means of “ensuring the cooperation and support of the West but also of Russia and China.”¹³

A second crucial point is that the very designation of extremist likely obscures more than it explains. Indeed, one of the few characteristics held in common among the various extremist groups in Central Asia is a perspective on Islam that might be referred to as “textualist” or “originalist.” This perspective tends to understand the Qur’an and Hadith (accounts of the words and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad) as the only authoritative source of religious norms and rejects much of the broader Islamic scholarly tradition that developed over the centuries. From the textualist point of view, moreover, local customs and traditions that came to characterize the practice of Islam in various geographical and social contexts are condemned as *bid’a*, or “unwelcome innovations.” Textualists of all stripes, meanwhile, typically claim to represent a more pure and authentic form of Islam; however it is not a given that this purist perspective necessarily constitutes extremism.

A third, related, point is that the term “extremist” is misleading because it usually serves as an umbrella label that conflates truly violent radical organizations like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, non-violent, albeit revolutionary, movements like Hizb ut-Tahrir, and wholly apolitical groups like the Tablighi Jama’at. While this kind of terminological fuzziness often works to the advantage of state regimes interested in controlling the religious sphere, it tells us little about the nature of the organizations in question.

Hizb ut-Tahrir, for example, is banned throughout Central Asia because the group’s propaganda advocates the establishment of an Islamic caliphate. Moreover, the group is often viewed as an “Uzbek phenomenon”¹⁴ in Central Asia. In Kyrgyzstan, this perception plays into prevalent

Religion and Collective Memory, London: Routledge, 2001; J. Rasanayagam, *Islam in Post-Soviet Uzbekistan: The Morality of Experience*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

¹² J. Heathershaw, D. Montgomery, “The Myth of Post-Soviet Muslim Radicalization in the Central Asian Republics,” London: Chatham House, 2014, p. 14.

¹³ B. Balci, D. Chaudet, “Jihadism in Central Asia: A Credible Threat after the Western Withdrawal from Afghanistan?” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2014.
<http://carnegieendowment.org/2014/08/13/jihadism-in-central-asia-credible-threat-after-western-withdrawal-from-afghanistan>

¹⁴ E. Karagiannis, *Political Islam in Central Asia: the Challenge of Hizb ut-Tahrir*, London: Routledge, 2010, p. 58.

narratives regarding the potential for a repeat of the traumatic inter-ethnic violence akin to that which ravaged the country in 2010.¹⁵ At the same time, Hizb ut-Tahrir has won many adherents by providing social goods that the Kyrgyz state has been unable to supply.¹⁶ Thus, while Hizb ut-Tahrir's goal of establishing a caliphate is shared with violent organizations like the Islamic State, its non-violent, gradualist methods are not; simply grouping both together as "extremist" obscures the very real differences between them.

In a similar fashion, the case of the Tablighi Jama'at clearly illustrates the difficulties in using the broad, overarching terminology of "extremism" to refer to textualist Islamic movements. The group, whose name loosely translates as "the society of spreading the message," was founded in the 1920s in India, and its primary mission is "faith renewal...to make nominal Muslims good practicing Muslims by helping them to get rid of un-Islamic accretions and observe Islamic rituals faithfully."¹⁷ However, like Hizb ut-Tahrir, the Tablighi Jama'at is banned as an "extremist" organization throughout most of Central Asia, despite the fact that it is non-violent and expressly apolitical. In most cases, the unstated motivation behind such restrictions is a desire on the part of governments to maintain a monopoly over the religious sphere.¹⁸

In Kyrgyzstan, however, the Tablighi Jama'at operates openly, and in fact appears to be widely influential. In some respects, the group's appeal is not difficult to understand: its message of helping Muslims to practice a more "pure" Islam based solely in the Qur'an and Hadith, attracts many who are in search of what they feel to be a more authentic religious experience. Moreover, the fact that the Tablighi Jama'at is an apolitical movement means that participation in its activities, especially *daavat*,¹⁹ the act of inviting fellow Muslims to pray at the mosque, provides a risk-free avenue for exploring and expressing a self-consciously Islamic identity rooted in the foundational texts of the religion.²⁰

Yet, even in Kyrgyzstan the Tablighi Jama'at is not entirely without detractors. Adherents have sometimes provoked controversy for wearing what are sometimes derided as "Pakistani" styles of dress – "long tunics, baggy pants and turbans in emulation of the Prophet Mohammed."²¹ Many Kyrgyz consider such clothes to be culturally inappropriate, or even a potential sign of extremist beliefs. In response to the controversy, members of Tablighi Jama'at have been encouraged to adopt more familiar "national" styles, including the traditional Kyrgyz *kalpak* hat.

