Islamic ethics in Muslim Eurasia
Prosperity theology vs. renunciation?

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God does not love the arrogant and vainglorious, nor those who are stingy and who hide the benefits that God has bestowed on them . . . nor those who spend of their substance so as to be conspicuous before others.

(Koran 57:23–4, 4:36–8)

Introduction

The post-Soviet states that comprise Muslim Eurasia, defined as a place (space) located both in Asia and Europe (Mostafa 2013), provide a unique case for looking at the new ways in which religion and economics are coming to interact on a global scale. With the fall of the USSR, these once-isolated areas were suddenly confronted with globalization, in a process more brutal than that experienced by the rest of the Muslim world. This study rejects an insular view of the region, which has seen the same religious pluralism as anywhere else. Indeed, the opening of the Soviet borders at the turn of the 1990s allowed for new inflows and the import of foreign religious models, including proselytizing Islamic and Protestant movements, to the post-Soviet space. More often than not, these transnational movements are denounced by the local authorities as ‘sects’ that serve foreign interests, while the so-called ‘traditional’ religions—Islam (Hanafism), Orthodoxy, Judaism and Buddhism—are all treated as part of a republic’s historical legacy.

The goal of this chapter is to study the mutations of Islam in the wake of the fall of Communism and the integration of Muslim Eurasia into a globalized economy and culture, with a particular focus on the emergence of Islamic ethical systems that reject globalization due to its Western roots. The analysis focuses on two post-Soviet Central Asian republics with a Sunni Hanafī majority, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Both speak Turkic languages and have a nomadic tradition.

Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan’s political situations are contrasted. Kazakhstan has had an authoritarian state oligarchy since the fall of the USSR in 1991. President Nursultan Nazarbayev, the ‘Leader of the Nation’ (Elbasy), ruled Kazakhstan for three decades before unexpectedly resigning on March 19, 2019 during a televised address to the nation. On
June 9, 2019, Kazakhstan elected as president Nazarbayev’s hand-picked successor, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, who pledged to continue the policies of his predecessor. Kyrgyzstan’s hybrid regime, meanwhile, has seen several transfers of presidential power since independence via ‘revolutions’ or ‘coup’s against incumbent elites. Nevertheless, both states have been shown to redistribute wealth in accordance with the logic of clientelism, a reality that has discredited these states as providers of public goods. For the Kazakh and Kyrgyz populations, the abrupt transition to a market economy—in the early 1990s, both states collaborated extensively with the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and ‘approved the “Western” blueprint of a free market economy’ (Botoeva 2018, p. 244)—was mainly experienced as trauma and signalled, above all, the total bankruptcy of the state and its mission. As most of society found itself impoverished, the dismantling of Soviet industries and the savage privatization of the 1990s gave rise to a new privileged class. The success of this privileged class arose from the control it exerted over the shadow economy, something deeply shocking to a population accustomed to a uniformity of lifestyles.

Moreover, although Kazakhstan is far wealthier, stark economic inequality is apparent in both states. Kazakhstan, a ‘rentier economy’, whose current population is 18.5 million, relies heavily on oil, which accounts for 60 percent of its exports and more than 40 percent of state budget revenues. The country has been economically strengthened by two decades of ‘shock therapy’ and massive foreign investment in hydrocarbons. As in the rest of the region, its growth in the 2000s can be explained by the rise in consumption and the boom in the construction and financial sectors, but not by the creation of new industrial wealth or technological innovation. Kyrgyzstan (6.4 million inhabitants), meanwhile, is mired in poverty: nearly half the population (55 percent of rural dwellers and 28.3 percent of urbanites) lives below the poverty line. The problem is particularly acute in the southern regions of the country, which are overcrowded and suffer from a severe land shortage. In response, significant migratory flows—more than half a million citizens—leave the country each year, mainly for Russia and Kazakhstan, where they meet market demand for labour and send home the remittances on which Kyrgyzstan’s economy and state budget depend.

In both post-Soviet republics, young people, in particular, have turned to Islam in search of values and ethical norms, which are shaped by the permanent interaction between the ‘local’ and the ‘global’ that characterizes globalization. These reinterpretations of Islam have turned it into an identity-building tool for acquiring self-worth and tend to centre on the economic (especially the acquisition of material goods and wealth). Although Islam is often thought of as a set of fixed beliefs, it is not unequivocal in meaning and orientation; it can be used for different ends. One such end is the rejection of neoliberal globalization, which is perceived as the triumph of capitalism. According to the revivalist proselytizing movement Tablighi Jama’at (in Urdu) or Jama’at at-Tabligh (in Arabic), the corollaries of consumption-based capitalism (e.g., materialism) divert the individual from ‘pure’ Islam. Key leaders of this pietistic movement in Muslim Eurasia, as Aisalkyn Botoeva points out, ‘insist that capitalism and the free market are first and foremost about idolizing the economy’ (2018, p. 254).

Founded in India under British colonial rule (between 1925 and 1927), this ‘preaching group’ has grown from a local movement into a preeminent global Islamic current (Gaborieau 2000). Its annual gatherings (idjīmā) in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh regularly attract millions of worshippers. In Western countries—especially Britain, France, Belgium and Canada—in the 1970s and 1980s, the Tabligh was often the principal religious organization in which Muslim immigrants participated (Gaborieau 2007); in more recent decades, it has lost ground to the (quietist) Salafi movement.
At the same time, Islam can equally well be used to legitimize the global market economy: new entrepreneurs from the urban middle classes of countries like Kazakhstan are giving capitalism a religious gloss.

The reworkings of Islam in these two post-Soviet societies, dislocated by sudden changes linked to the collapse of the Soviet welfare state and the forces of globalisation, have given rise to two ethical systems divided in their approach to the economy. In the first system, Muslim entrepreneurs who profess ‘bourgeois’ faith embrace an urban middle-class capitalist ethic, while in the second, Tablighi Jama’at militants advocate for the renunciation of worldly goods and for material and spiritual asceticism that facilitates drawing closer to the divine (zuhd) (Ingram 2011) as part of a perpetual quest for purity and personal salvation. Both Islamic ethical systems are emmeshed in the ‘local vs. global’ debate that is central to current globalization trends.

