

## Promotion of Islamic Values in and via Central Asia

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From its birth before Christ, through the heights of the Tang dynasty, until its slow demise six to seven hundred years ago, the Silk Road has had a unique role in foreign trade and political relations, stretching far beyond the bounds of Asia itself. It has left its mark on the development of civilisations on both sides of the continent.

The Silk Road gave rise to the clusters of military states of nomadic origins in North China, invited the Nestorian, Manichaean, Buddhist, and later Islamic religions into Central Asia and China. The specific role of the Silk Roads is in the destiny of so many people and so many communities involved.

It is very interesting to look back and observe the process that occurred within the Silk Roads region where there was a cross-fertilization of ideas, technologies and cultures that led to mutually beneficial developments on the cultural, social and economic levels for the peoples concerned.

This can be seen in the major historical processes of early entrance of Islam in Central Asia, the formation of Madrasas, and the development of Sufism; the process of change as well as the survival of ethnic identities of Central Asia within the framework of Islamic values, ideas, and culture.

Is the model of the Silk Roads one that we can look to for guidance in order to learn how we can organise our contacts in such a way as to benefit and strengthen local cultures and identities? Certainly yes; and this is a lesson we can take from this tremendous experience in the history of Central Asia. The Silk Road connections show clearly how cultures and civilisations have not developed in isolation but through the various cultural and other influences facilitated by the trading and communication routes.

This, in turn, suggests that for any culture – even a ‘global’ culture – to develop in a sufficiently rich and dynamic manner requires a constant infusion from other cultures on the level of ideas, culture and ways of life. Without the revitalising effect of such outside influences, no culture or civilisation can continue to flourish but will become stagnant and sterile.

Around the 2nd century BC, the Silk Road was established, running from the ancient capital of China at Xi’an in Eastern China and continued to serve as a major channel for international trade until around 1500 AD. The Silk Route stretched across and around the continent of Asia for over 1500 years carrying many goods as well as silk from the East to Western Asia and Europe (spices, tea, perfumes) and European commodities such as woolen and cotton cloth, gold and silver to the East. There was also a substantial amount of more local trading along the Silk Road itself.

The Silk Road served not only as a means by which goods and commodities were traded between East and West, but it was also the route by which ideas, cultures and ways of life migrated and were exchanged. The market-place was the heart of the great trading cities that developed along the route, and they provided a forum for a meeting place of many different nationalities and cultures. Their individual cultural practices were expressed through the designs of the goods they sold, their dress, their food and their religious observance. The trade routes also encouraged the employment of skilled artisans such as glass blowers and metalworkers from other regions and thus, beyond the cultural miscegenation, an exchange of technical skills and technologies. This was also reflected in the domination of the Sogdian language (from Samarkand) over the part of the route running from China to Central Asia and the use of Farsi and Greek for the Western part of the route.<sup>1</sup>

The Silk Road gave rise to the clusters of military states of nomadic origins in North China, invited the Nestorian, Manichaean, Buddhist, and later Islamic religions into Central Asia and China, created the influential Khazar Federation and at the end of its glory, brought about the largest continental empire ever: the Mongol Empire, with its political centers strung along the Silk Road (Beijing in North China, Karakorum in central Mongolia, Sarmakhand in Transoxiana, Tabriz in Northern Iran, Astrakhan in lower Volga, Solkhat in Crimea, Kazan in Central Russia, Erzurum in eastern Anatolia), realizing the political unification of zones previously loosely and intermittently connected by material and cultural goods.

Religion was the most important commodity to be carried along the route. The religions of Central Asia owe much of their existence to the trade routes that carried them to Tibet, the Taklimakan region, and eventually China's ancient capital Changan. Buddhism came into China from India as early as the first century AD, and changed the face of Silk Road towns with monasteries and pagodas. Buddhism's influence was also seen in the art of the era, as more artists began using the image of the Buddha in their work. Later, Islam made it into the heart of China much the same way as Buddhism did before.

The growth of civilisation is inextricably linked with trade and the wealth, urban settlement and political stability that it provides. Thus the Silk Road also encouraged the development of civilisations around the great wealth of the trading centres such as Samarkand that exhibited the characteristics one would expect of high cultural development – written language, advanced science and technology, magnificent architecture and a flowering of the arts. A city well-placed on the Silk Road would benefit from taxes and duties raised on traded goods, providing services to traders along the route and supporting artisans based in the city. The wealth and civic pride of these great trading cities is reflected in their splendid public buildings whose architectural styles are evidence of a rich cultural heritage, incorporating local traditions with those brought by the religions they celebrated. The Islamic architecture of the Silk Road cities is particularly worthy of note, of which the Great Mosque at Esphahan and Tamerlaine's Mosque at Samarkand are outstanding examples. There is also evidence in

the architecture of the Silk Road of the cultural sharing and exchanges that was being constantly practised along the Silk Road. This is also an evidence of the presence and influence of Islamic ideas and ideals in this Muslim region.