¹⁵ I. Rotar, "Situation in Southern Kyrgyzstan Continues to Smolder Two Years Since Ethnic Riots," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 9:115 (2012).

[http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=39507](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=39507)

¹⁶ E. McGlinchey, "Islamic Revivalism and State Failure in Kyrgyzstan," *Problems of Post-Communism* 56:3 (2009), pp. 16-28.

¹⁷ M. Ayoob, *The Many Faces of Political Islam: Religion and Politics in the Muslim World*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008, p. 135.

¹⁸ G. Saidazimova, "Uzbekistan: Tabligh Jamaat Group Added to Uzbek Government's Blacklist," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, December 20, 2004. <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1056505.html>

¹⁹ *Davaat* is the local pronunciation of the Arabic word *dawa*. So prevalent is this activity in Kyrgyzstan that members of Tablighi Jama'at are colloquially referred to as *daavatchilar*.

²⁰ Numerous other Islamic funds and organizations also operate in Kyrgyzstan, including the Turkey-based Nurcular (also known as the Gülen movement), Mutakallim, an Islamic women's organization, and Adep Bashati, a Kyrgyz group whose leadership received training at the renowned Al Azhar University in Egypt. Like the Tablighi Jama'at, these organizations often operate schools and medresehs, run charities, and provide other kinds of social services. The Kyrgyz government maintains a list of officially registered organizations, which can be found here: <http://www.religion.gov.kg/ru/muslim.html>

²¹ N. Schenkkan, "Kyrgyzstan: Islamic Revivalist Movement Quietly Flourishing," *Eurasianet*, 2011. <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/64378>

While such compromises appeased some critics, officials in the State Commission for Religious Affairs continue to express skepticism about the group's ultimate goals. Some suggest that the Tablighi Jama'at could be "laying the groundwork" for radical extremist movements.²² Other observers, such as the popular Kyrgyz theologian Kadyr Malikov and Emil Nasritdinov, a professor of anthropology who has himself participated in *daavat*,²³ argue that the group actually siphons potential recruits away from more violent groups by providing Kyrgyz Muslims with an apolitical avenue for exploring the possibilities of faith renewal.²⁴ Nevertheless, the Kyrgyz government is still considering the possibility of following the example of its Central Asian neighbors and banning the Tablighi Jama'at as an extremist organization alongside the Islamic State and al-Qaeda.

In the end, such overly broad and politically arbitrary definitions of what constitutes extremism ultimately reinforce the notion that the term itself is usually of limited analytical value.

Normative Hanafism

If the word "extremist" lacks definitional clarity, then the term "moderate" is similarly imprecise. For example, in Kyrgyzstan the definition of "moderate Islam" is in many respects a product of the mobilization of theology in the service of state policy. According to an official report entitled the "Conception of State Policy of the Kyrgyz Republic in the Religious Sphere 2014-2020": "[I]n order to ensure national security and cultural identity, the state is creating conditions for the strengthening and development of traditional forms of moderate Sunni Islam, based on the religious-legal school of Hanafism and the Maturidi creed."²⁵ To this end, the government has begun to promote what it calls "traditional Kyrgyz Islam," which "does not place in opposition Islamic beliefs and national traditions and customs, and has an ideological basis for the development of partnership with the state."²⁶

As a secular entity the government is constrained in the degree to which it directly intervenes in theological issues. Nevertheless, the State Commission for Religious Affairs, a secular body under the jurisdiction of the President of Kyrgyzstan, has broad authority to "regulate the religious sphere or other activities of religious organizations through laws and other normative legal acts."²⁷ At the same time, Kyrgyzstan also has an "official" Islamic governing body, which is called the Muslim Spiritual Authority of Kyrgyzstan. Although this institution, which is also known as the Muftiate, is legally separate from the Kyrgyz government, in practice it cooperates closely with the state. Moreover, unlike the State Commission for Religious Affairs, the Muftiate is an explicitly religious body, and it is composed of *ulema*, or Islamic scholars.