To some degree, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan seem to embrace a ‘global’ Islam that is localized by being practised differently in each country. Proponents of ‘global’ Islam—in this case, the new Muslim entrepreneurs among the urban middle class in Kazakhstan’s million-inhabitant capital, Nur-Sultan (formerly Astana)—imbue it with Kazakh characteristics and the ethnic nationalism and anti-Western orientation propounded by the confessional bureaucracy (muftiyat). They hope to reduce Islam to an ethnic national identity or even to a de-Westernized and de-Russified identity. Yet the true appeal of ‘global’ Islam is the theme of prosperity. Rooted in neo-evangelism’s prosperity gospel, it promises new Kazakh entrepreneurs wealth, upward mobility and social respectability. Consequently, ‘global’ Islam is conservative and market-oriented. It forges individuals who are well adapted to the norms of globalized market-capitalism—or at least willing to conform to its dictates.

At the same time, ‘local’ Islam has become a space for the production of the ‘global’. The revivalist movement Tablighi Jama’at is, paradoxically, a ‘local’ religious tradition that has provided a matrix for the creation of transnational faith communities in Muslim Eurasia and beyond. The Tabligh broadly adheres to the teachings of the Deobandi school (Arabic: Dār Al-‘ulūm—‘House of Learning’), named after Deoband, near Delhi, in which seminary the Indo-Pakistani reformist movement was founded in 1867 (see Metcalf 1982; Reetz 2008; Ingram 2018). The Deobandi school’s theological position has always been heavily influenced by the 18th-century Muslim reformer Shāh Wāḥīd Allāh and the early 19th-century Indian Wahhābīyah, giving it a very puritanical and orthodox outlook. The syllabus is highly traditional; modern disciplines that are not relevant to a proper knowledge of Islam and can lead to sinful innovation (bid'a) are ignored. The modern practice of Islam is studied only in order to purify it from unorthodox accretions. The Deobandi school adheres to a reformed Ḥanafī Sunnism that eschews the cult of saints but accepts a purified form of Sūfism (Reetz 2006). It enjoins an austere practice of Islam, including female seclusion (purdah), the prohibition of music and a ban on attending cinemas (Gaborieau 2007). The Tablighi apostolate are reminiscent of proselytizing Protestant preachers: self-financing itinerant groups patrol the streets both at home and abroad, systematically going from door to door across the land, much as the Mormons do. The primary objective is to deepen the faith of those who are already Muslims and purify their religious practice.

Tablighi Jama’at is much more active in Kyrgyzstan than in Kazakhstan, since Kyrgyzstan is the only republic in Eurasia not to have banned the movement. The country’s current Mufti, Maksat Hajji Toktomushev, is himself a former member of Tablighi Jama’at who drew international attention for pronouncing an anti-homosexual fatwa in 2014. In Kazakhstan, where the Tabligh is banned, Tablighis tend to go underground in order to escape state repression.

It is worth remembering that post-Soviet Kazakhstan and, to a lesser extent, Kyrgyzstan have not hesitated to intervene directly and massively in the religious field by repressing so-
called ‘bad Islam’, aptly exploiting the threat of ISIS to promote ethno-denominational identities centred on ‘good’ Islam (supposedly national, territorialized and loyal to the current regime). In a region experiencing globalization, the Kyrgyz and Kazakh political authorities promote a type of local Islam in which all pan-Islamist dimensions are marginalized and the focus is on supporting a specific Kyrgyz or Kazakh national identity. This ‘good’ Islam corresponds to a reified Kyrgyzness or Kazakhness and serves as a vehicle for the adoration of the nation and its supposed uniqueness—the ‘Kyrgyz way’ or ‘Kazakh way’. This reflects the general drift of post-Soviet politics: for the authorities seeking to legitimize their independent states, there is no better tool than the symbol of the nation, which offers the most inclusive membership and the broadest range of cultural material. Today, nationalism rooted in ethnicity tends to be positioned as a politically correct ideological framework in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan (Laruelle 2012).

Yet whether we are dealing with Tablighis or adherents of a Market Islam (i.e., Market Muslims) that is morphing into ‘bourgeois’ Islam among the urban middle classes of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, this chapter argues that they are united in their condemnation of globalization, which they see as a Western imposition on the rest of the world, and in their promotion of anti-Western puritanism. Indeed, the main thesis defended here is that although these Puritanical Muslims are divided over whether they see the global market economy as legitimate, they universally consider the Western values propagated by globalization (particularly the defence of LGBTQ rights) to be corrupting influences on the individual at the micro level and society at the meso level. Puritan Islamic ethics and/or puritanical conservatism are therefore the watchword for protests against globalization-as-Westernization (of lifestyles in general and mores in particular). Tablighis and Market Muslims alike deploy moral conservatism, foregrounding a reified Islamic virtue and purity that has to be protected or defended against the assaults of ‘decadent’ Western values propagated by globalization. Whether its proponents are capitalist or anti-capitalist, this morally conservative Islam stands, as Patrick Haenni reminds us, in opposition to prior forms of ‘Enlightenment Islam’ (Chebel 2004) which was both secularized and state-centric.

**Context: state-of-the-art concepts and methods**

This chapter draws from François Gauthier’s (2017) theoretical framework, according to which current mutations of Islam (like other religions) take on the specific shapes and social location which they do as a consequence of their modelling in accord with the characteristics of what he calls the ‘Global-Market regime’. This regime has emerged over the course of the last few decades as a result of the latest phase of globalization, in which the rise of economics as a socially structuring force in global societies has acted to rearrange, reconstitute and reconfigure the institutions inherited from the former National-Statist period. For Gauthier, religion in the Global-Market regime is best understood against the backdrop of the joint rise of neoliberalism as a dominant ideology and set of policies and practices and that of consumerism as a consumption-oriented and desirable cultural ethos. Historically, these trends emerge differently depending on whether one starts from Western welfare states or Soviet-led communist states, yet both cases provide variations on a common theme. It corresponds to a profound reshaping of religion and the emergence of new Market-shaped religious phenomena. It is important to note that the ‘Market’ here is understood both as relating to economics and as the idea of a spontaneous and immanent type of social regulation.
The mutations of contemporary Islam: a marketization-informed perspective

Gauthier stresses how religious phenomena in the Global-Market regime either espouse Market forms (e.g., Pentecostalism) or construct themselves against Westernization and its supposed materialism and moral corruption. In our case, we can distinguish between the emergence of an entrepreneurial and business-minded ‘Market Islam’ on the one hand, and fundamentalist currents which oppose such processes of neoliberal ‘Westernization’ on the other. While the latter proposes that Islam return to its origins, before its supposed ‘corruption’ by external influences, it contributes in practice to reshape Islam according to the new grammar of the Market regime.