Islam first arrived in Central Asia in the mid-seventh century, shortly after the death of the Prophet Mohammad. By the early eighth century it was the dominant religion, at least for the elites, through most of the region. By the ninth century, Bukhara had become one of Islam's leading centers of learning and culture. However, those Central Asians farthest from the border of Islamic lands were the last to adopt Islam and retained their traditional beliefs to the greatest degree. The Kazakh and Kirghiz of the steppe were converted to Islam only in the late 18th--early 19th centuries by Volga Tatars.<sup>2</sup> Though the influence of Islam in Central Asia has fluctuated over the past 1200 years, it has left a deep effect on its peoples and culture. Prior to the rise of the Soviet Union, the madrasas (religious schools) and mosques of Bukhara, Samarkand, Khiva, and other cities, towns, and villages were the dominant forces shaping the culture and social identity of the people.

There are several different forces and factors influential in shaping of Islamic identity in Central Asia. Among these are: the traditional and indigenous Islam shaped by Hanafi teachings, Sufi tariqas, and Shi'ism.

The prevailing fabric of religion in Central Asia has long consisted of a weave of Sunni Islam of the Hanafi school, several varieties of Sufism, and some popular folk practices. While it might be imagined that these aspects are inconsistent with each other, or even contrary to Islam, they nevertheless are part of the fabric as it is lived and practiced today. It would be a mistake to assume, for example, that Sunni imams and Sufi pits are antagonistic to each other, or that they consider pilgrimages to sacred grottoes as heretical. For many Central Asians, religious figures who have mastered both Hanafi teachings and Sufi practices may be particularly admired.

The Hanafi school is widely influential throughout the Middle East, but it has a particularly strong following in Central Asia, Afghanistan, and the Indian subcontinent, all of which have been influenced by scholars writing in the Persian language.<sup>3</sup> Close Central Asian spiritual ties to the Indian subcontinent, including the region that encompasses modern-day Pakistan, extend back several hundred years. In the sixteenth century, the great political and military leader from the Ferghana Valley, Babur, led a small band of soldiers into India and established what came to be known as the Mughal Empire. The Mughals ruled most of India until the arrival of the British in the nineteenth century and left a brilliant opus of architecture, literature, and art. In recent times, the principal external focus for learning and exchanges for the Sunnis of Central Asia has been on the Indian subcontinent. "It was not from Mecca, and even less from Mashad or Qum, that the ulemas of Central Asia obtained their books, but from Lahore, Bombay and Delhi". Thus it is not simply Hanafi Islam, but Hanafi Islam deeply influenced by Persian scholarship and the Islam of the Indian subcontinent.

The principal Islamic texts that were influential in Central Asia in the twentieth century were written or compiled in Persian in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, meaning that Central Asian ulema who speak Farsi have had privileged access to the most influential writings. During Soviet times, there was a severe restriction on importing literature, operating mosques, and teaching--which led to a virtual seventy-year freeze on knowledge of developments in Islam.<sup>4</sup>

While the focus for external exchanges was on the subcontinent, the centers for study within Central Asia were the madrasas of Samarkand and Bukhara. The Hanafi school, as taught and practiced in Central Asia, first, suggests that belief in Islam is more important than adhering to practices; second, is more concerned with practical devotion rather than strict adherence to practice, and third, is relatively tolerant in terms of punishments, divorce, almsgiving, and is less discriminatory toward women.<sup>5</sup>

A second important strand of the prevailing Islam in Central Asia is Sufism. Although the music, chanting, and dancing of Sufis is often considered heretical by Muslims outside Central Asia, it has been argued that this musical dimension is what made it particularly appealing to nomadic tribes. Of the four most influential Sufi tariqas practiced in Central Asia, three are indigenous. The most famous Central Asian tariqa, which has since spread throughout the world-including to the United States-is the Naqshbandiyya (fourteenth century). The two other principal Central Asian forms are the Yasawiyya (twelfth century) and the Kubraviyya (early thirteenth century). The remaining form, which is not indigenous to Central Asia but which is of importance second only to that of the Naqshbandiyya, is the Qadiriyya, which originated in Baghdad. The Sufis have had an important influence not only on the practice of Islam, but also on its original propagation. "The Islamization of the Kyrgyz was carried out almost exclusively by the Sufi missionaries ...". The tombs of the Central Asian founders of the Sufi tariqas are among the most prominent pilgrimage places for the Muslims of Central Asia. The tomb of Naqshband is generally considered by Central Asians as one of the most sacred sites outside Mecca and Medina.<sup>6</sup>

