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Executive Summary

This paper provides background for an understanding of contemporary Central Asia by discussing the varieties of religious practice in the region, their relation to each other and to politics. I address three broad, interconnected issues necessary to the understanding of religion in the political dynamics of Central Asia. The first of these is the structure of religious authority in Islam and its relation to government. The second is the doctrine and organization of Islamic mysticism (Sufism). The third subject is popular beliefs in the supernatural, and their influence on religious observance and daily life.

An understanding of the religious traditions of Central Asia is important not because they are unchanged from the Middle Ages to the present, but because they have evolved to survive and adapt to new conditions. This has happened in part because authority has been diffuse. If we look at pre-Soviet Central Asia, we cannot say either that the state controlled the religious establishment, or that the religious classes controlled the state. No one set of people, moreover, dominated more than a portion of the religious life and supernatural beliefs of the people. Neither ulama nor Sufi orders formed stable hierarchies, and the variety of different shrines continuing to develop through the medieval and modern period show us that popular belief and practice have always existed and evolved independent of religious authority of any kind. There has been no one institution or person with whom the Russians or Soviets could negotiate, whom they could control or destroy.
The issue of religion is a vexed one in contemporary Central Asia. The recent attempt on the life of President Karimov of Uzbekistan and the resulting persecution of religious figures have again raised the question of whether or not Islamic organizations in Central Asia are an active and disruptive force. One of the questions frequently posed by scholars and observers of the region is how we should understand the rise in popular religious observance in the Central Asian republics and what political significance we should ascribe to it. Since the end of the 1980s, many new mosques have been built, and even more strikingly, the innumerable shrines of Central Asia, active throughout the Soviet period, have taken on new life. These shrines, many of which are connected with the Sufis, the mystical brotherhoods of Islam, have never been under the effective control either of the state, or of the ulama – the regular clergy. During the Soviet period, Sufis and shrine personnel were seen both by the Soviet regime and by some western scholars, as potential organizers of underground resistance.¹

What I shall do in this paper is provide some background to the complex situation in contemporary Central Asia, to illustrate the varieties of religious practice and their relation to each other and to politics. I shall address three broad, interconnected issues necessary to the understanding of religion in the political dynamics of Central Asia. The first of these is the structure of religious authority in Islam and its relation to government. The second is the doctrine and organization of Islamic mysticism (Sufism). The third subject I address is popular beliefs in the supernatural, and their influence on religious observance and daily life. Finally I shall examine how Russian and Soviet rule served to change, or to maintain, historical traditions and patterns of behavior, and how these continuing patterns affect contemporary life.

The Background: Islam and the State

In the last twenty years, the issue of political Islam has received a great deal of attention from scholars and from the press. From writings on a complex subject, two statements have been singled out and repeated in the press and popular works:

1. that in the Islamic world there is no separation between Church and State, and
2. that in Islam, religion covers almost all aspects of life.

Both of these statements are true and both, in my opinion, are misleading. The history of Islamic societies shows us that, while medieval rulers in the Islamic world had religious legitimation, they did not have religious authority, while religious figures were rarely involved directly in government. Likewise, although religious law developed to cover many aspects of human activity which in Christianity come outside of religious authority, many other sides of life remained outside Islamic law. Let us look at these questions in more detail.

The prophet Muhammad was both the spiritual and the political leader of a fast-growing and successful community. When he died in 632 AD, prophecy ended for the Islamic community, but leadership of a united community defined by religion did not. The leaders of the Islamic community were called a khalīfa, or caliph, a word meaning deputy. Over the next century, the caliphs increasingly lost their authority within the religious sphere. After the conquests of the Arabs, the Muslims found themselves rulers of a great empire and to rule it they adopted many of the administrative personnel, practices and ceremonial of the Roman and Persian empires that had preceded them. Rule became hereditary and was frequently contested; what determined succession was superior force, and this fact became accepted in political thought. The caliph was expected to protect and promote Islam, but not to define it, or even fully to practice it. There was, for example, little expectation that the caliphs would avoid drinking alcohol.