The notion of ‘Market Islam’ was first coined by Patrick Haenni (2005), based on his study of the moralist preacher ‘Amr Khalid in Egypt. Haenni’s notion embraces a broad spectrum of trends within Islam that are all characterized by the blending of neoliberal values (self-realization, individual productivity and performance, competitiveness, effectiveness and efficiency, empowerment, mobility, personal success and achievement) and Islamic practices, turning ‘Market Muslims’ away from collective social and political projects. Market Islam is not the prelude to the establishment of an Islamic state, but one of the vectors of the privatization of the state, even of the liquidation of the welfare state (Haenni 2005, p. 11).

As for the Deobandi-affiliated Tablighi Jama’at, it is a quietist fundamentalist movement (Frykenberg 1994, p. 605) that opposes processes of ‘Westernization’. The Tabligh, as Barbara D. Metcalf points out, cultivates a mutuality and corporate identity constituted in the experience of missionary travel, ostensibly marking a contrast with mundane life and consumer society. This is a specific Islamic lifestyle (in terms of behaviour, clothing and discourse). Specifically, it is a Deobandi-inspired Sunna (the normative custom of the Prophet or of the early Islamic community) lifestyle that the Tablighis are advocating for and publicly displaying through specific practices: ‘The very image of the simply dressed, non-instrumental itinerant preacher implicitly devalues the wealth, success, and rootedness, that most of the society desperately seeks’ (Metcalf 1994, p. 717). Yet in so doing, Tablighis also partake, as we shall see, in the Global-Market model that predicts that religion is reconfigured into lifestyles: being involved in the Tabligh is indeed a born-again type of personal lifestyle choice which individuals can quit at any time without sanction (Dassetto 1988) and/or drift in and out of by participating sporadically in predication missions, in line with consumerism’s ethics of authenticity and expressivity. The Tabligh Islamic lifestyle corresponds to a mise en scène of the self that requires readily recognizable signs of identity and belonging through a distinct attire (fashion) that conveys a specific Islamic aesthetic. Through a specific type of Islamicized consumption, this lifestylization of Islam comprises a well-defined set of ethics (i.e., of guidelines as to how to live) as well as what presents itself as an alternative Islamic identity, in opposition to supposedly consumerist, materialist and amoral Western and Westernized lifestyles. The consumer-oriented religiosity fashioned by the ethics of Tablighi ‘authenticity’ turns ‘proper’ Islamic consumption into a tool for constructing expressive identities and therefore intersects with the market logics of the neoliberal age.

The practices of Tablighis and Market Muslims alike exemplify the shift from large-scale societal and political change to ‘narrower, more self-oriented goals of claiming and realizing individual and group identities’ (Yavuz 2003, p. 278). This shift from collective reform projects (political Islam) to individualized religiosities concerned more with ethics and identity is coupled with a lack of social contestation as well as the absence of a discourse on the growing social inequalities in both republics. These currents leave
aside former demands regarding social justice, except in terms of charity (in the case of Market Muslims). Both Tablighis and Market Muslims reject state-funded welfare. During the 1970s, political Islam opposed the Western capitalist system, applying Marx-inspired critiques to a system it judged exploitative and, therefore, unfair and damaging to the disenfranchised. Today, on the contrary, Market Muslims align themselves with the market-sanctioned compassionate conservatism of US Republicans and, consequently, as Patrick Haenni (2005) observes, with the philosophical battle that underlies it: the enforcement of a new definition of modernity, emancipated from the heritage of the French Enlightenment. As for Tablighis, they can be considered, to put it somewhat provocatively, as economic ‘libertarians’ insofar as they advocate the elimination of state regulation as concerns their activities (including their trading activities). The only area in which both Market Muslims and Tablighis value state action is regarding mores and morality-related issues.

‘Puritanical’ Islam, the market economy and transnationalism in Muslim Eurasia

In post-Soviet Central Asia, the relationship with Islam is structured around young people’s search for meaning in a context where more than half the population is under the age of 25 (Roche 2010). This is taking place in the midst of socioeconomic upheaval: the market economy has widened the gap between rich and poor and created new social structures that divide the winners and losers of this transformation. Key sectors of state action such as public health and education have been severely weakened. These humiliating ‘social misfortunes’—widespread and brutal pauperization, severe job insecurity and unemployment, elders’ loss of status and prestige, and the elimination of collective reference points—have spurred some citizens to emigrate, while others have turned to Islam as a means of restoring their dignity. Islam not only allegedly cures the evils that pervade modern Central Asian society, it also provides a route to self-fulfillment via a set of practices that allow the individual to (re)integrate society and even climb the social ladder. Adherence to Islamic ethical norms (akhlaq), manners and behaviour (ādaab) may further allow for self-purification and individual reform (Arabic: islāh) that leads to not only celestial but also terrestrial salvation.

The Islamic revival in Central Asia, particularly among the youth, is dominated by transnational movements such as Tablīghi Jama’at and by transnational strands of the Islamic prosperity gospel. Tablīghi Jama’at is committed to propagating the faith (tabligh) across state borders (see Noor 2012) and attempts to define a Muslim identity that is de-territorialized. The example of the Tabligh illustrates how neo-fundamentalism is involved in globalization, in the sense that it allows identities to ignore territories and cultures. Identities are based on individual choice and a set of markers with little content but high differential value. Islam is, for some, an opportunity for identity recomposition, which can be achieved in two ways that are mutually compatible: the construction of a local Islamized space (e.g., around a mosque) and accession to the umma, or at least to the ‘faith community’, or local and/or transnational neo-community through participation in an internationalist network such as the Tabligh.

The transnational Tablīghi community seeks to defend an ideal ‘niche society’ and/or global umma composed of ‘pure’ and ‘authentic’ Muslims, modelled on a fantasied ancient Medina in which everyone observes Islamic norms. Both as a sociocultural process and as an ideology, transnationalism relies on a give-and-take between a localized centre (historical or imaginary) that concentrates its resources and local communities that have become militant, such as the Tablīghis. The latter, who belong to a transnational Tablīghi ‘community of
faith’, are trying to *ex-culture* themselves—that is, they are withdrawing from the dominant culture that was once their own but has since become negative, ‘pagan’, anti-religious and destructive (Roy 2008).

