

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# “And I Believe in Signs”: Soviet Secularity and Islamic Tradition in Kyrgyzstan

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## Abstract

In Central Asia, the Soviet state had destroyed most Islamic institutions by the late 1930s, which gradually alienated millions of Soviet Muslims from the basics of Islamic theology and key Islamic practices of virtue cultivation, including the five daily prayers (*namaz*), Islamic ethics of dressing (like covering certain parts of the body), and certain lifestyle prescriptions (such as the avoidance of alcohol, gambling, and premarital sex). As a result, mainstream Islam in Central Asia came to revolve around the main Islamic life-cycle rites (i.e., male circumcision, the marriage ceremony, and funeral prayer) and occasional practices of uttering blessings, reciting short Qur’anic verses for the souls of the deceased, and visiting shrines, among others. Although more than thirty years have passed since the fall of the USSR, this non-observant form of Islam remains widespread in the region. Inquiring into the conceptual and affective aspects of Soviet forced secularization in Central Asia, I make two interrelated interventions into secularism studies and the anthropology of Islam. First, I theorize Soviet secularism through attending to the modern state’s aspiration to transcend and transform the particularities of lived traditions, which reveals significant overlaps between communist and liberal modes of statecraft and subject formation. Second, reflecting on a non-observant form of Islam in contemporary Kyrgyzstan, I ask: what remains of a tradition of virtue ethics when its modes of abstract reasoning and virtue cultivation have all but vanished?

**Keywords:** secularism; tradition; Islam; virtue ethics; religious doubt; communism; liberalism; Soviet Union; Central Asia

[Zachariah] prayed: “O my Sustainer! Appoint a sign for me!”  
———Qur’an (3: 41)<sup>1</sup>

Since the 1981 publication of Alasdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, the concept of tradition has been a major analytical site for thinking about

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<sup>1</sup>Muhammad Asad’s translation.

virtue ethics. Challenging Kantian and emotivist theories of morality, MacIntyre argued for the importance of understanding virtues as always embedded in communally established narratives and practices of the good life. Transmitted from generation to generation, such narratives and practices articulate the moral *telos* of a community and cultivate the subject to exercise necessary virtues, and as such, they constitute a tradition. A crucial aspect of MacIntyre's intervention is that he does not contrast tradition with reason, conflict, or change. A vital tradition, he argues, unfolds through arguments about how to attain, preserve, and transmit its fundamental goods, which necessarily makes it susceptible to transformations. Beyond contributing to moral philosophy, MacIntyre's thesis gained a foothold in anthropology, largely through the scholarship of Talal Asad. In a seminal essay, "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam," Asad famously argued that Islam should be conceptualized as a tradition.<sup>2</sup> Since then, the concept of tradition has been central to Asad's work. Avoiding the pitfalls of Geertz's concepts of culture and religion, it opened space for thinking about Islam—and human life generally—through historically specific entanglements of power, language, embodiment, authority, and time.<sup>3</sup>

Notably, for both MacIntyre and Asad, the concept of tradition creates a standpoint from which to think critically about the secular liberal state—its normative categories (e.g., culture, religion, law, morality, freedom) and its impersonal, anonymous publics that make sustaining community-based projects of virtuous life increasingly difficult. In fact, the scholarly interest in tradition, and in virtue ethics more generally (see also Arendt 1961; Foucault 1978; Asad 1993; Lambek 2000), anticipated what can be called critical secularism studies—new approaches to secularism that have complicated both the classical secularization theory and the ideological tenets of the secular liberal state. Asad's own *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* became a foundational text for this burgeoning field.

As a result of Asad's interventions, the nexus of tradition and secularism has profoundly impacted anthropological approaches to Islam. Focusing on the Middle East, South Asia, and Europe, several scholars have compellingly examined how the

<sup>2</sup>Challenging essentialist and nominalist approaches to Islam, which were prevalent in the 1980s, Asad argued that Islam is neither an unchanging social structure nor an empty signifier but rather a historically evolving tradition that consists of discourses, practices, and institutions that draw on the founding Islamic texts to articulate conceptions of the virtuous Muslim life for a present and a future. As such, Islam is always mediated by power relations (see the following note) and therefore embodies "continuities of conflict" (MacIntyre 1984: 222). For a thoughtful discussion of Asad's intervention, see Moumtaz (2015).

<sup>3</sup>According to Asad, Geertz's notion of culture as a text misses the interplay between symbol, power, and the body. Namely, it does not account for how symbols become authoritative—that is, how they get entangled with the body as a site of cultivatable potentialities (as opposed to a bearer of symbolic meanings). Hence Asad's emphasis on power, which he understands not simply as *coercive force*, but as *capability*, which is to say, the capability of a discourse to win one over (as opposed to forcing one into submission) and the capability of persons to be receptive to that discourse and fashion their lives accordingly (see Asad 1993). As such, this notion of power emphasizes the materiality and historicity of the human body (its senses and their susceptibility to discipline), the mediums of communication (sound, gesture, written word, etc.), and things. Precisely because the concept of tradition accommodates this understanding of power, it has played such a significant role in Asad's scholarship. Foregrounding reason and argument, time and authority, as well as embodiment and discipline, the idea of tradition highlights the historicity and complexity of human life that Geertz's semiotic concept of culture (and thus of religion) flattens out. For other critiques of the culture concept, see, for example, Abu-Lughod (1991); and Gupta and Ferguson (1997).

Islamic tradition—that is, historically-evolving forms of Islamic reasoning and virtue cultivation, which include theological deliberation, legal practice, didactic moral narratives, the five daily prayers, veiling, and so on—transforms and survives within the political logic and affective structures of the modern secular state (e.g., Agrama 2012; Fadil 2013; Fernando 2014; Hirschkind 2006; Jouili 2015; Lemons 2019; Mahmood 2005; Moumtaz 2021; Quadri 2021). Given the analytical clarity, ethnographic subtlety, and political urgency of this literature, the question of the relationship between tradition and secular modernity continues to be a major concern within the anthropology of Islam.

The present essay is about non-observant Muslims in (post-)Soviet Kyrgyzstan,<sup>4</sup> and it aims to think about both secularism and tradition from the perspective of Soviet history. Unlike Western European states and most of their postcolonies, the USSR espoused atheism as part of its state ideology and aspired to suppress the religious traditions of its people. In Central Asia, the Soviet state had destroyed most Islamic institutions by the late 1930s, thereby profoundly transforming local forms of life. While some ulama (Islamic scholars), mosques, and medreses were eventually allowed to operate (Tasar 2017) and Sufi practices remained influential in certain areas (Sartori 2019), millions of Soviet Muslims became alienated from the basics of Islamic theology and key Islamic practices of virtue cultivation, including the five daily prayers (*namaz*), Islamic ethics of dressing (like covering certain parts of the body), and certain lifestyle prescriptions (such as the avoidance of alcohol, gambling, and premarital sex) (Khalid 2007). As a result, mainstream Islam in Central Asia came to revolve around the main Islamic life-cycle rites (i.e., male circumcision, the marriage ceremony, and funeral prayer) and occasional practices of uttering blessings, reciting short Quranic verses for the souls of the deceased, and visiting shrines, among others.<sup>5</sup> Although more than thirty years have passed since the collapse of the USSR, this non-observant, “minimal” (Privratsky 2001) form of Islam remains widespread in Central Asia. The living legacy of Soviet secularization has proven to be tenacious.

Trying to understand this legacy, I make two interrelated interventions into secularism studies and the anthropology of Islam. First, departing from the existing studies of Soviet secularism (Luehrmann 2011; McBrien 2017; Ngo and

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<sup>4</sup>I use “non-observant” as a shorthand to refer to Muslims who are not committed to the daily Islamic ritual obligations and other Islamic techniques of virtue cultivation. As I imply below, most Central Asians falling under this category partake in other devotional practices, including Islamic life-cycle rites and shrine visitations. A widespread local equivalent of “non-observant” is the Russian adjective *nepraktikuiushii* (non-practicing). In Kyrgyz, people often differentiate between observant and non-observant Muslims through the category *namazqan*, which can be translated as “person committed to *namaz*.”

<sup>5</sup>Anthropologists who visited the region in the late 1990s have noted that people often expressed their alienation from core Islamic practices through self-proclaimed senses of a loss of knowledge and ignorance regarding religious matters (e.g., Louw 2007). There is an assumption within Central Asian studies that this alienation from Islamic observance pertained largely to Russified Muslims, who dwelled mostly in urbanized areas. Having travelled extensively in Kyrgyzstan and North-East Uzbekistan, I reckon that the marginalization of Islamic observance in Central Asia cut across the city/countryside divide. The fact that pietistic aspects of Islam (see the following note) remained more salient in some areas than in others could be related to how the locations of Muslim learning formed during Soviet era. The Fergana valley, for example, became a bastion of Muslim learning in the 1920s due to the Soviet state’s limited control over the region (see Khalid 2015: 196–97), which might explain why it has been regarded as one of the more “religious” areas of Central Asia.