²² Personal communication.

²³ E. Nasritdinov, "Spiritual Nomadism and Central Asian Tablighi Travelers," *Ab Imperio* 2 (2012), pp. 145-167.

²⁴ Personal communications.

²⁵ Kontseptsiiia gosudarstvennoi politiki Kyrgyzskoi Respubliki v religioznoi sfere na 2014-2020 gody (2014), p. 17. http://www.president.kg/files/docs/kontseptsiya_na_rus._prilojenie_k_ukazu_pkr-1.pdf. The Hanafi *madhhab* is one of the four major schools of Islamic jurisprudence, and the one that is most widespread in Central Asia. Typically, Hanafism allows for more consideration of local customs and practices than other *madhhabs*, and is sometimes interpreted as advocating political quietism. Maturidism is a philosophical doctrine that grew out of the teachings of Abu Mansur Muhammad al-Maturidi, a tenth century philosopher from Samarkand. Maturidism affords a greater role to human reason and free will than some other schools of thought.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

²⁷ Chotaev, Z., Isaeva, G., Tursubekov, Z. "Metodicheskie materialy: gosudarstvennaya politika v religioznoi sfere: zakonodatel'nye osnovy kontseptsii i "traditsionnyi islam" v Kyrgyzstane," Bishkek: Gosudarstvennaya komissiya po delam religii Kyrgyzskoi Respubliki, 2015, p. 12.

A significant proportion of the Muftiate's activities is aimed at spreading "correct" knowledge of Islam among Kyrgyz Muslims.²⁸ In addition to holding classes on the basics of the Qur'an and Hadith, the Muftiate also publishes religious literature, much of which is devoted to outlining the basics of Islamic belief and ritual, providing answers to common questions about religion, giving religiously-grounded advice on topics like marriage, child-rearing, and so forth. But the Muftiate's efforts to promote knowledge of Islam are not limited to remedial religious instruction; they are also intended to foster the development of patriotic, nationalist, political quietist, and moderate Kyrgyz Muslims.

The Muftiate thus provides important theological underpinning to the state's broader efforts to combat extremism. For example, along with representatives from the president's Security Council and the State Committee for Religious Affairs, the Muftiate now evaluates imams on their "knowledge of Islam."²⁹ The tacit goal of this process is to ensure that imams are not spreading religious extremism, which is defined as "adherence to violence and radical acts directed towards the unconstitutional change of the existing order, and threatening the integrity and security of the state, society, or individuals using religious rhetoric."³⁰ Similarly, the Muftiate argued that "real sacred 'jihad' is...a struggle against 'terrorism,' which is accursed by God and the angels."³¹ In 2015 the Muftiate hosted an international symposium on "Extremism and Takfirism³² as a Threat to Modern Society." This symposium brought together religious officials from across the Central Asian region, as well as from countries like Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, India, and Pakistan, to discuss the problem of extremism and terrorism. Among the resolutions adopted by the delegates were a declaration that terrorism and violence are contrary to the teachings of Islam and calls to put an end to communal, tribal, and sectarian divisions among Muslims.³³

Kyrgyz President Almazbek Atambayev himself used the symposium as an occasion to remind people of the nature of traditional Kyrgyz Islam. In remarks from a local newspaper, which were reproduced in the preface to the symposium proceedings, Atambayev noted, "The Kyrgyz people were never religious fanatics. That our forefathers belonged to the Hanafi *madhab* was not a coincidence. I would like to stress one feature of the Hanafi *madhab*. In modern parlance: it was tolerant."³⁴ Similarly, an analyst in the Kyrgyz Commission for Religious Affairs, commented: "Maturidism is [our] traditional Islam. It says that Islam and the state should live in harmony and that there is no necessity to build a caliphate."³⁵ The "Conception of State Policy" also highlights the patriotic and quietist character of Maturidism, noting that "[t]his school, which is

²⁸ N. Kurbanova, "Islamic Education in Kyrgyzstan," *Central Asia and the Caucasus: Journal of Social and Political Studies* 15:1 (2014), pp. 90-103.