As for adherents of a transnational Islam adapted to the rationale of the market economy, their full participation in global consumer culture does not make them open to allegedly universal liberal Western values (cosmopolitan liberalism, religious pluralism and cultural liberalism). Evidently, therefore, it is possible to be both pro-capitalist in economics and ‘illiberal’ with respect to moral values, the rule of law and democracy, especially among young people. For this youth-led ‘illiberalism’, Gulzhigit Ermatov writes, cultural and political liberalism is, in Muslim Eurasia, to blame for ‘moral decay and degeneration in society’ (2016, p. 11). Market Muslims’ model for such a combination—which appears, at first glance, to be quite paradoxical—is Dubai, to which they refer almost systematically when they imagine an ideal society that combines modernity (more precisely, a post-Western modernity), Islam and a business-friendly environment. This has remained the case even as Dubai’s consumer-driven economy and brash business model have begun to be questioned: the city-state’s capital markets are now moribund, unlike those of Abu Dhabi, the UAE’s oil-rich capital and by far the wealthiest member of the seven-strong federation. This adulation of Dubai is connected to Market Muslims’ practices: they often migrate, take business or religious trips, or start businesses there (see Stephan-Emmrich 2017a; Mirzoev and Stephan-Emmrich 2018; Stephan-Emmrich and Schröder 2016).

In their advocacy for the Islamization of mores (as opposed to their Westernization), Tablighis and Muslim capitalists promote an exclusivist and elitist puritanism with anti-Western accents. Islamic puritanism can be broadly defined as a reform project that consists of an individual and collective effort to go back to the source—that is, to the Koran and *Sunna*—in order to encourage Muslims to live in accordance with the norms and values of their religion. Islamic puritanism therefore seeks to restore rigid adherence to Islamic codes (Adraoui 2013).

Scholarly research on Islamic puritanism has mainly focused on Salafism in the Middle East (Laoust 1932; Berque et al. 1966; Rougier 2008; Lacroix 2011), as well as its appeal to young people in Western countries (Adraoui 2013; Meijer 2014). As far as the post-Soviet space is concerned, the most important works are historical studies that explore the links between Muslim reformism and modernity (Dudoignon et al. 1997; Dudoignon 1992). Worth noting is the study of Jadidism, the 19th- and early 20th-century Russian Muslim intellectual movement that developed in response to colonial hegemony and the modern age (Khalid 1998).

As for studies of ‘Puritan’ Muslims in Muslim Eurasia, they have mainly dealt, in the case of Tablighis, with the articulation between the transnationalism of Tablighi networks and their local discourses and practices, especially in Kyrgyzstan. The transnational nature of the movement has not prevented it from establishing, by the late 2000s, many connections with secular and religious authorities in Kyrgyzstan (Ismailbekova and Nasridinov 2012; Toktogulova 2017). Pelkmans (2017) has explored both the power and the fragility of conviction in the case of *Tablighi Jama‘at* while focusing on Tablighi techniques for making and keeping their conservative Islamic ideas relevant, believable and embodied.

entrepreneurs, religious authorities, migrants or state officials—come to articulate different orientations of Islam in the market.

The two case studies presented here are based on extensive fieldwork conducted in a Tablighi jama‘at (community) in Kyrgyzstan and among Kyrgyz and Kazakh Market Muslims, using the anthropological method of total immersion, between 2007 and 2017. The first relates the story of Mollah Kudaybergen, a healer who cares for Naryn’s alcoholics, whom I first met in 2007. Since its construction in 2010, Kudaybergen has also been the imam of the new mosque built with Saudi petro-dollars. The case study also discusses the experiences of Azamat, a pious Kazakh businessman who owns a prosperous cement company in Astana, the Kazakh capital; this study was conducted in 2017.

The second case study features Imam Askar, a rural migrant who became a Tablighi (Kyr. daawat) member in Bishkek, the capital city, in the early 2000s. This material was collected in the village of Geologia, in the district (rajon) of Sokuluk, near Bishkek, where Imam Askar lives, in early 2010, before President Bakiyev was removed from power and fled the country.

**From ‘global’ to ‘local’: ‘market’ or ‘bourgeois’ Islam and the Islamic Calvinist ethic**

In Muslim Eurasia, the Islam of the ‘disinherited’ that was prevalent among those dispossessed by privatization, shock therapy and the confiscation of wealth by oligarchs in the 1990s has morphed into a ‘prosperity theology’. In other words, in the post-Soviet area, as elsewhere, Islam has conformed or adapted to the rules of the global market and capitalist economy. This theme of prosperity is universal and is rooted in neo-evangelism.

Kazakhstan is the flagship example of the development of a Market Islam that is morphing into a ‘bourgeois’ Islam among the urban middle classes of countries with rent economies in Muslim Eurasia. High growth rates throughout the 2000s allowed for the emergence of new middle classes across the country, including in the capital, Nur-Sultan (Astana) (Bissenova 2014, 2017), which has since 1998 attracted hundreds of thousands of migrants from different regions of the country. This intersected with the globalization of Islam to produce a ‘bourgeois’ variant of religious practice. Devotees of this ‘bourgeois’ Islam expect religious facts to align with their expectations and interests. These new merchants of faith, many of them preachers, legitimate their accumulation of capital under the post-Soviet patronage system by reference to a prosperity gospel, an approach that continued even in the face of the economic crisis that forced Kazakhstan to devalue its currency, the tenge, in August 2015.

For pious Muslim entrepreneurs from the new urban middle classes, personal enrichment is perceived as positive—divine repayment for exemplary conduct based on the principles of Islam—so long as money is ‘properly acquired’ and purified by paying tax (zakât corresponds to one-fortieth of an individual’s income, while ushr entails giving up to 10 percent of profits to the needy). With the notion of salvation through work, these new middle classes have invented an Islamized version of the Puritan ethic, adherents of which likewise saw the wealthy as ‘God’s favourites’. This Islamic Calvinist-type ethic combines strict piety with intense entrepreneurship, heavenly salvation and the here-and-now: for the believer, to whom prosperity is promised, the reward is immediate and visible.