Quijada 2015; Wanner 2012), I argue that the Soviet state was secular because it exercised a modern form of statecraft that utilizes universalized notions of religion and the self to transcend and transform the particularities of lived traditions. My main argument could be summarized as follows: by suppressing the Islamic tradition of virtue ethics, the Soviet state inadvertently gave rise to the idea that private belief in God is a self-sufficient disposition—that is, a disposition more authentic than, and independent from, the ritualistic (or prescriptive) aspects of a religious tradition. Given that this understanding of belief had originally emerged with the advent of secularism in Western Europe, my argument uncovers hitherto unexamined affinities between liberal and Soviet instantiations of secular modernity.

During my fieldwork in Kyrgyzstan, the concept of self-sufficient belief became evident in how my non-observant Muslim interlocutors responded to the post-Soviet Islamic revival, a rise in Islamic piety movements that Central Asia has been witnessing since the dissolution of the USSR. Unlike its neighbors, Kyrgyzstan did not ban most of such movements, which gradually turned the country into an epicenter of Islamic revivalism in the post-Soviet sphere. Today, the Islamic revival in Kyrgyzstan is driven by the transnational missionary movement Tablighi Jamaat, the Gülen movement, a Naqshbandi Sufi center, Salafi websites, and numerous students traveling to the Middle East and South Asia for religious education. Stressing the importance of the five daily prayers and other Islamic practices of virtue cultivation, the piety movements have been redefining what it means to be Muslim in Kyrgyzstan today.

Working with non-observant Muslims, I endeavored to understand how they were grappling with the changing religious landscape of their country. Attending to my fieldwork interlocutors' vocabularies and dispositions, I realized that their affective estrangement from the pietistic dimensions of Islam was braided with the idea that private belief in God does not necessarily require a ritualistic discipline and concomitant lifestyle prescriptions.<sup>6</sup> While most of them held firmly to their identity as Muslim, the sensibilities that this understanding of belief articulated predisposed many of them to perceive revivalist forms of Islam with a dose of visceral skepticism. Provoking visceral reactions and their rationalizations, the post-Soviet Islamic revival, I found, acts as a sort of contrasting background that throws the affective and conceptual contours of Soviet secularity into relief.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup>I use "pietistic" as a heuristic to describe dimensions or forms of Islam that focus on cultivating principal Islamic virtues such as *khushu'*, *taqwa*, *ihsan*, and others. For a different, more abstract, notion of piety used to analyze Central Asian Islam, see Tasar (2021). Following Devin DeWeese, Tasar advocates for expanding the concept of religion to focus on practices such as parent-child conversations about God, wearing amulets, and venerating the deceased as aspects of Soviet Muslim piety. Understood as such, "religion" and Muslim piety, as Tasar rightly observes, permeated the everyday lives of Soviet Muslims. A disadvantage of this approach is that it flattens out differences between, say, wearing amulets in hope of recovering from an illness (Tasar 2021: 304–5) and inducing tears during the *salat* (*namaz*) prayer (Mahmood 2005: 129–30), venerating a deceased out of fear of their anger (Tasar 2021: 305–7) and practicing what al-Ghazali called the remembrance of death (*dhikr al-mawt*) to free the self from worldly desires (Pandolfo 2007: 345). My purpose is *not* to suggest that the practices analyzed by Tasar are unrelated to Muslim piety but to heuristically highlight the key performative ends of Islamic modes of ethical discipline.

<sup>7</sup>This dynamic is not a fixed pattern but a *tendency*, the scope and intensity of which varies across Central Asia (see note 5) and it depends on the specificities of people's life trajectories. That Islamic piety movements have been successful in Kyrgyzstan means that many formerly non-observant Muslims have embraced more ritualistic forms of Islam. Discussing such personal transformations is beyond the scope of this article.

My exploration of non-observant Muslims' sensibilities also required me to think beyond the dominant representations of Islam as a tradition. Specifically, I had to ask: What remains of a tradition of virtue ethics when its modes of abstract reasoning and virtue cultivation have all but vanished? In other words, can we think of Islam as a tradition beyond its theological discourses and practices of ethical discipline?

Incidentally, the question of how to define the Islam of non-observant Muslims has been salient in English-language literature on Central Asia since the early 1990s, when Western scholars were finally able to travel to the region. Startled by the laxity of local Muslims regarding matters of Islamic observance, some scholars suggested that the Soviet state eliminated much of Islam's "religious" content (Shahrani 1994), turning it into a marker of ethno-national identity (Akiner 1996; Khalid 2007). Later, others departed from the religion versus culture duality implied in this thesis, offering alternative conceptual frameworks. None of these frameworks, it should be noted, foregrounds Asad's idea of Islam as a tradition (e.g., Abashin 2014; Louw 2007; McBrien 2017; Montgomery 2016; Privratsky 2001; Rasanayagam 2011; Sartori 2019). The fact that the concept of tradition has not appealed to scholars of Central Asia is worth pondering. In my opinion, this is partly due to the assumption that the concept is unhelpful for understanding Islam in places where normative theological discourses are severely marginalized.<sup>8</sup> As such, this assumption posits tradition as a linguistic space for theological debates, including debates over the ins and outs of Islamic observance. Moving beyond this common misreading of Asad's work (see Asad 2015; and McBrien 2023), I reflect on how tradition can unfold through practices that are not always geared towards the cultivation of piety and that some post-Soviet Muslims may perceive as cultural rather than religious. Having survived Soviet forced secularization, such practices constitute a space of loyalty to the Islamic tradition that operates outside the tradition's principal forms of embodiment and language. I figurately call this space "the shadow of tradition."<sup>9</sup>

Each of these lines of inquiry is shaped by two years of fieldwork in Kyrgyzstan and over one hundred interviews with Kyrgyzstani Muslims. In terms of its narrative, however, this essay foregrounds a story of one individual—Aziza, a Muslim woman belonging to the first post-Soviet generation.<sup>10</sup> Like many people of her age, Aziza inherited secular sensibilities and a Soviet form of Islam from her parents.<sup>11</sup> What makes her story unique is that she, a non-observant Muslim, happened to work as a translator for a revivalist Islamic website. Aziza translated

<sup>8</sup>This assumption is evident in Rasanayagam (2011). Recently, Liu (2017) and McBrien (2023) have discussed the relevance of Asad's scholarship to the study of post-Soviet Islam.

<sup>9</sup>The estrangement of Soviet non-Muslim populations from religious observance is also well-documented. See, for example, Shternshis (2006) for Judaism, Quijada (2020) for Buddhism and Shamanism, and Wanner (2022) for Christianity. Notably, Quijada (2020) and Wanner (2022) also analyze (post-)Soviet religiosities beyond the religion-as-ethno-national-identity thesis. The concept of tradition, I argue, could serve as a valuable alternative to their analytical frameworks.

<sup>10</sup>Aziza is a pseudonym, while Asel, an interlocutor I introduce later, is a real name. Both interlocutors have read the article and decided themselves whether to disclose their identities.

<sup>11</sup>Scholars have noted that people born after the collapse of the USSR are more receptive to pietistic forms of Islam than the last Soviet generation (e.g., McBrien 2017: 60–78). This paper also illustrates this tendency. However, besides showing generational discontinuities in relating to the present, it provides an example of how Soviet concepts and sensibilities were transmitted from the last Soviet to the first post-Soviet generation.

theological articles from Turkish, the language she learned at university, into Russian. Additionally, she was responsible for running the website's official Facebook page, which required her to call its subscribers to become Islamically observant. Given Aziza's extended and intimate engagement with Islamic pietistic discourses, her story reveals in detail how Soviet secularity can mediate a Muslim's relationship with the Islamic tradition.<sup>12</sup> Aziza's ability to articulate complex feelings through utterance and body language shows how her alienation from and skepticism towards pietistic forms of Muslim life coexist with an inherited loyalty to Islam. In Aziza's case, this interplay of skepticism and loyalty manifests through an uneasy aspiration to become Islamically observant, an aspiration marked by doubt and a sense of failure.

### An Unlikely Proselytizer: Introducing Aziza

I met Aziza in December 2017, thanks to a common friend who, aware of my research interest in Islam, recommended that I speak with her. As someone who grew up in neighboring Uzbekistan, I invited Aziza, as I did many other interlocutors, to talk about Islam through discussing our shared (post-)Soviet past—childhood, family, and university years—and rapidly evolving present. "I'd be glad to meet up, discuss, and debate these issues with you!" Aziza texted me in what seemed an enthusiastic tone.