²⁹ "Kyrgyzstan Testing Clerics' Knowledge of Islam," *Eurasianet*, May 28, 2015. <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/73636>

³⁰ "Kontseptsii gosudarstvennoi politiki Kyrgyzskoi Respubliki v religioznoi sfere na 2014-2020 gody," op. cit., p. 34.

³¹ F. Yusupov, "Musul'manin ne terrorist – terrorist ne musul'manin, paralleli mezhdu dzhikhodom i terrorismom," March 17, 2016. <http://muftiyat.kg/ru/article/musulmanin-ne-terrorist-terrorist-ne-musulmanin-paralleli-mezhdu-dzhihadom-i-terrorizm>

³² To accuse someone of *takfir* is to accuse them of being an unbeliever, even if they call themselves a Muslim. "Takfirism" is thus not a coherent ideology, as the name might suggest, but rather a label that refers to a broad spectrum of purist or extremist viewpoints that categorize many, if not most, other Muslims as having been corrupted by un-Islamic ideas and practices.

³³ "Ekstremizm zhana takfirizm koomgo keltirgen korkunuchu": I el aralyk simpoziumu," Bishkek, April 16, 2015. http://muftiyat.kg/sites/default/files/books/simozium_2015_final_akyryk.pdf

³⁴ Ibid., p. 3.

³⁵ Personal communication.

shared by the majority of the citizens of the Kyrgyz Republic, has a historically proven capacity for tolerance, good-neighborliness, and respect in conditions of ethnic and religious diversity.”³⁶

The defection of what constitutes moderate Islam in Kyrgyzstan today therefore effectively conforms to the government’s preferred qualities: politically inert, loyal to the state and the existing order, and unreceptive to extremist ideologies like “takfirism” or calls to establish a caliphate in Central Asia. It is important to recognize, however, that the fact that traditional Kyrgyz Islam is rooted in the venerable Hanafi tradition imbues it with a theological legitimacy that is independent of its political utility. However, the traditional Kyrgyz Islam promoted by the state and the Muftiate is not the only form of moderate, culturally authoritative Islam in Kyrgyzstan.

Traditionalists

According to a report published by the State Commission for Religious Affairs, Islam, “[h]aving become an integral part of our culture and history...exists in harmony with the customs and traditions that spread in Kyrgyzstan over the course of centuries.”³⁷ From the perspective of the state and the Muftiate, “tradition” refers to moderate, tolerant Hanafism. But for many Kyrgyz, the concept of tradition also refers to a broad constellation of beliefs and practices that are linked to the concept of *kyrgyzchylыk*, which translates roughly as “the essence of Kyrgyzness.” Although it is a somewhat vague concept, *kyrgyzchylыk* typically includes practices like divination, performing *ziyarat* to *mazars*,³⁸ attending to the spirits of the ancestors, and various other practices, many of which are linked with the Kyrgyz people’s nomadic past. Importantly, for many Kyrgyz such traditional practices are also closely intertwined with Islam. Although the two are not necessarily conceived of as being identical, the boundaries that separate one from the other are often indistinct. It is important to note, however, that this “traditionalist Islam” does not constitute an organized movement or group; rather it should be understood as a perspective on the faith that is less concerned with *bid’a* than it is with honoring Kyrgyz customs and traditions.

Not surprisingly, many practices associated with *kyrgyzchylыk*, and thus with traditionalist Islam, are frequently excoriated as “un-Islamic” or as “shamanism” by textualists and others. For example, members of the Tablighi Jama’at sometimes argue that people who engage in fortune telling derive their powers from *djinni*, or evil spirits.³⁹ The supernatural powers of healing and fortune telling manifested by clairvoyants, from this perspective, are simply intended to mislead people and tempt them into *shirk* (idolatry or polytheism). Similarly, the Muftiate itself has argued, “There are still many superstitions in Kyrgyzchilik [sic] that go against Islam and are sinful...The one who commits *shirk* certainly can expect to be thrown into the fires of hell.”⁴⁰

³⁶ “Kontseptsii gosudarstvennoi politiki Kyrgyzskoi Respubliki v religioznoi sfere na 2014-2020 gody,” op. cit., p. 17.

³⁷ Chotaev et al., op cit. p. 19.

³⁸ *Ziyarat* is the practice of performing a pilgrimage to a *mazar*, or a sacred place. *Mazars* can include the graves of ancestors or saints, as well as natural sacred sites like springs, trees, or stones, which are said to have a special holy quality. Visiting *mazars* is an important aspect of religious practice throughout Central Asia.