For this Muslim ‘pious bourgeoisie’, displaying piety is the path to middle-class status. The inculcation of Islamic values and ethics is seen as part of the process of embourgeoisement—that is, of developing bourgeois respectability as well as social and cultural capital. Even if Market Islam is carried by the urban middle classes, it tends to affect all social classes. Lower social classes do not escape this market formatting of Islam.
An example of this can be seen in the poverty-stricken republic of Kyrgyzstan, where I found that some Islamic actors put prosperity with a market logic at the centre of their teachings. Those ‘left by the wayside’ by the economic ‘shock therapy’ carried out in Kyrgyzstan in the 1990s are key targets of this preaching. Mollah Kudaybergen, for example, focuses his advocacy for a ‘return’ to Islam on alcoholics and drug addicts in Naryn, where 90 percent of the local population lives below the poverty line. Kudaybergen has opened a mosque in his own home, where he tries to first rehabilitate his patients through the rite of *dem-salū* (‘breathing’ on a patient after reciting some *ṣūras* as well as exhorting them to pray. Once patients are rehabilitated, Kudaybergen strives to (re)integrate them into society. He has even struck a deal with an employment agency to help his patients find work once they have recovered. In his work, the ‘return’ to Islam is clearly seen as the first step on the path to personal fulfilment and material success. Kudaybergen uses appeals to economic gains to engage with alcoholics and homeless individuals:

> When I meet an alcoholic in the street, I approach him and say, ‘Why do you drink a lot?’ I say just that and then I leave. The second time, I dress very nicely and I take a lot of money with me. I then say to him, ‘You drink a lot; if you didn’t drink, you would be like me, well dressed’, and then I show him my money. ‘You must read the *namaz* [pray], and if you behave well, if you do not drink, you will also have money’. Then I leave without giving him any money. The sick person is left to reflect.

Some of Kudaybergen’s former patients, healed through his care and re-Islamized through his preaching, have allegedly become prosperous notables through their practice of Islam. They serve as examples to his current patients, who are marginalized and underprivileged.

The process of embourgeoisement among the new urban middle classes, meanwhile, is embodied by Azamat, a successful Kazakh businessman who owns a prosperous cement company that has a quasi-monopoly on government contracts for construction in Nur-Sultan. Azamat is a devout Sunni Ḥanafī Muslim, a rite that corresponds to the state-advocated ‘good’ Islam. Azamat has a private *zakāt* fund for helping orphans, the disabled and the needy through which he distributes his wealth, and established a free *madrasa* in Nur-Sultan. Through these charitable deeds, Azamat seeks to lead by example, increase his social prestige and gain bourgeois respectability.

The cultivation of Islamic discipline is similarly connected to the development of civic virtue and urbanity. It is worth noting that the new urban cultural codes are loaded with references to Islam. Halal cafes are, for instance, trendy in all the big cities of the country. In Kyrgyzstan, the presence of Islam in the urban public space is even more undeniable (for instance, in the Kyrgyz capital, Bishkek, Islamic popular literature is on sale in kiosks and big supermarkets, as are halal products, and Islamic fashion shops are sprouting up). Furthermore, in Kyrgyzstan (unlike Kazakhstan and the other republics of Central Asia), public institutions now include prayer halls. The view that the public space should be gradually ‘normalized’ by Islam-inspired values such as ‘modesty’, discretion and gender segregation is a growing tendency among the Kazakh and Kyrgyz new urban middle classes. Islam is seen, in particular by the youth, as a new code promoting individual morality and a more normative public space.

The new Muslim entrepreneurs I studied in Nur-Sultan hold neoliberal economic views and support the globalized capitalist market economy, which they pair with conservative moral values. Kazakh youth as a whole are supportive of the symbols of a market economy, such as a private sector, entrepreneurship and the banking system, but not of ‘liberal’ social and cultural values, as surveys conducted by the Friedrich Ebert...
Stiftung confirm. Only 18 percent of young Kazakhstani consider Western countries to be a good model of development (13 percent for European countries, and only 5 percent for the United States); 17 percent of respondents believe that Western values are becoming increasingly prevalent in society, while 69 percent agree that Kazakhstan’s culture should remain distinctive and resist outside influences and intrusions (cited in Laruelle 2018).

This calls into question Nasr’s (2009, 2010) contention that Muslims who are partisans of a Market Islam are necessarily ‘liberal’ due to their legitimation of the market economy. Both at work and at home, a prosperous businessman such as Azamat adheres closely to conservative Islamic mores, implementing separation between the men and women who work in his company and maintaining gender segregation that is close to purdah (female seclusion) at home (male and female family members are, for instance, separated into two different rooms during meals and other gatherings). This conservatism is coupled with a desire to protect oneself from foreign (Western) imperialist influences, such as US movies or haram (forbidden) consumerist goods. Azamat and his family make sure their lifestyle is as ‘halal’ as possible: their leisure time and holidays are Şari’a-compliant (they vacation in Turkey and in Dubai, the favourite destination of Azamat’s wife), the family goes exclusively to the new trendy halal cafes in Nur-Sultan, and their children are educated in Fethullah Gülen Turkish schools. This conservatism also includes a nationalist, anti-colonialist opposition to Russia. As a patriotic businessman, Azamat considers it imperative to ‘produce Kazakh’ in order to compete economically with Russia. Along the same lines, he is fighting for the Kazakh language to be favoured over Russian, be it in the administration, the media or education. On this basis, Azamat welcomed Nazarbayev’s decision to shift to the Latin alphabet in 2025. This decision is indeed a very strong sign of Nazarbayev’s will to increase Kazakhstan’s cultural distance from Russia and symbolize its autonomy. The Soviet-sounding state programme called ‘Modernizing of the National Consciousness’, launched in 2017, is also a project of cultural empowerment of Kazakhstan in the face of Russia’s cultural dominance in the post-Soviet space.

Thirty years after perestroika, Kazakhstan is still facing profound changes in its nation-building, with growing interactions between the state organs and several segments of society (Laruelle 2018). Kazakhstan offers, as Marlène Laruelle (2018) point out, a ‘multifaceted state narrative about the nation’s identity, with several competing repertoires’, and the same is true for Kyrgyzstan. In both post-Soviet republics, where there is minimal diversity of political expression, a new generation of practising Muslim businessmen/politicians are holding key positions of power. They combine both ‘nationalist-minded’ agendas and ultra-conservative values that echo the conservative laws and the anti-Western and anti-liberal atmosphere that prevails in Russia.