From then on, we would meet in various coffeeshops of Bishkek once every few weeks, until July 2019, the final month of my fieldwork in Kyrgyzstan. From the very beginning, Aziza was keen on talking about her work for the Islamic website, which quickly became the major topic of our conversations.<sup>13</sup> She would eagerly share with me both challenging and gratifying aspects of her job, reflecting on religious dispositions she inherited as part of her upbringing and ethical struggles she happened to experience as a translator of Islamic theological texts. As I listened carefully, I made sure to welcome her questions about my experiences growing up as a post-Soviet Muslim. Thus, our conversations would often turn into moments of collaborative remembering and reflection, an approach that was emotionally charged, but helpful in moving beyond the formality of in-depth interviews.

During our first meeting, we talked about our parents and their religious practices. Aziza told me that she grew up in a family of non-observant Muslims, suggesting that it was her father's religiosity that impacted her the most:

In my childhood, father used to tell me: 'Daughter, there are various religions, but all of them are from one God. There is Allah, and religions are the different ways in which people relate to Him. This is for the sake of convenience: people speak different languages, have different ways of life, and God sent His

<sup>12</sup>By foregrounding Aziza's story, I think of epistemes and forms of life—social structures, if you will—through attending to the vagaries of a single life. My purpose is not to reproduce the dualities of structure versus agency or tradition versus the everyday (see Fadil and Fernando 2015); rather, I approach a single life as a particular striving through which historically specific sensibilities and concepts are refracted, as it were, in unique, often unpredictable ways. Put differently, Aziza's story reveals both the major dispositions and categories of Soviet secularity and a particular way in which they can figure in a person's life.

<sup>13</sup>Aziza spoke with me in Russian, resorting to Kyrgyz only when a meaning could not be adequately communicated otherwise. All conversations presented in this article were audio recorded with Aziza's explicit permission.

revelations accordingly.’ He would explain it to me this way. And I grew up with such an understanding—that all people have one God, and that all religions, in essence, also constitute a whole, that they are about one and the same thing.

A touch of a smile appeared on Aziza’s face when she spoke about her parents. “They call themselves Muslim,” she noted, “but they are moderate; I mean, they don’t perform *namaz* and neither do they fast.”

Educators in their sixties, Aziza’s parents have long lived in Bishkek. Her father is a university professor, and her mother works at an orphanage. Aziza’s father belongs to the late-Soviet, Russified generation of urban intelligentsia, whereas her mother grew up in a village, in the least Russian-speaking region of Kyrgyzstan.

“My papa is somewhat neutral in his attitudes toward religion,” Aziza said. “He doesn’t go to the mosque; he says that the most important thing is to pray at home.”

“And how does he pray?” I wondered.

“On the balcony! He wakes in the morning and goes to the balcony to supplicate. And sometimes at night he also goes to the balcony and supplicates.”

“Does he recite from the Qur’an?”

“No, his prayers come from his heart. He is more responsive to the impulses of his soul than to some externally imposed standards, if I may say so.... I’m not saying that what’s written in the Qur’an are just externally imposed standards, because I believe in the truth of the Qur’an. It is just the understanding of my father.... He says that it is better to do what the heart wants. And his heart wants to pray this way.”

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Like her parents, Aziza grew up with little knowledge of Islamic theology and no commitment to the daily ritual obligations. Working for the Islamic website, however, she gradually departed from her father’s understanding of religion: she had come to believe that the Qur’anic revelation was the only truth to follow and had no qualms about condemning some of her parents’ religious practices.

Speaking of Qur’anic recitation, for instance, Aziza once expressed indignation that many people, including her parents, recite the Qur’an even during celebrations of non-Islamic holidays, such as the New Year. “This is such an absurdity!” she said, “according to Islam, it’s not allowed to celebrate the New Year at all. It is considered *shirk* [idolatry]. But I remember from childhood: we would celebrate the New Year, set up a New Year tree, and then recite the Qur’an.”

“So, you recite the Qur’an at home?” I followed up.

“Although papa doesn’t perform *namaz*,” Aziza said, “every Friday he recites the Qur’an at home.”

Like most Kyrgyzstani Muslims, Aziza’s father recites short Qur’anic verses to comfort the spirits of their deceased relatives, a devotional practice that is essential to popular Islam in Central Asia. Along with the major Islamic life-cycle rituals, it withstood decades of Soviet anti-religious policies. Note that Aziza criticized not the practice itself, but what she perceived as its misplaced enactments. Not only do Kyrgyzstani Muslims, according to her, come close to idolatry by celebrating non-Islamic holidays, they also recite Qur’anic verses during such celebrations, which testifies to their profound ignorance in matters of religion.

Although Aziza did not confront her parents regarding such issues, they were wary of her increasing reservations about their practices. The change seemed sudden to them: growing up as a non-observant Muslim, Aziza did not display any passion regarding religious matters. Having joined the Islamic website, though, she began speaking more about Islam and grew critical of her parents' way of being Muslim.

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The website belonged to a young Kyrgyz businessman. Influenced by Turkish pietistic discourses, he wanted to spread a positive image of Islam in Kyrgyzstan. As an act of charity, he established a website that would draw on rich Hanafi resources available in Turkish to educate non-observant Muslims about Islam.

Aziza met the man when she came to her job interview. Remembering that day, she noted that she was wearing summer shorts.

"I thought I'd go there as a translator," she explained. "I didn't know I'd be responsible for the entire website! And go there I did!" Aziza could not help but burst into laughter before completing the sentence. "My boss still remembers this. 'That day you came in shorts!' he sometimes says to tease me."

Despite his teasing, the man was not disturbed by Aziza's laxity in matters of Islamic dress code. What is more curious, before employing her, he had employed four observant Muslims one after the other in this position—no one's performance satisfied him. Aziza, though, seemed to him like a perfect employee. "You will be able to speak from the perspective of a non-believer," he told her, implying that her being a non-observant Muslim was an asset for his project.

What might "the perspective of a non-believer" signify in a country where most people identify as Muslim? Aziza understood what her boss meant, and, recounting the case to me, she thought no clarifications were necessary. Implicit in these exchanges was a conception of Soviet secular legacy—inherited categories and forms of religiosity that predispose many non-observant Muslims to react viscerally against pietistic manifestations of Islam. Experience taught Aziza's boss that an observant Muslim would have a hard time reaching the hearts of the website's target audience.

Thus, having no self-conscious commitment to the Islamic tradition, Aziza embarked on exhorting *others* to become Islamically pious. Yet calling people to Islam affected her own religiosity, too: Aziza gradually came to aspire to become Islamically observant. But hers is not a story of a born-again Muslim. Becoming Islamically observant was more difficult than acquiring knowledge about Islamic doctrines and ritual obligations. The fact that Aziza could speak from "the perspective of a non-believer" meant that her relationship with the Islam she was expected to preach would be all but easy. More specifically, she had to grapple with theological postulates and forms of embodiment that were in tension with the categories and sensibilities of Soviet secularity that articulated her inherited form of Islam.

In the following section, I inquire into the formation of these categories and sensibilities in Soviet Central Asia. I begin by discussing the onset of Soviet power, focusing on key transformations in language and everyday life that signaled the rise of secularism in Central Asia. I then resume retelling Aziza's story. Our conversations gradually reveal how Soviet secularity mediates Aziza's understanding of belief, ritual, and the body, and how it conditions her relationship with the Islamic tradition.

## Secularizing Central Asia: From Lenin to Kant

In the early 2000s, Talal Asad, William Connolly, and Charles Taylor challenged liberal theories of secularism, facilitating a radical rethinking of both the classical secularization theory and political liberalism. Specifically, they argued that rather than a separation of church and state creating a non-violent space for religious freedom and rational discourse, secularism is profoundly invested in defining religion and cultivating sensibilities. By extension, secularity came to be understood not as the ideologically neutral condition of a disenchanted, truly reasonable self, but as a cultural formation authorized by secularism and enforced by the nation-state order.

Several anthropologists have found this critique of secularism helpful for thinking about the Soviet state. Departing from the focus on liberalism characterizing this pioneering literature, they proposed to consider the USSR as a non-liberal manifestation of secular power (Luehrmann 2011; McBrien 2017; Ngo and Quijada 2015; Wanner 2012).<sup>14</sup>

Sonja Luehrmann's *Secularism Soviet Style: Teaching Atheism and Religion in a Volga Republic* (2011) is a seminal study of this kind. Engaging with Taylor's *A Secular Age*, she contends that the Bolsheviks tried to disseminate what Taylor calls "exclusive humanism," an onto-epistemic standpoint that emerged in the process of European secularization and remains at the heart of liberal secularisms. While Luehrmann focuses on Soviet didactic policies for spreading exclusive humanism, the state's commitment to atheism at times took on violent forms, Stalin's Great Terror being the most infamous example. In Central Asia, the Great Terror resulted in mass persecutions of religious leaders, demolitions of mosques and sharia courts, and forced unveilings of women. Thus, the trajectory of exclusive humanism in the USSR was qualitatively different from the one in Western Europe: unlike Western Europeans, who developed secular sensibilities over centuries, Central Asians experienced Soviet secularization not as a natural "coming of age" (Taylor 2007) but as a catastrophic rupture, a forced displacement from the domain of tradition into a different, unknown time. I will return to this point and its implications at the end of this essay.