³⁹ Personal communication.

⁴⁰ Quoted in N. Borbieva, “Parallel Worlds: Male and Female Islam in the Central Asian Republics,” presented at “The Turks and Islam: An International Conference,” Bloomington, Indiana, 2010, p. 7.

Traditionalism's historical connection with Kyrgyz culture and identity, however, also imbues it with prestige and authority. Many traditionalists view both textualist interpretations of Islam and the normative Hanafism promoted by the Muftiate as posing a threat to authentic Kyrgyz Islamic customs. As one traditionalist argues, "Pure Qur'an is good. But today's Islam is a negative influence. It is destroying all our traditions. Women have started wearing the *hijab*. People are wearing Pakistani clothes. The number of mosques has grown in villages. Mullahs are prohibiting crying and saying *koshok* [mourning of the dead] at funerals. Our ancestors accepted *pure* Islam. It didn't contradict our culture."⁴¹

Suggestions that traditional practices are somehow not consistent with Islam are often met with confusion and scorn. As one practitioner argues, "[W]e perform *namaz*, read and recite the Qur'an, we often do feasts of sacrifice, and perform alms. [Islam] is in our blood, and it is passed to us from our ancestors from seven generations ago."⁴² Indeed, despite pressures from the Muftiate to conform to normative Hanafism, one observer notes that people with "pieces of crucial local knowledge – knowledge of texts in Farsi and Chagatay Turkic, knowledge of rituals at *mazars*, local vernacular poetry, and songs and epics – have asserted their voices as purveyors of real and legitimate Central Asian Islamic traditions."⁴³

Traditionalism thus represents another authoritative modality of Islamic belief and practice in contemporary Kyrgyzstan, one that has strong roots in culture, history, and tradition. At the same time, however, traditionalism occupies a peculiar position outside the boundaries both of extremism and normative moderate Hanafism. But, since traditionalists do not constitute an organized group or movement, they have not attracted the attention of the state. Consequently, disputes over belief and practice between traditionalists and the Muftiate tend to play out on the theological and rhetorical planes, rather than in the realms of politics and national security.

Conclusion

The meta-discourse about the nature and threat of Islamic extremism, both in Central Asia and elsewhere, is likely to continue unabated. However, as the furor over President Obama's refusal to blame "radical Islam" in wake of the June 2016 massacre in Orlando has made clear, the act of labeling extremism is not neutral.⁴⁴ Some have accused the President of ignoring the reality of the threat posed by extremists, while others, including the President himself, have countered by pointing out that simply using the label "radical Islam" achieves little of substance. Much the same argument could be made regarding the habit of classifying Islam in Central Asia into moderate and extremist varieties: as the foregoing has demonstrated, just what these labels mean is not always self-evident, and their apparent homogeneity begins to break down upon closer inspection.

In the end, "moderate" and "extremist" are essentially political categories, not descriptive or analytical ones. Such labels not only mask the considerable diversity of religious practice and theological perspectives in Central Asia, but they also work to perpetuate dominant geopolitical metanarratives about the region as a zone of danger and instability. Understanding Islam's role in contemporary Central Asia will therefore require us to reassess the value of these labels and

⁴¹ Personal communication.

⁴² Personal communication.

⁴³ V. Schubel, "Islam's Diverse Paths: Seeking the 'Real Islam' in Central Asia, in G. Aitpaeva & A. Egemberdieva (eds.), *Sacred Sites of Ysyk-Köl: Spiritual Power, Pilgrimage, and Art*, Bishkek: Aigine, 2009, pp. 281.

⁴⁴ C. Amidon, "Why We're Debating the Term 'Radical Islam' in the Wake of Orlando," *Huffington Post*, June 17, 2016. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/kicker/why-were-debating-the-ter_b_10488686.html

the ideological baggage they come freighted with. Once we have freed ourselves from the necessity of deciding who counts as an “extremist” and who counts as a “moderate” we can begin to turn our attention to the more difficult – and more rewarding – project of trying to make sense of the ways in which different actors mobilize Islamic authority, mapping the fault lines that separate disparate modalities of belief and practice, and observing how these contestations shape policy, theology, and public discourse.