This new generation of politicians with open references to Islam—a conservative and even rigorist Islam, not the folkloric and secularized interpretation of Islam inherited from the Soviet period—seek to justify their economic activities and gain popular support by proposing a new political discourse. It is characterized less by post-Soviet references than by Islamic values, similar to that of Erdogan’s party in Turkey before his authoritarian shift. In this new ‘post-post-Sovietism’, there is no longer a confrontation between a secular state and Islam—thus debunking the idea of a necessary dialectical opposition between the two—but a peaceful Islamization of society and state institutions through the progressive co-optation of Islam by state structures and the free market agenda.

Against that backdrop, the advocates of bourgeois Islam such as Azamat display respect for political norms (they are loyal to the authoritarian regime and display respect for the
status quo) as well as for social hierarchies, arguing that money acquired through halal business (no bribes, no *riba* (interest)) and economic success should be praised. This bourgeois Islam for middle classes and elites, which draws on the Ḥanafī rite, could be consensual: the philanthropy of its devotees allows it to substitute for the state in guaranteeing the population access to basic public goods and services, while its conservative (even illiberal) values and its nationalist-accented anti-colonialism are popular. This bourgeois Islam could therefore be promoted as the embodiment of a new, de-Russified and de-Westernized, Kazakhness or Kyrgyzsness that combines ethnic identity, Ḥanafī Islam and free market ideologies.

This bourgeois Islam illustrates how the idea of the nation, with its links to ethnicity, can assert itself in a global context and help build indigenous/local identities. In a sense, the nation serves as a buffer between imperial forces, globalization and the local.

**From ‘local’ to ‘global’: Tablighi transnational networks in Kyrgyzstan and the ethic of renunciation**

The *Tablighi Jama’at* movement is a paradoxical case where a local religious tradition has provided the foundation for faith communities worldwide. *Tablighi Jama’at* has transformed into a transnational entity that operates across state borders.

*Tablighi Jama’at* is a modern movement. As Barbara Metcalf writes, it:

> creates a voluntary, transnational society, apart from the state. It helps constitute an ideology of individualism in its radical concern with personal salvation, made possible by faithful action and in its emphasis on individual choice [...] Also characteristic of many modern movements is *Tabligh* self-consciousness about ‘authenticity’, coupled with an ideology that is increasingly expressed as an alternative to ‘the West’. (1993, p. 606)

Looking at *Tablighi Jama’at*, it becomes clear how a local religious tradition became global by spreading a universal model of human behaviour through the imitation of Muhammad and his companions. This extends beyond beliefs to include clothing, gestures, behaviours, the rhythms of daily life and topics of conversation that exclude anything that is connected to the impure domain of ‘culture’ or refers to the diversity of cultures and civilizations—that is, to history (Roy 2008). The export-oriented *Sunna* expounded in the didactic monographs and textbooks written by Muḥammad Zakariyyā Kāndhalawī (1898–1982) between 1928 and 1964, which are collections of *hadith*, must therefore appear detached from the Deobandi school in order to present itself as universal (i.e., not tied to the South Asian cultural context).

One individual who has embraced in Kyrgyzstan the Tablighi outlook is Imam Askar, a rural migrant who became a member of *Tablighi Jama’at* (Kyrgyz: *daawaci*) in Bishkek, the capital, in the early 2000s. Askar was seduced by what gives the *Tabligh* its universal appeal: the intensity of the personal commitment, the simplicity of the message and a tight-knit group that offers unconditional emotional support. Through religion, Askar was able to remodel his own identity, an empowering experience. Today, he is proud to see himself as a zealous Muslim preacher who ‘forbids the wrong and commands the right’ according to the Koranic injunction (see Cook 2000), rather than as a poor and uprooted migrant.

In the course of his identity mutation through religion, Askar has reconstructed his view of the meaning of life and his system of ethics by internalizing the etiquette of this pietist movement. His main sources of inspiration are textbooks, with their specific *hadith* commentaries consulted by *Tablighis* for guidance, whether at home or in the mission field.
Tablighis’ profound internalization of these texts—they are read in groups, often aloud, and are memorized—allows each follower to become autonomous, able to make Tabligh-aligned choices without hesitation. According to Barbara Metcalf, ‘followers attempt to live by hadith but in such a way that they aspire to internalize the written/heard texts to the point that they ideally become, in a sense, “living hadith”’ (Metcalf 1993, p. 585).

Among Tablighis in Kyrgyzstan, including Askar’s jama‘at, the most read and most cherished textbook or pamphlets (risāla) are the Hikayāt-i sahāla (Stories of the Companions). This book provides a template for individual and group behaviour by laying down two paths: one from the past, described in tradition, and one from the present, which has deviated substantially from the model set by the first (Metcalf 1993, p. 587). The text pays substantial attention to the spiritual values that dominated the Sufi milieu of the 13th century, offering detailed guidance on inculcating personal virtues—steadfastness, fear of Allah, abstinence and self-denial, piety and scrupulousness, self-sacrifice, devotion to the Prophet and so on (Metcalf 1993, p. 587)—into everyday life. For the Deobandi-affiliated Tabligh, Sufism is therefore conceived exclusively as an individualistic concern: the ‘ethical reform (islah) of the self’ (Ingram 2011).

The model, based on the Deobandi interpretation of the lifestyle of the Prophet and his Companions, who are used as moral exemplifications, is intended for application to every circumstance. It comments on contemporary failures in order to inspire change: virtually every story draws a comparison between the present and the past, noting present failures to achieve a Sunna lifestyle:

Those in times past lived frugally and humbly, worked with their hands, made any sacrifice to fulfil divine commands and spread the faith. They were passionate in their quest for knowledge—knowledge defined, one might note, as remembering hadith. They did not compete for worldly gains. They did not define taraqqi [progress] as it is defined today, as accumulation of worldly goods.