Unlike Luehrmann, Wanner (2012), Ngo and Quijada (2015), and McBrien (2017) drew inspiration from Asad's *Formations of the Secular*. Their distinct engagements with this work share the general claim that besides disseminating atheist propaganda, the Soviet state was invested in defining religion and regulating the religious lives of its citizens, which reveals that the regulatory principle of secular power was key to Soviet governance.<sup>15</sup> I would like to develop this assertion as follows. The secularism of the Soviet state lay at the core of its non-liberal ideology: to eliminate "religion," the state inevitably had to embark on the inherently secular project of *transcending* and *translating* distinct forms of life through Eurocentric, universalized conceptions of religion. My argument is not that the Soviet state simply redrew the boundaries and changed the definitions of a pre-existing phenomenon (religion). Rather, what emerged was a new kind of statecraft and a new language through which people had come to relate to the world.

<sup>14</sup>Ngo and Quijada extend their argument to all communist states (2015). For other studies of non-liberal secularisms beyond the USSR, see Bubandt and van Beek (2011); and Dean and van der Veer (2019).

<sup>15</sup>For an encyclopedic account of Soviet government's regulation of Islam, see Ro'i (2000).

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To better understand this aspect of secular power, we need to reflect on how Vladimir Lenin imagined the state and “religion.” Counterintuitive though it might sound, despite its commitment to atheism, the USSR did not abandon the language of religious freedom. Aziza’s parents might have been taught that religion was an opiate for the masses, but the Soviet constitution also guaranteed them “freedom of conscience,” which included the right to adhere to a religion without proselytizing it. In fact, Lenin always insisted that religion must be a private matter (*chastnoe delo*) (e.g., 1968a: 143; 1968b: 423).

Interestingly, however, Lenin drew on Engels to twist the liberal language of freedom by differentiating between religion in relation to the state and religion in relation to the Party.<sup>16</sup> Specifically, he maintained that the state must not discriminate against people based on their religious beliefs—that is, religion must be a private matter in relation to the state. But he also stressed that religion could not be a private matter for the members of the Party (e.g., Lenin 1976: 73–74). This arrangement stemmed from Lenin’s belief that Russia lagged behind Western Europe in terms of progressive secularization. “The task of fighting religion,” he wrote, “is the historical task of the revolutionary bourgeoisie” (1968b: 423). Implying that the Russian bourgeoisie were loyal to the Church, Lenin argued that the task of fighting religion had to fall “almost completely on the shoulders of the working class” (Ibid.: 424).

But what does the idea that “religion” can be a “private matter” reveal about Lenin’s conception of politics? I think that it reflects a biopolitical imaginary—particular conceptions of state, people, time, and public—that had emerged in Europe and was now migrating to the lands of the former Russian Empire.

Consider this: when Lenin speaks about “society” (*obshchestvo*) or “the masses” (*massy*) he invokes a novel conception of human collective existence: a space inclusive of people belonging to a variety of traditions, but all of whom are seen as subjects *equally* manageable through standardized methods of governance, and all of whom are represented as members of an agentive community, the history of which unfolds in the homogenous time of secular modernity.<sup>17</sup> As both Asad (2003: 181–201) and Taylor (2007: 90–211) have shown, the ascent of this imaginary was profoundly intertwined with the rise of the modern secular state. Secularism, therefore, can be understood as a power of transcendence: unlike the empires of the past, it aspires to transcend lived particularities by translating them through ostensibly universal—and thus ideologically neutral—categories (e.g., religion, ethnicity, culture, history). In reality, however, the secular state exercises its sovereign power to transform various forms of life, for the ability to enforce *mistranslation* is key to modern governance. In this context, Lenin’s injunction to make “religion” a “private matter” does not change the social location of “religion” but transforms its grammar, essentially altering its very fabric.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup>That is, the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party, which after the revolution became the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

<sup>17</sup>See Lenin’s famous “The State and Revolution” in Lenin (1976). Note, though, that a biopolitical imagining and centralization of Russia began taking place even before the October Revolution, in the wake of World War I. See Hirsch (2005).

<sup>18</sup>Speaking of the separation of church and state in Europe, Asad notes that it “not only included the development of different moral and political disciplines, such as those that Foucault identified as

In February 1918, the Soviet government activated secular power by releasing “The Decree on Separation of Church from State and School from Church,” which lumped together distinct forms of life under the abstract concept of religion, confirming Hussein Agrama’s apt observation that “secular power renders the specificities of religious traditions irrelevant” (2012: 185). In effect, the decree declared state institutions as independent from the Russian Orthodox Church, and, by extension, from any other religious tradition. According to the decree, Soviet peoples’ religious affiliations would have no bearing on their rights as Soviet citizens and would not be mentioned on their official documents. Organizations identified as religious would not be granted any legal status, being considered private communities (*chastnye obshchestva*) with no rights to private property. A few weeks later, “The State Commission on Education Decree on Secular School” specified that “religious education” at state and private schools, as well as “religious rituals” (*religioznye obriady*) at such schools, would be prohibited. In short, the Soviet state laid the foundation for creating a standardized social space where people could live without their ethical-legal traditions.

In Central Asia, creating such a space was challenging due to the initial lack of resources and popular resistance to the early attempts to curtail Islamic institutions. As a result, during the first years of Soviet rule, pre-existing *waqf* properties (endowments) continued to function, albeit under close state control, and new ones were established; Sharia courts existed alongside Soviet courts; and Islamic schools were widespread (Keller 2001: 31–106). Then, by the late 1920s, the Bolsheviks began demolishing the Islamic infrastructure and cracking down on what they termed *dukhovenstvo* (clergy) to secure direct access to lay Muslims. It is important to highlight here that some Central Asian ulama (Islamic scholars) tried to convince the government to let the ulama mediate the relationship between Muslims and the state. Unsurprisingly, Soviet officials perceived such demands not as attempts to preserve Islamic virtues among Muslims, but as the clergy’s aspiration to retain their class privileges (Arapov 2010: 96–124; Keller 2001: 126–27). This was a major mistranslation of Islam that the Soviet state decisively enforced.<sup>19</sup> As such, it enabled the state to directly control and mediate public life in Central Asia. The public spaces that this transcendence created allowed for the possibility of a social life unmoored from Islamic forms of embodiment and

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governmentality. It included a redefinition of the essence of ‘religion’ as well as of ‘national politics’” (2003: 190). Here and elsewhere, Asad draws on Wittgenstein’s notion of grammar to argue that the privatization of religion in Europe was not a social relocation of a universal phenomenon. Instead, it was a transformation in how the concept of religion was used and the types of sensibilities and practices it could organize and facilitate.

<sup>19</sup>In February 1918, in a letter addressed to “Russian socialists,” Central Asian ulama argued for the importance of making Turkestan an autonomous Islamic state. Such a state could realize socialist ideals, they asserted, because the core principles of European socialism originated from Islam. These rhetorical gymnastics aside, the letter is remarkable because it cautioned the Bolsheviks against mistranslating Islam: “First of all, Islam is not a religion, as you, Europeans, imagine it. In contrast to all other religions, Islam is an elaborated socio-political system established once and for all and elevated to the level of religious experience and belief” (Khaidarov 2004: 175). My point is not that this is an accurate representation of Islam, but that the ulama were aware that translating Islam through Eurocentric concepts of religion would reduce it to a matter of personal belief or superstition, while representing the ulama as a parasitic economic class. “Mullahs and the ulama,” they noted later, “are nothing less than Muslim intelligentsia: jurists, teachers, professors, defenders of the principles of Islam—the irreplaceable leaders of Muslims...” (Ibid.: 176).

language, which profoundly changed people's relationship with the Islamic tradition.

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Consider a Kyrgyz primary school student in the 1970s. The daughter of a KGB officer, Asel lived in a town near Lake Issyk-Kol. Neither of Asel's parents spoke with her about Islam—the public spaces they inhabited had no need for the Islamic ethics of the past, and, for the family of a Soviet official, Islam was a risky topic to indulge in. But her grandfather Soodoke came of age in a very different world. Born in the 1890s, he gained Islamic literacy either at a small Jadid school or at the feet of an occasional *moldo* (Islamically literate person),<sup>20</sup> and despite the state-imposed atheism he remained a pious Muslim.

Asel was close to her grandfather; she liked to listen to his engrossing fables and observe how every so often he recited the Qur'an and performed *namaz* in private.

One day she approached him and asked: "Grandfather, is there no God? At school, teachers say that there is no God."

"No, sweetheart," the elder responded kindly, "God does exist. And he sees *absolutely* everything!"

Given the anti-religious policies of the time, Soodoke did not teach Asel about Islam—he might have feared that the child would inadvertently disclose this to strangers. But the idea of the omniscient God that he once sowed in her mind would stay with her for decades to come. The elder passed away in the 1980s, but even today memories of his fables, prayers, and statements about God bring a smile to Asel's lips.