The authority to define correct doctrine soon ceased to belong to any one person. In the course of
several centuries, people of serious religious beliefs and scholarly interest studied the Qur’an and collected stories about the life and sayings of the Prophet, known as hadith, to put together a code of religion and behavior. As in Christianity and Judaism, formal theology was elaborated with the help of Greek philosophy, soon translated into Arabic. Religious knowledge was acquired and passed on informally and personally. Religious scholars are known simply as “learned” (in Arabic, ulama), and achieve their status entirely through study and learning; there is no sacrament or ceremony that sets them apart from other people.

Furthermore, in Sunni Islam, with which we are concerned here, there is no accepted hierarchy culminating in one authority entitled to decide religious questions by decree. In this way the ulama resemble rabbis much more than the Christian clergy. Questions of doctrine have been decided gradually, by emerging consensus among the ulama. Sometimes the early caliphs involved themselves in doctrinal disputes, and used force to promote what they saw as correct doctrine, but this happened only occasionally, less frequently certainly than in the Christian world.

The next question to turn to is Islamic law, in its relation to government and to everyday life. This law, the shari‘a, was developed by the ulama over a number of centuries. Its textual sources are limited to those reflecting the time of the Prophet, namely the Qur’an and the hadith — traditions about the Prophet, sifted and authenticated by the ulama. The ulama observed the practices of the government and society of their time, often quite critically, and formulated rules and laws in reaction. This was an attempt to preserve the purity of Islamic practice in the face of a wealthy, powerful and worldly court society. The shari‘a law, as it emerged, was never a single definite code. Scholars worked separately, in different centers, and soon recognized that different opinions were possible to defend on sound textual basis. Thus several accepted schools of law developed, and have continued to coexist; the one most accepted in the eastern Islamic world, including Central Asia, is the Hanafi.

Two things have limited the scope of Islamic law. The first is the fact that it is based on a strictly
delineated set of texts, coming from the time of the Prophet, when the Islamic community was relatively small. Thus the shari’a is very full on commercial law, especially trade, and on family and inheritance practices, both relevant to the community of the Prophet, but there are a large number of government and administrative issues which cannot be fully addressed on the basis of the available material.

The other factor which limited the scope of the shari’a was that up to at least the nineteenth century the shari’a courts, run by judges, or qadis, who were members of the ulama, were not directly connected to a police force. Thus, while in theory they could rule on criminal law, in practice questions of violent crime and public order were usually dealt with by municipal or government authorities. What existed throughout most of the Islamic world, including Central Asia, was a de facto acceptance of two other types of law: siyasat, which was the law concerning administration and the preservation of public order, administered by the government, and ‘adat, or customary law, administered by lower level leaders such as ward headmen in the city, village headmen or tribal chiefs in the countryside. In theory, neither administrative nor customary law could contradict the shari’a, but in practice they frequently did. Almost all governments, at least those after the first few centuries of Islam, used taxes which were not sanctioned by the shari’a, while customary law frequently also diverged, particularly on questions of inheritance.

What we see in the Islamic world is an early de-facto separation of the religious classes from the state, and coexistence involving both cooperation and tension. Some ulama filled posts appointed by the ruler; this was the case of the main city judge, the qadi, and also the overseer of the market and public morals; the muhtasib. In the later periods of Islamic history, with which I am dealing, some other supervisory positions also existed, which the ruler might appoint, but none held complete authority over other religious functionaries. Rulers and their government servants also endowed mosques and colleges (madrasas) to which they might then appoint personnel from among the ulama.

Nonetheless, this patronage always remained incomplete, and the bulk of the ulama, while certainly profiting from the wealth of the ruling class, retained considerable independence both financial
and personal, necessary if they were to retain their position as the conscience of the community. The relation of appointed religious officials to the states could be compared to that of the judiciary in the United States. Most other ulama had a relationship to government similar to that of members of the academic establishment. When they observed un-Islamic practices in government, the more activist ulama often called for reform, and some rulers heeded them, or adopted their rhetoric for purposes of their own.