The dividing lines among Sufi orders are not well defined. The different practices have, over time, blended in such a way that it is often more instructive to understand the families who lead the movements rather than the strict lineage of the tariqas. "By the early twentieth century, the link with the original orders was recognisable only with difficulty in Central Asia, traditional sufism having been superseded rather by 'ishanism', with each/shah of repute becoming the founder of a separate order" (Ro'i 2000:386). Typically they "preached asceticism and abstinence, which, together with contemplation, were designed to bring man closer to God. In many respects their beliefs and practices were essentially animistic rather than Islamic in origin, tracing back to the rituals of ancient local cults" (Ro'i 2000:386-87). These pre-Islamic origins of Sufi practices are but one example of the incorporation of popular practices into the faith. Then one strand of Islam in Central Asia may be referred to as "popular Islam." It is perceived generally as not inconsistent with the Islam taught in the

madrasas or practiced by Sufis. This popular Islam is observed most readily in the pilgrimages (ziyarat) that people take to shrines (mazars). The most popular pilgrimages are to the tombs of revered Sufi masters.

And lastly shiism. There are several Shi'ite communities in Central Asia, the largest of which consists of three to four hundred thousand Ismailis (or "Seveners") who live in the Pamir Mountains of Tajikistan. The Seveners are followers of the Aga Khan. Elsewhere, the Twelver Shi'ites of Central Asia are considered to be ethnically Persian and now include a few thousand people living principally in some major cities of modern-day Uzbekistan (Samarkand, Bukhara, and Tashkent), though other Twelvers live in Turkmenistan.

Now let us see some of the examples of the Islamic values present in, and exchanged through Centre Asia.

Historically speaking, before the Islamic period, Central Asia has been the land of tolerance, and no single religion and ideology struggled/succeeded to be a uniquely dominant throughout the region. In contrast, Central Asian cities, with regard to diversity of their peoples, and, their mixed social strata, were crossroads to varying and different belief systems and ideologies. These characteristics have been reflected also in their material culture; religious architectures, artistic works etc.<sup>7</sup> These remnants support this idea that Central Asia has been enjoying a general freedom and a relevant lack of prejudice against different religions and beliefs.

Education also has been a value for Islamic Central Asia. A Russian traveler to Central Asia in mid nineteenth century observes that:

"In Tashkent, with a population of no more than sixty-four thousand, there are some three hundred mosques, in each of which, there is a teacher sitting to teach children. In addition to the mosques, Tashkent also has some fifteen schools and my assumption is that half this number of mosques and schools is enough to meet the needs of people there.

These schools are funded from the place of endowments; every rich person endows part of his/her riches to these schools, or builds new schools in an attempt to bring for him or herself divine forgiveness. Thus, when reaching the age of ten, boys are sent off to (primary) school and girls are sent to the houses of "Ulemma" or religious scholars, whose wives are entrusted with the task of teaching them. It is decided that expenditures of any school or mosque in which no students study should not exceed "thirty Tilia" per month.

Primary school teachers have no predetermined wages; students' fathers pay each, as much as they can afford, with clothes, fabrics and others.

On Fridays, though, women go to the Imam (religious leader) to listen to his preach, and each take with them, as much as they can afford, a little something for the Imam's wife. A few eggs, some rice flour, a piece of silk material etc, include tokens given to the Imam's wife.

Thus, in winters, primary school students set off for school at dawn with an oil lamp in hand and their book of elementary religious lessons (*Amme Jozv*) under their arms; there, based on their educational level and status, they are classified into different groups. The teacher is also present, waiting for all students to come, gather together and start the lesson. Students all start reading together and after two hours school is over, and the students go home until the next day which is no exception from the day before.

In the summer time, some schools are temporarily closed since children either go to the fields for farming or have to take care of their family orchards and groves. However, girls who are intended to graduate earlier than boys are to study the whole year through. Children thus normally study until sixteen years of age; some quit education earlier as per the will of their fathers and a small some who are interested in higher education and wish to become teachers, once graduating from primary school, attend higher levels. What is taught at primary schools depends greatly on the teachers' level of understanding as well as on their will to teach all they know. As for the girls, they are taught a fixed set of materials; their teachers, who are the wives of the Ulemma, teach them what they know about the principles and sub-principles of religion, the lives of persons of exceptional holiness (saints) and etc. It is not far from normal to see most girls get more educated than boys do in a short period.

However, for a girl to be betrothed to an Alem (Singular form for Ulemma), she should be knowledgeable of certain religious texts including *Tafsir-e Kabir* (the great exegesis), certain scientific books as well as the Persian and Arabic languages.