(Metcalf 1993, p. 588)

Despite the unfavourable contrasts between an idealized past and what is presented as a corrupt and decadent ‘present’, the main message of the text is that a return to the past—when people lived out the ideals expressed in hadith—is possible. Sunna, as portrayed in Tabligh-specific hadith commentaries, is a personal lifestyle choice (Gugler 2011, p. 341); a modern Sunna lifestyle can therefore be chosen and adopted in the ‘present’ and lead to moral fulfilment through the Islamization—or what Thomas Gugler more appropriately terms the ‘Sunnaization’—of one’s clothing, speech and behaviour (2011, p. 341).

Individuals have the opportunity to stage their imitatio Muhammadi (Schimmel 1994, p. 90) in public space. The elements of this modern Sunna lifestyle pave the way to personal salvation: the more one adheres to the Tabligh programme, the more spiritual rewards—or ‘paradise points’ (tawab; Kyr. sawap) are gained. By living correctly in this world, individuals prepare for their salvation in the next.

For the Tablighi neo-community of which Askar is part, a Sunna lifestyle means sacrificing with humility to please God. Askar therefore complies strictly with the Tabligh programme and etiquette, including such subtle embodied sensibilities as how to eat, pray and wash, in order to dwell eternally in Paradise. The pietistic movement advocates the progressive detachment of ties with this world by means of prayer—dhikr (remembrance, which corresponds in the Tabligh with the recitation of fervent prayers), ‘ilm (knowledge of God) and khunuj (lit. military expedition; ‘exit’)—which is supposed to allow the true
believer to find the serenity to which the soul aspires. Family, work, social position and material well-being are mere distractions from this goal (Kepel 1987). Indeed, ‘everything involving economic outcomes—material goods, money, and success in this life—should be secondary for devout Muslims’ (Botoeva 2018, p. 254). As success is always taken to be proportional to individual effort, Askar scrupulously carries out all obligatory and supererogatory religious rites, devoting all his time to worship. From a Tablighi perspective, the extreme poverty of Askar, his wife and their two children—occasioned by the fact that Askar does not work, except in an unpaid position as the imam of an unregistered mosque—shields them from the temptations of (over)consumption and other ills. Indeed, Askar’s younger brother, who inherited the family’s livestock, indicates that Askar lives only for daawat and namaz (prayer), following therefore what is advocated in the Hikayät-i sahāba, the Stories of the Companions: ‘In fact, the Sahāba would sacrifice the whole world for their prayer (namāz)’ (Mālik ed., p. 60 quoted in Metcalf 1993, p. 594).

Despite their sharp criticism of capitalism and the free market, most Tablighis, as Asisalkyn Botoeva points out, do not resist participating in the economy in their daily lives, even as they emphasize the need to be ready to give up profit in the name of their piety and prioritization of God. Indeed, the majority of Tablighis in Kyrgyzstan do not sacrifice their material survival as Askar does (provoking constant criticism from his wife) in order to comply strictly with the ideals of frugality and asceticism propounded by the ethics of renunciation or zudh, not least because Tablighis also insist that a ‘proper’ pious Muslim should be economically self-reliant. Such self-reliance could be achieved ‘through entrepreneurship if necessary’ (Botoeva 2018, p. 255). Tablighis in Kyrgyzstan, Botoeva explains, occupy specific economic niches:

[they] actively seek ways of establishing their own private businesses, primarily in trade and agriculture (e.g., selling Muslim attire at bazaars, reselling used cars, and working plots of land). They also actively support each other through market activities, using mosques and their dava’at groups as venues for consolidating business partnerships and justifying the community-based approach to commercial activities as one means of paving the way to heaven.

(Botoeva 2018, p. 255)

Botoeva adds that some members of the Tabligh in Kyrgyzstan developed economic partnerships, ran their businesses together and ‘expressed genuine pride at their material success’ (2018, p. 255). Nevertheless, ‘such spiritualists always framed material success in terms of the freedom and ability it gave them to practice a rigorously Muslim life’ (Botoeva 2018, p. 255).

Even a pietistic proselytizing movement like the Tabligh engages with marketization, since ‘marketization transforms religion into lifestyles, practices, and voluntary adhesion’ (Gauthier 2018, p. 387). This is precisely what Tablighis are doing: promoting and advertising the Sunna lifestyle in the public space—even though Tablighis like Askar refuse to participate in consumer society. Advertising this lifestyle requires that individual born-again Tablighis express their franchized ethics and identity-oriented brand of Islamic religiosity through visible, public signs, thus ‘making the specific qualities of their salvation goods visible in public spaces’ (Gugler 2011, p. 343). These public signs correspond to a specific dress code: wearing the veil for women and the Pakistani shalwar-kameez for men. The latter are also distinguished by their beard without a moustache, the cap (taqiyah) or turban on their head and the rosary and siwak stick they carry. These public signs, Tablighis hope,
make them recognizable as ‘pure’ and ‘authentic’ Muslims, allowing them to draw attention and inspire others in post-Soviet Kyrgyz society to follow their example. In reality, however, they only make Tablighis look ‘backward’, ‘radical’ and potentially ‘fanatical’ in the eyes of the broader population with secular sensibilities (see Nasritdinov and Esenamanova 2018).

The (re)publicization of Islam based on Tablighi understanding, which is blurring the private and public realms and thereby ‘deprivatizing religion’ (Casanova 1994), can be understood ‘as a consequence of the rise of the neoliberal world order and the spread of consumerism’ (Gauthier 2018, p. 401). Indeed, though Tablighis disdain consumerism, the public expression of their Islamic identity—through the dress code described above—is in itself a form of consumerism, echoing ‘the fashion for veiling’ as analysed by Baris Kiliçbay and Mutlu Binark Kamal in the case of Turkey (2002).

It should be noted that this dress code has recently undergone a number of adjustments in order to deter suspicion from local authorities. Local media and Kyrgyz traditionalists had criticized davaachi who had returned from trips to India and Pakistan for wearing the ‘Pakistani’ dress code in emulation of what is, for Tablighis, the Sunna lifestyle. Davaachi now tend to alter their dress to suit national and local tastes. Members are encouraged to wear a chapan robe and national headgear like a felt kalpak (the traditional Kyrgyz hat), although a turban is permitted during prayers. This change in dress code has resulted in Kyrgyz Tablighis attempting to standardize and market a corporate Sunna lifestyle with an aesthetic that is half global/universal and half Kyrgyz/local.