In 1258, when the Mongols took over Iran, they destroyed the Islamic caliphate. The loss of the central symbol of unity and religious legitimation contributed to political and religious changes in the Islamic world. At the time of the conquest, the Mongols were pagans, and even when they later converted officially to Islam, many Muslims remained skeptical about the completeness and correctness of their belief. The ruling class also remained self-consciously foreign, speaking a different language, and wearing distinctive clothing. Thus the outward separation between government and society increased and became symbolically more important; furthermore, the separation between the religious and ruling classes was now connected with a difference in ethnic origin and language. The attitudes which this engendered remained in place for centuries, despite large-scale patronage of religious institutions and individuals by Turco-Mongolian dynasties and military classes.

Sufism

It was also after the Mongol invasion that Sufism, or Islamic mysticism, became politically significant. In the Islamic world, mysticism came to occupy an important place within religious practice and doctrine, and became widely accepted as a legitimate form of religious experience. A number of mystical writings were widely known and read, and many religious scholars, holding regular professions as teachers or jurisprudence, were also trained in mysticism. Poetry became strongly infused with mystical themes, a fact of some importance, since this was the most important form of literature, widely memorized, recited and used to grace the portals of important buildings. The Sufi seeks union with God,
and this must be achieved through a fundamental transformation of the self. It is necessary to destroy the lower soul which is attached to worldly things, and turn one’s soul into a mirror which, without qualities of its own, can reflect God. This state of non-being is very difficult to achieve, and for most people cannot be attained without help; thus most people who attempt it seek out a guide.

By the later Middle Ages, many Sufis had organized into orders or brotherhoods (tariqas) which came to play a very important part in the economic, social and political life of Central Asia. Sufi orders should not be seen as monastic communities. The ideal of monasticism and celibacy were explicitly rejected by the prophet Muhammad; both ulama and Sufi shaykhs are usually married. While community and communal life were highly important within the Sufi orders, there does not seem to have been a requirement that all disciples live together. The major purpose of the Sufi orders was to train disciples according to an accepted method. There are numerous techniques which can be useful in achieving a state of ecstasy or unconsciousness of the self. Some of these are ascetic, involving solitary meditation and fasting. Others are communal: gatherings to recite a particular phrase similar to a mantra (known as dhikr) and in some orders, music and dance (sama’), which can help in achieving a higher consciousness. For almost all orders, the role of a teacher, called pir or shaykh, is central, and disciples should subject themselves unconditionally to his guidance. “like a corpse in the hand of the washer”. When a disciple has achieved a state of unity or nearness with God, he is competent to go forward on his own, and to take on his own disciples, often in a different location.

What led to the formation of separate, and sometimes competing Sufi orders was first the strong attachment between master and disciple and second the existence of disagreement over the best methods for achieving unity and training disciples. One can take as an example the Naqshbandi order, the most active and widespread order in Central Asia over the last five centuries. The Naqshbandiyya split off from an earlier order largely because they preferred to use a silent recitation (dhikr) rather than a vocal one, and gave lesser weight to ascetic practices.
In the course of the Middle Ages, Sufi shaykhs became important actors in the wider political sphere. As people considered holy and outside everyday politics, they could be used as mediators, and were called upon to act in this way by local peasants, by city notables and indeed by the government. Furthermore, the lodges, or khanaqah, which were built to facilitate communal life were open to travelers and often dispensed free meals for the poor, a common activity in shrines and other religious establishments. These establishments might be endowed by a charitable endowment known as waqf, and members of the elite not uncommonly endowed such institutions.

Some Sufi shaykhs, moreover, became important landowners in their own right, and used their personal wealth in part to support disciples and works of charity; this was particularly true of the Naqshbandi, mentioned above. Shaykhs had not only disciples, but also followers who sought their spiritual advice and attended some assemblies, but did not devote their lives to religion. As people who had spiritual grace and prestige, and who had standing among all classes of the population, Sufi shaykhs were important also to rulers. Particularly from the Mongol period on, we find rulers and military figures seeking them out as personal counselors. The great conqueror Tamerlane (1370-1405) for instance, had a number of Sufi shaykhs with him on his campaign to pray for victory, and he credited some of his success to their intercession. Major Sufi shaykhs thus were operating in two worlds simultaneously, as members of the elite, managing wealth and political contacts, and at the same time, as guides on a spiritual path leading away from the concerns of this world.