Asel's story is not unique. In Soviet Central Asia, it was common for several generations to live under one roof. Since the state strived to purify its public spaces from Islam, older people, many of whom were Islamically devout, had to perform Islamic rituals mainly within the privacy of their homes and neighborhood communities.<sup>21</sup> Their children and grandchildren were exposed to scientific atheism at schools and universities, but at home they witnessed elders perform *namaz*, participate in life-cycle ceremonies, utter casual blessings, and teach them short Qur'anic verses. Several other interlocutors told me that atheist propaganda and childhood curiosity would move them to have conversations about God with their parents and grandparents. A man in his sixties, for instance, remembered that he had once told his mother that there was no God. "I'll cut your tongue, if I hear this again," she replied.<sup>22</sup>

My point is that while practicing and transmitting pietistic forms of devotion was increasingly difficult, the elders exposed younger people to ideas about God, since they were prone to counter the Soviet creed "there is no God." Consequently, although most Muslims did not embrace atheism, their belief in God was increasingly disentangled from Islamic pietistic discourses and dispositions. Inhabiting the public spaces of the Soviet state, people were unable to perform,

<sup>20</sup>For Jadidism in Kyrgyzstan, see Kubatova (2012).

<sup>21</sup>Abashin rightly observes that the public/private division in Soviet Central Asia was not rigid. He acknowledges, however, that performing Islamic rituals in spaces which were not, strictly speaking, "private" was more prevalent in the countryside and during the perestroika years (2014). See also Tasar (2021).

<sup>22</sup>For similar conversations about God recorded by Soviet scholars, see Tasar (2021).

and many were simply uninterested in, practices of virtue cultivation such as the *namaz* prayer, *zikr* (*dhikr*, remembrance of God), extended recitations of the Qur'an, and the like.

Notably, the fading of pietistic practices and vocabularies among lay Muslims was accompanied by the increasing dominance of the Soviet concept of national culture. Despite its aspiration toward social homogenization, the Soviet state fostered the development of ethno-national identities, especially among its non-Russian subjects. Carried out with the support of professional ethnographers, Soviet nationalities policy allowed some elements of pre-Soviet lifeworlds to thrive as folklorized symbols representing coherent "national cultures." Highlighting this aspect of Soviet governance, scholars have argued that Soviet Muslims' relation to Islam was increasingly defined by the idea of cultural heritage and ethno-national belonging, to the extent that some Muslims regarded their Islamic practices as cultural (i.e., non-religious).<sup>23</sup> My argument is that this transformation was not the only or the primary achievement of Soviet secularism. I reckon that it was accompanied and facilitated by the ascent of the generic notion of belief in God—a notion detached from the Islamic tradition of ethical discipline—as a key aspect of popular piety.

Almost three decades ago, Mikhail Epstein (1995), a scholar of Russian literature, made a similar argument. The Soviet state's struggle against "religious beliefs," he asserted, constructed a generic conception of belief in God:

Soviet atheism produced a type of a believer who is impossible to identify, in denominational terms: he is simply a believer, "*veruiushchii*." In Western countries, this term is rarely used because it is devoid of specific meaning. In what does this person believe? In the Soviet Union, by contrast, all believers were classified identically in contrast to the dominant and officially approved nonbelievers. This is why faith in general, which was persecuted and oppressed from all sides, acquired its own peculiar meaning: spirituality as such, a faith in God (ibid.: 363).

Epstein's assessment of Soviet religiosity is an exaggeration, not least because for Soviet Muslims, as I mentioned above, certain Islamic practices remained crucial. Yet his argument illustrates well the *kinds* of mass transformations that the Soviet state had the potential to bring about. As such, it reveals a major *tendency* of Soviet secularism: the backgrounding of traditional disciplines and the crystallization of abstract conceptions of private religious belief and the believing self. In Central Asia, the Islamic practices that remained widespread were losing their capacity to cultivate and maintain Islamic reverential dispositions (e.g., *iman*, *taqwa*, *khushu'*, *ihsan*), which made it possible for some local Muslims to perceive them as "cultural" rather than "religious." It will become clear below that the concept of tradition, unlike that of religion, can help us appreciate how Islam exercises its authority even through practices that Muslims may experience as cultural. Here, though, my argument boils down to the following: the Soviet state did not only disseminate Marxist understandings of religion and, contrary to the widespread argument, it did not merely entangle Islam with the idea of ethnic belonging. Soviet secularism, I reckon,

<sup>23</sup>See, for example, Lemerrier-Quellejey (1984: 21–22); Akiner (1996: 14–16); Ro'i (2000: 682–712); Khalid (2007: 84–115); Pelkmans (2007); McBrien and Pelkmans (2008); and McBrien (2017).

nearly eliminated the Islamic tradition of virtue ethics among lay Muslims, thereby foregrounding the abstract notion of private belief in God as a self-sufficient and most genuine aspect of human religiosity.

It is important to emphasize here that such primacy and autonomy of private belief had initially developed as a result of secularization in Western Europe, becoming an important element of liberal secularism as a political doctrine (Asad 1993; 2003; Taylor 2007). This conceptual convergence, I maintain, indicates how the very moral architecture of the secular transcends the ideological boundaries between liberalism and communism, religious liberty and state-imposed atheism.

In *A Secular Age*, Taylor illustrates how the growing emphasis on private belief at the expense of ritual in the West—the tendency he calls the “excarnation” of religion—went hand in hand with the rise of disembodied Kantian ethics. Forty years earlier, reflecting on the dominance of Kantian ethics in the twentieth century, MacIntyre noted, “For many who have never heard of philosophy, let alone of Kant, morality is roughly what Kant said it was” (1998: 122). His argument is as perceptive as it is poignant, especially if one thinks of an empire as different from his native Scotland as was the USSR. Soviet Central Asians grew up reading Lenin and Marx, but the forced secularization predisposed them to think about religion not only in Marxist terms but also through the lens of Kantian ethics. Put more directly: the marginalization of the Islamic tradition of virtue ethics gradually inclined people to perceive the subject’s relationship with the Divine through a sense of disembodied morality. An interlocutor of mine, a journalist in his thirties, brought this point home most strikingly. “When an acquaintance starts performing the five daily prayers,” he said, “I immediately think that he has perhaps committed some grave wrongdoings in his life!”

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The idea that *namaz* is primarily a way of washing away sins is widespread in Kyrgyzstan. A popular stereotype about born-again Muslims is that before becoming pious, many of them espoused socially irresponsible behaviors—drinking, defrauding, taking bribes, behaving badly with relatives, and the like (Louw 2013). Accordingly, non-observant Muslims tend to claim that the dominant, non-ritualistic religiosity may have a higher moral ground. It is better to be a regular but decent and honest believer, so the reasoning goes, instead of sinning throughout life and then washing away sins and pretending to be a saint.

Observant Muslims, on the other hand, draw on the Islamic tradition of virtue ethics, stressing that it is only through regular performance of the obligatory rituals that one’s heart can truly open up to God. This difference in views is encapsulated in a “slap” meme that circulated on Facebook among my interlocutors (see figure 1).

“Performing *namaz* is not necessary; the purity of the heart is sufficient,” says the slapped man. The slapping man responds: “Shut up! If your heart was pure, we wouldn’t bother calling on you to perform *namaz*!”

Since the early 2000s, popular perceptions of the Islamic revival in Kyrgyzstan have also been impacted by the post-9/11 fears of radical Islam. In the mid-2010s, reports of hundreds of Kyrgyz nationals traveling to join ISIS augmented popular calls to expand state control over Islamic movements and educational facilities. Many of my interlocutors described the transforming religious landscape of Kyrgyzstan as chaotic and jeopardizing the public order. That said, popular condemnations of the Islamic revival normally stem not from atheistic denials of Islam but from a particular



Figure 1. An observant Muslim man slaps another Muslim man for saying that performing namaz is not necessary. Image circulated on Facebook, 2019.

conception of true religiosity (see also Louw 2013). “Religion is a weapon,” noted a woman in her fifties, “but God,” she continued, “God is an entirely different phenomenon.”

While post-9/11 Islamophobia mediates negative attitudes to the Islamic revival in Kyrgyzstan, underlying this discursive layer is a characteristically secular sense that one’s relationship with God does not necessarily need to be encumbered by a tradition of theological discourse and ritualistic discipline—a deeply-seated disposition that the Bolsheviks inadvertently cultivated. Positing pietistic manifestations of Islam as excessive, this Kantian, “faceless” (Spivak 1993: 217) sensibility generates visceral skepticism (Conolly 1999) against Islamic forms of life that the piety movements aim to popularize.

In the sections that follow, I will show how this affective-conceptual legacy of Soviet history conditioned Aziza’s aspiration to become Islamically observant. Embodying the secular concept of belief and lacking a cultivated pietistic sensorium, Aziza viewed the question of Islamic observance as either a matter of complete intellectual assent to theological discourses, which she approached with skeptical caution, or a result of an unambiguous Divine intervention.