This visibility and publicization, even if frustrated, becomes political. The Tabligh has focused on ways to achieve the formation of a core of the truly faithful and the consolidation—through a body of doctrine—of a supranational cultural code. The ‘total’ faith preached by the Tabligh involves living outside mainstream society at the same time as saturating that society’s public spaces with Tablighi religious signs advertising the Sunna lifestyle. Tablighis see mainstream society as fundamentally hostile to ‘authentic’ Islam; the Tabligh therefore frames itself as a movement for the bottom-up re-Islamization of society, with the spiritual progress of individuals as its main concern.

With tens of thousands of members and support in certain powerful economic circles, the Tabligh could mobilize against the Kyrgyzstani regime should it feel threatened with being banned. The Kyrgyz authorities, conscious of this, have sought to ‘ride the wave’ of Islamization and give it some direction by creating a davaat department within the muftiyyat. Particularly among the youth, they have sought to encourage an apolitical conservative re-Islamization that would help heal certain social ills (unemployment, crime, drugs, etc.) while containing the threat posed by Islamic groups that seek to oppose ‘impious’ political regimes. This effort has, in turn, allowed the government to appear friendly towards Islam and its blossoming and not as a kafir (infidel)—and therefore illegitimate—leadership in the eyes of believers (Biard 2017).

Although Tablighis condemn globalization, considering it a Western imposition on the rest of the world, they are in fact perfectly adapted to it. Globalization allows for the creation of a web of regional networks that may be dispersed across the globe but which share similar logics and social representations—precisely the situation in which the numerous Tablighi jama’ats find themselves. Transnationality is decisive in the formulation of Tablighi Jama’at’s neo-fundamentalism: networks replace territory. Community life takes place in isolation within the network and not within a defined territory. It requires rupture, retreat and the organization of a space surrounding a charismatic leader (military leader or âmir in the Tablighi vocabulary) and/or a faith community (jama’at). This takes place in ‘Islamized spaces’—considered as pockets of resistance that Tablighis hope will eventually attract more
Tablíghi ‘converts’—based on what Barbara Metcalf calls the ‘New Medinas’ (1996) within modern cities and villages.

**Conclusion: future pathways for research**

These Islamic ethical systems—the Prosperity Theology from Market Islam and the Tablíghi’s ethics of renunciation—whose adherents, be they capitalists or anti-capitalists, seek purity and individual virtue, both promote an elitist puritanism in the face of the supposed moral decay of the West. In order to be ‘virtuous’ Muslims, pious bourgeois capitalist Muslims and Tablíghis alike must fiercely defend themselves against the decadent values of ‘Western Babylon’. A notable example is LGBTQ rights, which are considered ethically desirable in the West, whereas these groups see them as evidence of a moral laxness that corrupts both individual and society. This anti-Western puritanism links two models of Islam that appear to be economically and politically in opposition to one another, in that one seeks to embody a regionalized nation-state while the other rejects the nation-state as a horizon of meaning. Ironically, however, this anti-Western puritanism has in fact borrowed many features and themes from the object of its contempt, even imitating the conservative family values promoted by the Kremlin and the Orthodox hierarchy in Russia, conservative Catholicism in France and Evangelism in the United States.

Tablíghis and Market Muslims alike want to make the Prophet’s tradition, the *Sunna*, the norm for individual behaviour. In their view, every Muslim should imitate the ‘pious predecessors’, understood as Muhammad’s companions (the *sahāba*) in Medina’s idealized first community (622–661). It is, however, difficult to bring this ideal to fruition because it is subject to a circular logic: the political can only be based on individual virtuousness, but virtue can only be fully acquired if society is truly Islamic.

Life ethics and lifestyles are used to challenge globalization as a Western phenomenon, in spite of the fact that Westernization is a *fait accompli*. Partisans of these alternative Islamic ethical systems are themselves the products of Westernization and globalization. The societies in which they have evolved are neither ‘traditional’ nor ‘traditionalist’ but hybrid and cosmopolitan: they have already undergone authoritarian Soviet modernization. With rural exodus and emigration, traditional conviviality, respect for elders and consensus have been shed, replaced with conservative values built around Islam, especially the defence of the ‘traditional’ family. Local populations have the same values as people in any modern city: they engage in consumerism and strive for social mobility. The universes of young people, in particular, are made up of Western elements: social media, films, music, cafes and TV reality shows promising glory and fame. By rejecting a Westernization they have already internalized, Tablíghis and Muslim capitalists are in fact voicing the myth of authenticity in borrowed and inauthentic language. But this does not prevent Tablíghis, especially, from presenting themselves as reformers, censors and defenders against the threat of foreign influence, an influence that encourages people to abandon their sacred texts and forget their morals.

The central question raised by these two case studies relates to the interactions between the state and these conservative—and sometimes competing—Islamic models. Do these Islamic movements’ critiques of Westernization extend to the contemporary Kazakh and Kyrgyz states? Whether bourgeois Muslims or Tablíghis, believers in these countries do not spend their time praying: they have expectations of the political and economic system as citizens of these countries, in particular in the aftermath of the 2014 economic crisis and in a context of stark social inequality. Socioeconomic and cultural issues also haunt these
Islamic communities, since a posture of pure religion without any participation in the broader society is untenable in the long run (Roy 2008), even for the ostensibly apolitical Tablighi communities (Gaborieau 1997). This raises the question of how Muslim capitalists and Tablighis, vying for recognition from the state authorities and advocating for the preservation of their interests, are entering politics and what they are demanding. It is also worth exploring how post-Soviet states are trying to channel pro-Islamic protests by condemning the corrupt and corrupting West. How do states incorporate these social demands into their visions of Islam without facing threats to their political legitimacy as secular states? Officials, whether in Kazakhstan or Kyrgyzstan, need to be careful not to alienate foreign and Western investors and to translate their anti-Western ideology into loyalty to the incumbent regime, along the lines of the Chechen model. Indeed, the latter implies ‘Kadyrovism’, named after the Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov (see Laruelle 2017). Kadyrovism, which promotes a hard-line pietism and is loyal to existing regimes while remaining fundamentally anti-Western—as evidenced by the 800,000-strong anti-Charlie Hebdo demonstration Kadyrov led in January 2015—and puritanical, is enjoying increasing prosperity in both Russia and Central Asia.

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