Both living shaykhs and their tombs came to be credited with supernatural powers. Some of the wonders ascribed to them come quite naturally from the heightened powers of will and imagination resulting from long spiritual training. The ability to endure physical deprivation, to become unconscious of one's surroundings, or to profit from visions are all achievable through effort. The ability to read the thoughts of others, or to affect their mental state through concentration was also something highly respected, and it is not hard to believe that in the close and overheated atmosphere of the Sufi community
such feats could be performed by an intelligent, sensitive and charismatic person. Other powers were more fully supernatural, and for us, less easily believed. Accomplished shaykhs were thought to be able to foretell the future, to converse with the spirit of the Prophet and earlier masters, to cure or save others by taking on their illness, and indeed, to bring misfortune and death on those who sinned against them. All of these actions, even those with negative results, were considered signs of God’s favor and of exceptional holiness. The fact that spiritual powers were ascribed to Sufi masters, and to a lesser extent to members of the ulama meant that for an outside person, particularly a ruler, it was dangerous to punish religious figures. If any kind of failure or misfortune befell a ruler after acting against a shaykh, it was seen as a punishment for lack of respect.

**The Broader World of the Supernatural**

In my research on the politics surrounding religion and the religious classes, I go beyond the consideration of formal religious figures – Sufi shaykhs and ulama – to consider the wider realm of access to supernatural power and its manipulation. This includes not only the belief in a God and an afterlife, but faith in the power of dreams, and of intermediary spirits, which could be approached and conciliated through holy people or places. In the Middle Ages popular religion was not the province of the uneducated, rather it was believed in by almost all members of the population, including the educated elite. There has been considerable attention to the influence of popular beliefs on Sufi practice, but relatively little to the development of beliefs outside the Islamic sphere. It is I think a mistake to divide the politics of Central Asia into separate spheres of secular government, regular religious establishment and Sufi orders, among them covering the secular and religious concerns of the population, and each

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dictating a set of beliefs and practices. I suggest also that we see popular religion not as a combination of
pre-Islamic, early Islamic and Sufi beliefs, formed by a succession of religious figures, but as a realm of
belief developed by the population as a whole, and constantly evolving. Ulama, rulers, and Sufis certainly
contributed towards the formation of popular religion, but they added to and adapted it; they did not create
or control it.

If we are to understand the importance of access to the supernatural, whether through Sufism or
through popular religion, we will do well to understand the reasons for its appeal and its survival in
contemporary Central Asia. While the particular practices discussed below may be special to the Islamic
world and/or Central Asia, we should recognize that the underlying phenomenon is a universal one, and
one that we can find, though in different forms, in our own society. It seems natural for people to try to
experience something beyond the everyday world, to attach themselves to a spiritual world where one can
sense a connection with people not only present but past. People also need to find intermediaries for
forces which the individual can neither understand nor control. We must recognize that we are still
looking for magic bullets, and that many, if not most of us, still harbor superstitions.