### Longing for a Tradition

My first meeting with Aziza continued for hours.

“Breakfast, lunch, dinner. We start our meals with remembrance of Allah,” she said, explaining to me the Islam of her family. “You know,” she continued, “this is in

our blood, we don't even give a thought to it. When I sit at the table in the morning, I say *bismillah* [in the name of God]—everything starts with *bismillah*, *omin* [amen]. I eat and then, rushing out, I say automatically 'thanks to God for this food. *Omin.*' That's it. All members of our family do this automatically."

A sense of belonging to Islam—like uttering *bismillah* before meals—was also in her blood. Before starting university, Aziza unequivocally identified as Muslim. "I didn't know much about religion then," she once noted, "but for some reason I used to say I was Muslim." She became more conscious of her religious tradition by the time she was finishing high school, when her brother married a woman from an observant household. "When *jengeshka* [sister-in-law] joined our family," Aziza said, "she was the most educated among us in matters of religion. I love her so much. I feel at times she came to our house like a ray of light. Like happiness. Allah sent her to us."

Aziza also spoke highly of her *taineshka* (sister-in-law's mother): "There's so much warmth in her. She speaks very right things. She has even bought for herself the cloth that people use to wrap the body of a deceased. And she has bought for herself a spot at the cemetery." The elderly woman was always patient and kind with Aziza. "And you think," Aziza confided, "'such a cool person, she is an exemplary Muslim!' And you want to learn [about Islam]."

Despite this incipient curiosity about Islam, Aziza did not at that time aspire to become an observant Muslim. "Before starting this job," she noted, "I didn't think I'd want to observe the Islamic prayers in the foreseeable future. I thought that I might start performing *namaz* in my thirties or that I might end up not performing at all. I didn't know where I'd go...."

Things became fuzzier at university. Taking then an undergraduate course in critical thinking, Aziza learned that religions could act as instruments for keeping people in check. "We studied a lot about radicalization," she told me. "We were taught that religion was a means for manipulating the masses." The more Aziza delved into these topics the more convincing this Marxist conception of religion was becoming. "And you sit and think, and you realize that there is something to it," she said.

Her doubts were exacerbated when a friend began challenging her to justify her attachment to Islam. "How can you prove that the Qur'an hasn't been altered?" she would provoke Aziza. Being unable to answer or deflect such questions, Aziza gradually decided to "put religion aside"—that is, to stay clear of issues pertaining to Islamic theology and ethics. Echoing the sensibility of her father, she said that disregarding theological frameworks and simply believing in "the [universal] good, the Godly essence" felt right and enjoyable. Living solely according to what seemed like the inborn sense of good and bad soon became her comfort zone. What could reverse this ethical orientation so drastically?

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"And I believe in signs," Aziza said slowly, in a soft, daydreamy manner.

Her gaze would wander over the surface of a coffee shop table before she raised her eyes and spoke.

Baggy T-shirts and a boyish haircut; she always greeted me with a characteristic mispronunciation of my name—hello, Uusman!

"And I used to pray," Aziza continued, "asking God, 'lead me along the right path, don't let me go astray, if my rejection of religion is wrong.' So eventually I came to

work for the website, do you understand? I was led to the website.” She paused for a moment. “My Lord [*moi gospod*] brought me there.”

It appears that despite trying to distance herself from questions of theology, Aziza could not help but wonder if Islam was *the truth* after all. Addressing her concerns to God, she hoped to receive a Divine sign, an unambiguous message from God that would settle her worries and bring the right answer to light.

After Aziza asked God to give her a sign for the first time, a classmate gifted her a paper bookmark with Qur’anic verses printed on it. “Isn’t it a sign?” she thought then. But questions and doubts persisted until the end of her university years, when another classmate told her that an Islamic website was looking for a translator. The unexpected job opportunity promised a decent income, but before anything else it was “definitely a sign from God.” Majoring in International Relations, Aziza had been imagining a different career path. “I could’ve ended up in some international organization,” she speculated. “I wouldn’t have had time to learn about religion, right? Normally, people working in such organizations are free-thinking and liberal—they are far from religion. Perhaps I would’ve become one of them. But the Lord showed me the way, and I simply walked along it.... That’s why I take this job offer to be so extraordinary and meaningful.”

Yet working for the Islamic website turned out to be a thorny path toward Islamic piety. As I will show, time and again Aziza would be taken aback by certain theological postulates and Islamic ritual obligations. Although loyalty towards Islam sedimented under her skin through her father’s Qur’anic recitations and the habitual *bismillah* before meals, Aziza equally embodied post-Soviet secularity—a constellation of concepts and bodily habits that inflected her relationship with the Islamic tradition.

### Shadow of the Prophet: Craving Evidence in a Dreamlike Life

“It seems to me sometimes,” Aziza said, “that it’s all like a dream. Don’t you have such a feeling—that it’s a dream?”

“Our meeting, you mean?” I mumbled, at a loss.

“No, generally—this life.”

“There’s an Islamic metaphor,” I found my way. “It says that life is like a dream or a rain—it passes.”

“And there’s a term...,” Aziza tried to recall something. “Damn, I should’ve written about it. I haven’t studied this topic yet. But the idea is that a person is held responsible [by God] only when he starts believing both with his mind and his heart. And I believe only with my heart at the moment—I can’t say I believe with my mind completely. There’s a dissonance between my heart and my mind.”

“How’s that?”

“Dissonance. You see, the heart doesn’t need any evidence. But the mind is such a rational jerk! It requires evidence and proof.”

Aziza had been working for the website for six months by the time of this conversation. The more she learned about Islam the more questions accumulated in her mind. Quite often, some aspects of theological discourse seemed non-rational, and she wanted to find “material proofs” that they were, in fact, reasonable. At times, this was easy. For instance, a quick Google search on the take of contemporary

medicine on male circumcision led Aziza to conclude that there was no clash between Islam and medicine. Other questions were harder to resolve, and in fact some Islamic postulates seemed unbelievable or even wrong.

“For example,” Aziza once told me, “there’s the argument that the Prophet Muhammad did not have a shadow. Look, this seems implausible, doesn’t it? It seems like it belongs to the genre of fantasy, right? Do you yourself believe in it? See, I’ve come across it recently. It turns out that it was a special sign of his chosenness—he didn’t have a shadow. I can’t believe it, because my mind is very materialistic. But my boss believes it.”

Aziza spoke highly of her boss, praising his intelligence and piety. Upon learning that she was unsettled by the question of the Prophet’s shadow, he encouraged her not to dwell on it. “He told me that this is because of the lack of knowledge and *iman* [faith], that I’m not ready yet,” Aziza said to explain his reaction.<sup>24</sup>

“I can’t accept,” she told me on another occasion, “that Islam permits men to marry four women.... What gnaws at me is that a man, according to Islam, can marry a second, third, fourth time without getting permission from his wives.... If the first wife is against [his second marriage], he still can marry.”

“Are you alluding to Chubak ajy?” I noted with a smile, referring to a controversy sparked by the now-late Chubak ajy Jalilov, Kyrgyzstan’s most influential post-Soviet preacher. Although polygyny is illegal in Kyrgyzstan, in 2017 Jalilov publicly declared having taken a second wife. Rumors circulated that his first wife was against this marriage.

“Yes, by the way!” Aziza laughed. “I was so angry. I was furious, thinking ‘no, this can’t be true, this is unfair.’ And I asked my boss about this. But he said: ‘Look, Aziza, no adequate woman would allow her husband to take a second wife. That’s why it’s permissible [to marry without wife’s approval]. The man must inform her about his intention, but he doesn’t need her approval. The man, however, must make sure that he treats all his wives justly—provides for them equally and gives them equal attention. If a man is capable of this, then he is allowed to do it.’”

“But is it humanly possible?” I asked.<sup>25</sup>

“That’s the point!” Aziza exclaimed. “Very few people are capable of this. This is a huge responsibility.” Having said that, she added: “I still can’t get my head around this—how can one marry a second time without his wife’s approval?”

What is remarkable here is that neither the argument about the Prophet’s shadow nor the question of polygyny was the original source of Aziza’s skepticism. Rather, these were among many manifestations of her overarching skeptical disposition toward Islam. “They [i.e., questions],” she said, “I don’t have them well articulated and ordered in my mind. I simply feel that there’s a lack [of conviction].” Aziza raised her hand and touched the top of her head. “The lamp here,” she said, looking at me, “it isn’t on yet.”

This lack of conviction, Aziza implied, was preventing her from becoming Islamically observant.

“How often do you think about this sense of unreadiness?” I asked.

<sup>24</sup>Many Islamic scholars do not take seriously reports about the Prophet not casting a shadow.

<sup>25</sup>Qur’an (4:2) grants men the right to polygyny on the condition that they do not fear being unfair towards their wives. My question alluded to Qur’an (4:128), which states that men are incapable of treating their multiple wives with equal fairness.