In summary, a student who wishes to study the different sciences, goes to school. These schools are mainly endowments or benefit from certain endowments; the endowments are mainly deposited with a person who is called "motevalli" that is one who is responsible to look after the whole of the endowments. After entering school, the student is given a room. Books to be studied are either written by the student himself, or bought from the other higher grader students. These schools mainly put effort into teaching the "shari'a", "wisdom", "mathematics" and "medicine", with medical teachings being taken from Avicenna. Although, "geography" is not taught, in the time they spend in schools, each student collects considerable knowledge about Dissimilation and the history of the Caliphs. Since some students stay at schools for more than thirty years, to become judges, Assistant judges or Imams, the number of students sometimes rises to two hundred; these students might each have their own students then. One single teacher and two assistants are, therefore, not enough to meet the educational needs of all students. It is, thus, decided for the teachers to teach their high graders and have them prepared to teach the lower level students. The punishments considered for students follow the old

tradition of physical punishments, which is still being practiced in these schools. At summer time, schools are emptied from students with some going off to fields for farming and some staying at caravansaries as the merchants' accountants. At Ramadan or religious festivities, people invite students over to their houses, giving each a "Koukan" that is money equivalent to a twenty cash note in their currency".<sup>8</sup>

The same person informs us of the special place of scholars, and of widespread education as their result in that period:

"We should say a few words about the domination (and place) of Ulamma (scholars) there; because the education and progress of all the residents of the city (Tashkant) is uniquely dependent on these scholars, therefore, the majority of city dwellers, say 85%, are educated due to them. Consequently the city residents well respect their educators, and the teachers are dominant over them".<sup>9</sup>

The review of changes and exchanges of material and non-material cultures in socio-economic reality of Silk Roads region shows that Silk Road has acted as a substructure framework within which "Islamic Values", and spiritual and behavioral Islam, has become operationalized and functional. In other words Islamic values and ideals did not happen in a vacuum.

Sociologically speaking, the socio-economic-historical material reality surrounded around the Silk Roads prepared the road to ideal-cultural teachings and norms and values derived and realized from them. Using Max Scheler's terminology, "Real Factors" and "Ideal Factors" within the Silk Road are interrelated,<sup>10</sup> or according to Max Weber, are in "Elective Affinity".<sup>11</sup> This can be compared with the changes and exchanges of ideas (and their flexibility) in parallel with economic exchanges, featuring cultural and material dynamic life of Athens--compared to the static life of Sparta; both in thought and society.<sup>12</sup>

It is very interesting to compare the experience of contemporary Globalization with the process that occurred with the Silk Roads where there was a cross-fertilisation of ideas, technologies and cultures that led to mutually beneficial developments on the cultural, social and economic levels for the peoples concerned. The rapid spread of globalisation in recent years has led to a desire in many places to reassert local identities in the face of the monolithic 'global' culture that is perceived to be reducing choices and stripping people of their cultural traditions.

Is the model of the Silk Roads one that we can look to for guidance in order to learn how we can organise our trading and other contacts in such a way as to benefit and strengthen local cultures and identities? Certainly yes.

1. Different racial groups dominated the trade along different sections of the Road, with Chinese nomadic peoples covering the route from China to Central Asia, the Sogdians of Samarkand covered the Central Asian part of the route and Iranian traders then carried the good onwards from Central to Western Asia to Syrian, Jewish and Greek traders or direct to Europeans via the Eurasian Steppes.
2. Thanks to policies of Catherine II, of Russia (r. 1762-96), who apparently hoped that Islam would soften those populations and make them more receptive to the Tsarist empire. She allowed the Tatars to represent her court in Transoxania trade. On the way, the merchants were encouraged to form settlements and convert nomads. The Kazakh and Kirghiz, even today, retain much of their pre-Islamic way of life including mastery of the horse, drinking kumiss and extensive personal independence of women so characteristic of steppe societies. See, H.B. Paksoy, Nationality or Religion? Views of Central Asian Islam, ([http://vlib.iue.it/carrie/texts/carrie\\_books/paksoy-6.html](http://vlib.iue.it/carrie/texts/carrie_books/paksoy-6.html)), p.4.
3. Extracts from High Beam Encyclopedia, (<http://www.encyclopedia.com/printable>), p.5.
4. Ibid
5. Ibid
6. Ibid
7. **Belenitsky A.** Persian tr. P.Varjavand, MMTF Pub, 1371, pp.256-9. See also different parts of History of Civilizations of Central Asia, Vols 4, 5, 6, UNESCO, 2003.
8. Extracts from Turkistan Diary by Dr Pashino, Persian tr. M. Davoodkhanov, MMTF publisher, 1372, pp. 271-3.
9. Opcit, p.279.
10. **Scheler M.** Problems of a Sociology of Knowledge, RKP, 1982, Chapt1.
11. **Weber M.** From Max Weber, H.H. Gerth & C. Wright Mills (eds), RKP, 1977, Part III.
12. **G. Dé Gre.** Science as a Social Institution, Random House, 1968, chapt1.