When we look for real wood to knock on, rather than the plastic laminate nearest to hand, we are
probably not entirely joking. For more serious crises, most people in the modern world can turn to
trained experts, and the enormous strides of science and technology in recent years make such people
more effective than the tombs and healing springs available to people of an earlier age. We might
consider however, that the specialized experts of the current age – whether in law, in technology, in
psychiatry or in medicine – have a function similar to that of the Sufi shaykh or the shrine; they are serving
us as intermediaries to realms which we as individuals cannot enter, to forces which we personally cannot
control. The popularity of scientifically unproven remedies for otherwise incurable ills is a constantly
recurring theme in the press, and may serve to remind us that where institutionalized science fails, people
will continue to look beyond it.
With this in mind, let us look at popular religion in the eastern Islamic world during the Middle Ages. The ordinary person in medieval Central Asia was not without personal, independent access to the supernatural. Beyond the daily ritual prayers and personal prayer, there were two major avenues open to all: dreams and the visitation of holy places. Dreams, in the Islamic world as elsewhere, were considered as an avenue of communication with the unseen. While dreams were available to all, the ability to interpret them and to induce them remained the province of the spiritual elite. People of particular spiritual power appeared in dreams to others, either to communicate their wishes or to impart advice, and such appearances were considered a sign of special status. The Prophet appeared often, particularly to his descendants, the sayyids, whom he still looked after. Deceased Sufi masters also continued to appear in dreams, especially to mystics, and it was in fact possible, from the late Middle Ages, to become a Sufi by discipleship to a dead master, through an education conducted via dream and vision. For rulers, likewise, dreams were important political currency. We find rulers and dynasties using dreams as part of their legitimation; it was quite common to record the dreams of future kingship. The appearance of a ruler in dreams to his servitors, and the claim that such dreams presaged future events, was likewise recorded as a sign of supernatural power and favor.

The other major avenue to the supernatural, one that remains important in contemporary Central Asia, is the visitation of graves and other holy sites. These are undertaken for practical as well as spiritual reasons. Many graves were and are associated with miraculous powers, often quite specific: they grant fertility to women, or cure individual diseases in men or animals. Among the shrines are the tombs of important Sufi leaders, such as the shrine of Baha al-Din Naqshband, founder of the Naqshbandi order, near Bukhara. A number were embellished and maintained through waqf endowments, permitting them to serve as educational and charitable institutions as well as pilgrimage sites.

Many pilgrimage sites, both past and present, have no inherent connection to Islamic figures or beliefs. An examination of the nature of these places can give us some insight into the nature of popular beliefs, their continuity and their development. It is quite clear that some places have been considered holy for many centuries, indeed millennia, and were probably sanctified originally by local animist or Turco-Mongolian shamanist beliefs. We can take as an example the Chashma Ayub near Bukhara, originally a sacred spring and grove, which in Islamic times became associated with the prophet Job, and which remains an active shrine today. Other shrines go back to Zoroastrian beliefs, which may or may not be covered with an Islamic gloss. Quite a large number of holy places were not connected with any particular religion, past or present, but are powerful apparently because they represented the human concerns of society. We find for instance miracle-working graves identified as the Grave of the Maidens, or the Grave of the Infants, or the grave of those who died in a remembered famine: numerous graves refer to mythical invented figures, with names meaning “granter of wishes,” or “illuminated.”

It is particularly interesting to find among miracle-working graves numerous ones commemorating the important figures and events of local history – these might fulfill in some way the community function of public monuments, with the additional quality of miracle working. Numerous powerful graves are associated with the companions of the prophet Muhammad, with people who died during the Islamic conquest of Central Asia, or Muslim functionaries active in the region during the early years of Islam. Some of these figures are real, some are probably invented, some are attributed to real people who are actually buried elsewhere.

We also find famous graves associated with later events and people of importance. Graves of

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1 For a discussion of pre-Islamic survivals in the cult of shrines, see V.N. Basilov, Kul’i svatyykh v Islame, Moscow, 1970.

particularly well-known scholars are sometimes associated with power, and other graves commemorate significant events in the later history of the region: the 'Abbasid revolution of 750 AD, the Samanid dynasty of the 10th century, a particularly prosperous and brilliant period for Central Asia, and the Mongol invasion. Such historical interest accounts for a number of the most famous and continuously holy sites, such as that of Khwaja Abadi Dirun in Samarqand.

Sites can also acquire additional layers of association and power in the course of time. The most popular shrine of Samarqand, the Shah-i Zinda, is a good example. This was almost certainly a holy site before the advent of Islam, and was then appropriated in the early Islamic centuries as a site for a mosque and the tomb of a cousin of the Prophet, Qutham b. Abbas, who was thought to be still alive, and thus known as the Living King, or Shah-i Zinda. When the family of the conqueror Tamerlane constructed family mausolea on the site, it took on added meaning, with a myth involving the testing and authentication of the shrine by Tamerlane himself.