“Every day.... When the day is over, I feel I’ve missed something important; I feel I’ve left something undone. And when I take a ride in a *marshrutka* [a minibus] back home, I feel like ‘for nothing—I’ve lived the day for nothing.’”

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Still, Aziza’s struggles did not prevent her from successfully developing the online project she was in charge of. To the contrary, the website’s official Facebook page, which she began managing, gained thousands of subscribers. A major reason for such success was the fact that Aziza wrote there in her own voice, regularly posting visuals with catchy statements. Every so often one would come across images of sunsets, kids playing, cute animals, and families. Islamically unidentified images were abundant: at times, pictures of unveiled women, clean-shaved men, and even of Buddhist monks accompanied Islamic messages that Aziza aimed to communicate. General, theologically unmarked moral truisms were also a major aspect of the page’s discourse: “The true wealth is the richness of the soul”; “Loving hands are the best cradle”; “Deeds are more important than words.” In short, Aziza’s thoughts and observations, hopes and anxieties, merged with the more formal language of the theological articles that she translated and circulated on this Facebook page.

The followers were quick to notice Aziza’s warmth behind their screens. One random comment, for example, stated: “Facebook gave us another good person.” Under a post about the Prophet Muhammad’s daughter Fatima, a Russian woman wrote: “Whatever the truth might be. Whoever the saints in the heavens meant you to be. For me, it is you who are the most saintly, the most sensitive, the most just. Wishing you good health and happiness!” The audience felt Aziza’s presence behind the seemingly impersonal page.

Aziza, in turn, inadvertently weaved her religious ambivalence into the texture of her proselytizing discourse. In particular, she consistently translated and posted articles discussing the relationship between Islam and modern science. One of her first Facebook posts, titled “The Qur’an Condemns Blind Worship,” presented convergences between Qur’anic narratives and modern scientific discoveries. Multiple similar posts followed: “The Phenomenon of Iron in the Qur’an”; “The Qur’an and the Big Bang Theory”; “The Health Benefits of Namaz”; “The Five-Time Prayer is Healthy for the Spine”; “The Wonders of the Qur’an”; “The Magic of Numbers in the Qur’an”; and so on. Importantly, Aziza’s focus on resonances between science and Islam was not part of a defensive civilizational politics—an aspiration to get past post-colonial inferiority complexes by domesticating discourses of European Enlightenment. Rather, it stemmed from the aspiration to provide evidence—to herself and to others—of the truth of Islam. A comment of an elderly follower under one such post highlights this best: “We searched for the truth for a long time. Thanks to God, we are now on the right path.”

It was becoming clear to me that, lacking a visceral binding to the pietistic dimensions of Islam—to their discourses and materialities—Aziza saw commitment to the Islamic tradition as a matter of disembodied intellect. Under the conditions of Soviet secularity, when Islamic ethical discipline is not part of one’s affective history—is not a matter of habit, love, friendship, and loyalty—an

aspiration to embrace it gets inflected by the “ethics of belief” (Clifford 1999) and, in some cases, as will become clearer, requires Divine interventions.

Following the advice of her boss, Aziza would set aside texts which seemed disturbing. Deferring judgment, however, meant, for Aziza, deferring a commitment to being Islamically observant. “I definitely believe in God,” she confided to me, “but I don’t have a hundred percent conviction in the religion of Islam as such. That’s why, I think, I don’t perform *namaz*. If I was a hundred percent sure, I’d immediately learn everything and would start praying tomorrow.” Then she added: “But I feel like I’m in a dream. Since I don’t pray, my heart feels that something is lacking, and it seems that every day is wasted.”

### The Silent Frogs: Tasting Prayer during Ramadan

The sun was pouring through the windows of the popular coffeeshop “Shokoladnitsa.” It was July 2018, and more than three months had passed since we had last met. During this time, significant events had happened in Aziza’s life: she observed her first Ramadan and performed her first prayer.

“I fasted with *jengeshka*,” Aziza said enthusiastically, “and dad supported us in various ways.”

“Moral support?” I smiled.

“Yes, and my brother did so, too.”

“It’s good when you have people around,” I said, thinking how I had spent most of my Ramadan fasts alone.

“Yes,” Aziza affirmed. “Although when Ramadan was about to start, and I told my family that I wanted to fast, my father went: ‘maybe you shouldn’t!’ and ‘isn’t it harmful for health?’ and so on....”

“Also,” Aziza continued, “I started to perform *baghymdad namaz* [*salat al-fajr*, the morning prayer] during Ramadan.” Responding to a shadow of surprise on my face, she added, “I mean the *fajr namaz*. It was very cool! I liked it.”

“So, you learned how to perform?”

“I did! Two *rakat* [prayer cycles] of *sunna* [non-obligatory prayer] and two *rakat* of *fard* [obligatory prayer]. And it was from the heart.”

It turned out that Aziza began performing the morning prayer together with her sister-in-law, who was rather experienced in this matter: before her marriage and the subsequent pregnancy she used to pray five times a day. Initially, the women tried to pray together, but it was difficult to synchronize—Aziza’s pace was extremely slow.

“See, I don’t know Arabic,” she explained, “and I fear that I can mispronounce some of the words. After all, mispronunciation can change the meaning of a word. So, for this reason, after completing *fatiha* [Al-Fatiha, the first verse of the Qur’an] in Arabic, I’d recite it in Russian as well.”

“So, you would repeat it *sotto voce*?”

“Yes,” Aziza clarified, “after reciting *fatiha*, I’d recite its Russian translation. I mean ... When I recite *fatiha* in Arabic, my mind is busy making sure I don’t forget a word or don’t stumble, making sure I pronounce it correctly. But in Russian I recite from all my heart; I can imbue with sincerity every line. That’s why it took me so long to complete my prayers. And *jengeshka* laughed, having no clue what was wrong with me!”

Eventually, the women ended up praying separately.

“Also,” Aziza continued with excitement, “there was *Qadr Tün* [Laylat al-Qadr (Night of Power), the holiest night of the Islamic year. I commemorated it for the first time....”

According to the Islamic tradition, any night of the last ten days of Ramadan can be the Night of Power. Since no one knows in advance which night will be Laylat al-Qadr, some Muslims spend all of the last ten nights of Ramadan offering additional prayers. To simplify matters, many Muslims in Kyrgyzstan and elsewhere commemorate Laylat al-Qadr on the twenty-seventh night of Ramadan. On that night, mosques also offer nightlong collective prayers. Despite this convention, Aziza and her sister-in-law happened to spend two nights in worship.

“So, our people have commemorated *Qadr Tün*,” Aziza began explaining, “but the next night I felt that that night was the real *Qadr Tün*. I commemorated it. Do you know why I thought this way? See, one of the signs of *Qadr Tün* is that it is quiet—no noise can be heard. But the day our Muftiate announced *Qadr Tün*, I heard some noise. See, there’s a river behind our house with a few swamps. And the frogs there were croaking. ‘No,’ I thought, ‘this shouldn’t happen on *Qadr Tün*.’”

A few days earlier, Aziza learned from her sister-in-law that the Night of Power has a special feature: it is exceptionally tranquil, so that even the animals stay silent. Aziza was taken aback and struggled to take this seriously.

“I think it was Tuesday,” Aziza went on. “On Tuesday night we were cooking *sukhur* [the morning meal consumed before fasting], and the frogs—they were silent! Can you imagine this?! ‘This might be *Qadr Tün*, Aziza,’ *jengeshka* told me. And the sky was so clear. I went to pray. I was performing *namaz*, and when the day began dawning, after *azan* [the Islamic call to prayer] had sounded, the frogs began croaking. Can you believe this?!”

Upon hearing the frogs, Aziza rushed to inform her sister-in-law. Both were deeply impressed by what they happened to witness.

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This is how Aziza’s first observed Ramadan was approaching its end. Although she had warm memories from those days, one thing was bothering her strongly: after Ramadan was over, she could not wake up to perform the morning prayer anymore.

“If you think about it,” Aziza said, reflecting on her struggle to perform the prayer, “every day is a sign from Allah. We just take this for granted. But Allah manifests Himself in everything. You can see His love everywhere.”

“Have you witnessed any personal signs lately?” I asked her carefully.

“No, I have not,” she replied. “I feel like I’m still in need of a sign.... I mean,” she paused to make sure I did not misunderstand her, “I believe in Allah, I’m telling you.... My Lord, I feel Him inside.”

“How’s that?”

“I don’t know... what can I say...?” Aziza laughed awkwardly and, lowering her voice, added, “I love Him, it seems.”

At this moment our waitress came to check in. Having finished helping her remove the cups, I directed my gaze back at Aziza. She was covering her face with a facial tissue but I could see tears coming down her cheeks. After a second or two, Aziza looked straight into my eyes, whimpering quietly, her face red.

“If I received a sign,” she said a few seconds later, “I’d immediately veil and start praying five times a day, or something along these lines....” Aziza’s words were becoming less and less articulate, and she laughed again.