The commemoration and sanctification of history has continued to the present. In a nineteenth-century grave visitation manual for Samarqand we find both new shrines and old ones with additional legends attached to them. In contemporary Central Asia, likewise, one can observe the continuation of older patterns, both in the visitation of ancient shrines and in the creation of new ones, representing more recent history and modern communal concerns. There are shrines dedicated to officials of the pre-Russian khanates, and men who died resisting the Russians. What we see here is a continuous process of development, in the creation of new shrines representing the concerns and historical identity of the community.

The number of different aspects of human experience represented in shrine visitation has

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importance in the political sphere. Just as the sites considered holy and useful by the population represent a variety of forms of sanctification, so no one group or type of religious figures can claim to dominate or control popular belief. While the Sufis were and are particularly active within this sphere, the veneration of graves attached to important scholars, rulers and other historical actors, shows that they do not have a monopoly of influence in this field. In the same way, we find that in the Middle Ages, rulers, and to a lesser extent ulama, acted and claimed power within the sphere of the unseen. All dealt in dreams, visited and authenticated shrines.

**Politics within the Religious Sphere**

As I have shown, popular belief in Central Asia is too varied and diffuse to come under the control of any one group or organization. Within the organized religious classes, likewise, authority has remained diffuse and variable. It is important to recognize that while one can delineate different types of belief, “orthodox”, Sufi and popular, these were not provinces of different parts of the population. Many ulama were trained also in Sufism, and most Sufi shaykhs had an education in the Islamic sciences. All members of the population venerated shrines of different types.

In examining the politics of the religious classes and their relationship to the ruling elite, therefore, I have gone beyond the study of individual, well-known Sufi shaykhs and of individual orders, to try to trace political contests and influences both within and among orders and institutions. Instead of considering contests for power within orders as something purely internal, and thus of little importance for the understanding of broader politics, I have looked at these as central contests, played out to a large audience including many people outside the order. I suggest that the prestige won in these contests served to enhance power in society in general.

We know that in both Herat, now in Afghanistan, and Bukhara, in Uzbekistan, important Sufi masters held their assemblies in the main cathedral mosque of the city, a meeting place for people of all
parts of society. Contests and displays of exceptional spiritual prowess played out here were be witnessed by a large variety of people. We read, for instance, of one particularly gifted disciple, a brilliant preacher, who attracted huge crowds to hear him in the main mosque, alienating his master by quoting the poetry of a newly arrived Sufi. He then sought the help of a different Sufi master, but alienated his new patron by his arrogance – or perhaps his success? – in preaching, again before large crowds, which almost certainly included much of the religious and the secular elite of the city. Sufi disciples were given trials to break their pride and to disengage their souls. One new disciple was ordered to go barefoot through the bazaar hawking apples, much to the chagrin of his respectable merchant brothers. Another, particularly emotional and successful disciple, spent nights hitting his head against the floor of the mosque, as people went in and out to look at him. This man later became one the most respected Naqshbandi shaykhs of Herat.  

The people of the city and region were thus witnesses to feats of asceticism and contests for power. Many of the ulama had been the teachers of members of Sufi orders. The city population was probably very aware of internal politics within Sufi orders, and knew who rivaled whom, and which were the most promising disciples. The elite and general population provided the necessary audience before which dramas were enacted, and the fruits of successful competition were not only position within the order, but also favor from outside people: respect and attention from the ruling class, gifts and endowments from both the elite of government and the privately wealthy. Both outside followers and the general public were part of Sufi politics.

Just as political rivalries existed within Sufi orders, many alliances flourished between members of different orders. When we consider politics within the religious sphere, we should not think of each Sufi order as a separate and cohesive organization, determining all the alliances and actions of its members. In some places, at least, shaykhs of different orders routinely visited each other and attended

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each other's assemblies, bringing their disciples along. Here the common quest for spiritual blessing
clearly overrode any competition among orders or feeling of group particularity. While there are some
signs of competition between prestigious shaykhs in Herat in the early 15th century, these seem to be
largely a matter of personal status, and perhaps competition for the allegiance of students, rather than an
expression of exclusive loyalty to one order.

This situation, however, was not universal. By the sixteenth century, in what are now Uzbekistan
and Tajikistan, the Naqshbandiyya, under a particularly strong leader, Khwaja Ahrar, had begun to act
more competitively in relation to other Sufi orders, and this may have contributed to its rise to
preeminence. Even at this time however, conflict often arose for personal reasons, and shaykhs did not
necessarily take sides along doctrinal lines. Thus, while the issue of silent or vocal dhikr was considered
an important one for the Naqshbandiyya, it did not necessarily determine the alliances formed.9

Orders were indeed a strong focus for loyalty, but they did not preclude personal conflict, and the
conflict within an order could involve people outside. Standing within an order had to be achieved and
maintained through the demonstration of spiritual gifts and the ability to attract people, both disciples, lay
supporters from the elite, and often ulama and shaykhs from other orders, whose respect is recorded in
hagiographies, and was clearly an important part of prestige. The power of a shaykh might certainly be
enhanced by his belonging to an important order, but power remained personal. At times Sufi orders in
Central Asia had strong leadership, at others they did not. We see among the Sufi orders a constant
political activity bringing with it change and development over time. What a Sufi order was, how its
members interacted with Sufis of other orders, or with the state depended on the circumstances of the
times and the personalities involved.

9 Jo-Ann Gross, "Authority and Miraculous Behavior: Reflections on Kar_m t Stories of Khw_ja
Survival and Contemporary Relevance of Popular Religion

It is probably the very lack of a fixed internal structure or hierarchy that has facilitated the survival of Sufi orders and popular religion in Central Asia. These are phenomena difficult to define or control. It has been remarked that tribes without centralized leadership and organized succession – sometimes called “jellyfish tribes” – are particularly hard to control, and states dealing with tribes have often formalized and consolidated tribal rule. Similarly in dealing with religion, both the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union found it useful to create formal hierarchical religious structures called Spiritual Directorates for the Muslim population, identifying one person as authoritative for each of the major Islamic regions.

For Sufi orders however this tactic was not practicable, in part because of the decentralized and changing nature of orders, and in part also because both the Russians and the Soviets strongly disliked and suspected Sufi shaykhs. They were considered to represent the worst aspects of Islamic society, as repositories of fanaticism and superstition. The rebellions and resistance movements led by Naqshbandis shaykhs in both the Caucasus and Central Asia in the nineteenth century confirmed to the negative feelings of the Russians.

Despite the Russian distaste for popular religion and Sufi practice in Central Asia, a number of Russian and Soviet policies have contributed to their survival. First of all, both the imperial and the Soviet administrations were hesitant to attempt a full overhaul of Central Asian society. In the early period of Russian rule, the policy was to rule at the local level through indigenous leaders, and not to attack the Islamic religion directly, in the hope that it would wither naturally. In the later period the government intervened somewhat more actively, but still Central Asians were considered among the “inorodtsy” – that is people who were too foreign to be ruled directly as citizens, and who should continue to live under their own laws and customs, as far as was practicable.

The Soviet regime was more strongly anti-Islamic, and closed most mosques and madrasas, leaving only a small number of official mosques and teaching centers through which to publicize and
reproduce officially sanctioned Islamic beliefs. However, fear of provoking backlash or disorder held the Soviet authorities back from attempting to transform Central Asian society as completely as Russian or other more western peoples of the Soviet Union. It was thus possible for numbers of mosques to continue unofficially, and numerous shrines remained active. At the end of the Soviet period, under Brezhnev, the retention of lower-level local leadership and practices was tolerated in return for political and economic acquiescence.10

Another aspect of Russian and Soviet rule which fostered the continuance of popular religion was the failure to provide acceptable alternatives, especially outside of the cities. The quality of Soviet health care was certainly higher than what had preceded it, but was still far from satisfactory, and in remote districts, even the most rudimentary care was hard to find. Thus the hope offered by shrines reputed to help with infertility or to cure disease remained attractive. Furthermore, the festivals and ritual offered up by Soviet culture could not provide full satisfaction either for religious or for communal leanings. The novels and short stories of the Kazakh author Chingiz Aitmatov provide vivid testimony to the continued need for popular religious practices.