### The Unruly Body: Listening to the Heart

I met with Aziza again only in October. This time, she came with her preschooler nephew. They gifted me a self-help book titled *The Subtle Art of not Giving a Fuck* (*Tonkoe Iskustvo Pofigizma*). I was pleasantly intrigued, I must admit. Aziza looked serene.

Sometime after our July meeting, it became clear to Aziza that by the end of Ramadan she had been burnt out by the demands of her job. Once, while receiving her salary, Aziza burst into tears right in front of her boss. She confessed to him that she had been wasting time watching comedies instead of doing work. The very sight of the website, she told him, made her nauseous. The man suggested she take a week off.

After this breakdown, Aziza came to deal with her challenges more affirmatively. “You know,” she noted, “there are books on *fiqh* [Islamic law], sermons; I read them and understand what they say.... But my heart doesn’t accept [this information].” Yet a moment later, Aziza admitted that some Islamic norms, including the daily prayers, did, in fact, seem reasonable to her, but she still had questions and therefore did not feel ready to commit to the Islamic tradition. Speaking of *namaz*, for example, Aziza said she was at a loss as to why Muslims must perform all five prayers and only at certain times.

“Why can’t we pray only in the evening, or in the morning, or just whenever we are spiritually inclined to?” she asked rhetorically. “Why are all the movements in *namaz* so strictly ordered? I’m not criticizing them. It’s just about me—I don’t like these limitations. You are expected to do things a certain way, and if you do them differently, God will not accept your prayers.”

Having nothing to add, I kept listening.

“When you do *sajda* [prostration], your limbs and head should touch the ground a certain way, and if any of them doesn’t, it means you made a mistake and only Allah knows whether your prayer will be accepted. These kinds of things unsettle me a bit. Because when a person prays sincerely, he just can’t....” Aziza giggled and clarified, “When I pray, let’s say, I can totally forget about things such as the position of my legs, or what minor movements I’m doing, or on what level I am keeping my arms.”

Aziza decided to take her time. “Now I understand,” she said, “that I want to come to this [Islamic piety] not through these books, but....” she paused for a moment and then continued, “one day I’ll come to this. I mean, I want to have the right to choose—the fact that I work for the website shouldn’t pressure me to fulfil the prayers and the other Islamic obligations; I haven’t come to this with my heart.”

The heart wants what it wants, as a popular saying goes. While Aziza was equipped with detailed information about Islamic obligations, she was neither ready to submit herself to their authority nor was she able to deflect their arresting normativity through an alternative language. Instead, she looked for science in the Qur’an and longed for a Divine sign—a push from Elsewhere, an event that would settle all worries and extinguish the bewildering freedom of

choice.<sup>26</sup> Such an event would claim the doubting mind and tame the unruly body—it would demand from them utmost loyalty.

### In the Shadow of Tradition: Soviet Secularity and the Subtle Art of Reading Signs

In a famous essay, Louis Althusser highlights the importance of practice by paraphrasing Blaise Pascal: “Kneel down, move your lips in prayer, and you will believe” (1971: 168). A critic of state-centered ideological practices, Althusser refers to Pascal with a grain of sarcasm. But the idea that ritualistic discipline is indispensable for cultivating belief and piety is central to many religious traditions. Within the Islamic tradition, an Islamically cultivated, docile body is both a necessary asset for ordinary ethics and an epistemological foundation for abstract theological reasoning (Hirschkind 2006). But “the molding of the self into the ideals of the tradition,” as Nada Moumtaz reminds us, “is just an aspiration” (2015: 138) and therefore does not guarantee ethical perfection or unshakable conviction. Put differently, cultivating piety according to a tradition is inhabiting a form of life, which necessarily involves working through its challenges, including moments of ambivalence, doubt, and failure.

Aziza’s story illustrates a mode of belief and doubt unmoored from the Islamic tradition of virtue ethics, and indeed, from the very idea of belief and piety as virtues developable through a willing submission to an authoritative discourse and embodied practices it articulates. Pietistic Islam, in this case, is perceived as a theory about the world which should be first fully comprehended and only then followed. In such a context, secular viscerality and scarcity of theological discourses that could appeal to secular sensibilities risk making the aspiration to become Islamically observant a no-win game.

As I have contended throughout this paper, Aziza’s mode of belief and doubt is a product of secularism and secularization, two major and mutually constitutive facets of modern life.<sup>27</sup> Incidentally, the idea that secularization brought about new ways of experiencing doubt is also central to Taylor’s *A Secular Age*. The argument I am developing complicates and expands Taylor’s general thesis. Note that his basic assertion is that secular unbelief—what he calls “exclusive humanism”—is an inseparable part of modern perceptual habits and thus profoundly conditions how people embody religious beliefs and doubts. The immanent frame, as a *sensed context*, predisposes one to feel cross-pressured between immanence and transcendence, such that “naiveté is now unavailable to anyone, believer or unbeliever alike” (2007: 21). Thus, according to Taylor, a major predicament of secularity as “a condition of belief” is coming to terms with distinct perspectives on reality and living one’s creed with the ever-lingering vulnerability to be pushed in the opposite direction.

<sup>26</sup>The resonance between Aziza’s longing for Divine signs and the salience of the trope of Divine signs in the Qur’an (*ayat Allah*), to which this article’s epigraph alludes, is stimulating to think about.

<sup>27</sup>Doubt and failure are increasingly salient topics among anthropologists of religion (e.g., Beekers and Kloos 2018; Blanes and Oustinova-Stjepanovic 2015; Engelke 2005; Louw 2013; Pelkmans 2013; 2017; and Schielke 2009). Arguing that accounting for such experiences deepens our understanding of religion, most anthropologists do not emphasize the importance of situating them within historically specific formations of the self. Religious doubts and failures, like beliefs, are always embedded in particular forms of life, and so understanding their grammars can be an objective of anthropological inquiry.

The peculiarity of Soviet secularism is that it forced exclusive humanism on people through violent means. In Central Asia, this resulted not in a dominance of Taylor's unbelief as a sensible form of life but rather in the formation of a private, non-ritualistic religiosity. Even today, atheism in Central Asia is marginal, while an intimate connection with God is an expected default disposition. Through Aziza's struggle, we thus observe a different kind of secularity, one that does not force the subject to agonize over choosing between immanence and transcendence. For Aziza's self is not "buffered" (Taylor 2007), and her main question is not whether to believe in God, but *how* to believe.

Centered around this predicament, Aziza's story highlights an important question about secularity and doubt that Taylor does not consider. Namely, her attempts to become Islamically pious reveal what might be involved in the aspiration to enter a tradition of virtue ethics. "Someone lacking a tradition who would want to have one," wrote Ludwig Wittgenstein, "is like a man unhappily in love" (quoted in Asad 2015: 167). As Asad notes, Wittgenstein does not imply that entering a new tradition is impossible but highlights that it is less a matter of intellectual choice than a transformation in the very architecture of one's self. Entering a tradition is not learning a new "doctrine (rules), but a mode of being, not a thread one can pick up or drop whenever one feels like but a capacity for experiencing another in a way that can't be renounced" (Asad 2015: 168). As my conversations with Aziza show, for post-Soviet Muslims, becoming Islamically observant can be tantamount to entering a new tradition: it requires them not simply to assent to theological truth-claims but to grapple with their visceral reactions against certain forms of piety, cultivate particular bodily aptitudes, and tune the self to a new ethical language.

At the same time, Aziza's relationship with Islam demonstrates that tradition does not operate through clearly defined outside/inside boundaries. While she struggles to commit to the Islamic tradition, the way that she relates to it reflects as much her inherited loyalty to Islam as it does aspects of (post-)Soviet secularity. Note that although Islamic pietistic dispositions are not part of Aziza's sensorium, she still claims that Islam runs "in her blood." This, I suggest, demonstrates how the workings of the Islamic tradition can exceed the conventional interplay between abstract theological reasoning (e.g., Hirschkind 1995), educational and legal institutions (e.g., Messick 1993), struggles over orthodoxy (e.g., Asad 1986), techniques of virtue cultivation (e.g., Mahmood 2005), and modern forms of governance and mediation (e.g., Spadola 2013). Entangled with secular sensibilities and categories, and sometimes understood as culture rather than religion proper, tradition can continue to unfold by simply refusing to lose its grip on the body; tradition lets Aziza dwell, as it were, in its shadow.

I use the image of a shadow to bring into relief a space of loyalty to the Islamic tradition that is neither external to it nor internal to its thrust. Located beyond the tradition's principal forms of embodiment and language, it is both its extension and its living remains. In Aziza's case, the shadow of tradition had long existed as a latent potentiality, an unarticulated but deeply embodied responsiveness to calls of Islam that at some point began manifesting through her longing for Divine signs. Having eventually taken the narrative form of a struggle, it continues to attune Aziza to the possibility of a different life.

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