In some ways Soviet culture actually served to promote local beliefs. First of all, the espousal of many of the traits of romantic nationalism, with the emphasis on the culture of the masses, rather than the elite, could serve to justify the continuance of popular practice, despite the strictures of the press. The Soviet leadership furthermore made political and cultural history a central concern in politics, giving strong symbolic community meaning to Russian historical figures and monuments. The monuments erected by the Soviets almost achieved the level of shrines – the tomb of Lenin, the eternal flame, and the monuments to the soldiers who perished in World War II, parallel in some ways the types of shrines active in Central Asia. National republics were encouraged to follow the Russian example with the caveat that

they should avoid glorifying figures of military stature, and those who had opposed Russian rule. The restoration of important monuments was encouraged, as were statues of approved historical figures. The great scholars of the past were particularly favored, a policy that fit well into local patterns of prestige.

It should not surprise us, therefore, that shrines, both Sufi and otherwise, continued active during the Soviet period. Some of these were managed by people coming out of families of Sufi background, and some presumably by men active as Sufis, though we know little about the actual functioning of Sufi orders under Soviet rule or later. We do know of the continuation of some Sufi families and such practices as the *dhikr* recitation.

Sufi activities and shrine visitation could be seen in various ways: as a form of opposition to the Soviet regime, as a relatively apolitical attempt to preserve religion and culture under new conditions, or as a practice which simply added a spiritual and local communal dimension to life. It seems likely that all three of these were motivations for different people.

With the advent of perestroika and the end of the Soviet Union, the revival and rebuilding of local shrines was a speedy and natural reaction. On liberation, the Central Asian republics set out to show their independence from the Soviet past and to write their history to suit their own needs. What had been forbidden or disapproved now became particularly favored. Earlier Soviet propaganda against Sufis and shrines thus added to their attraction, making their promotion a symbol of liberation. Just as the political figures most criticized by the Soviets, from Tamerlane to Khojaev, have been put in the center of the new pantheon, so the history of Sufism and the rebuilding of local shrines, Sufi and otherwise, have become matters of central interest to the new intelligentsia and the wider public. \(^{14}\)

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\(^{14}\) The restoration of the shrine of Baha al-Din Naqshband near Bukhara and the conference held there are examples, as are the recent works on Naqshbandi and other Sufi shaykhs by the young Uzbek scholars Bakhriyar Babdjanov and Ashirbek Muminov.
Conclusion

An understanding of the religious traditions of Central Asia is important not because they are unchanged from the Middle Ages to the present day, but because they have evolved in a way that allows them to survive and adapt to new conditions. This has happened in part because authority has been so diffuse. If we look at pre-Soviet Central Asia, we cannot say either that the state controlled the religious establishment, or that the religious classes controlled the state. By the same token, no one set of people dominated more than a portion of the religious life and supernatural beliefs of the people. Neither ulama nor Sufi orders formed stable hierarchies, and the variety of different shrines continuing to develop through the medieval and modern period show us that popular belief and practice have always existed and evolved independent of religious authority of any kind. There has been no one institution or person with whom the Russians or Soviets could negotiate, whom they could control or destroy, and the same holds true for the current government.

On the other hand, while lack of structure and uniformity make the religious life of Central Asia difficult for the government to control, it may also make it hard for any one religious leader to organize. It is useful to keep in mind when we hear of the revival of religious practice in Central Asia that religion is not a single phenomenon, but a diverse set of beliefs and practices, some very tenuously connected to the religious doctrines of Islam, and some not connected at all.