CHAPTER 4

Moral Education in Central Asia, 19th–21st Centuries: The Foundations for Sufi, Jadīd, Soviet, National, and Islamist Ethics

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The present article attempts to provide a framework for analyzing moral education on the territory of what is today the Republic of Uzbekistan, and what in Tsarist times was the government of Turkestan and the Khanates of Khiva and Bukhara. It highlights several types of ethics that were taught in Muslim schools and discussed among scholars and educators; these ethics are compared as to their religious and philosophical foundations and motivations.1 In the course of the last 150 years, the Central Asian region witnessed several important changes, in particular increased Russian influence from the late 1860s, the coming to power of the Bolsheviks, and the collapse of the Soviet Union. The writings I analyze here have much in common with those spread in neighboring areas, and so the patterns discussed in this overview can, to a certain extent, also be taken as indicative of the general development of moral teachings in Central Asia as a whole.

Education, and moral education as one of its important constituents, has hitherto mostly been considered over shorter time-periods, and usually from the perspective of identity building. Recent scholarship has provided insights into learned Muslim identities,2 such as what it means to be a Muslim

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Turkestani, a Soviet citizen, or an Uzbek. Such studies have mostly focused on socio-political circumstances. Additionally, in the past two decades several scholars have investigated the formation of “the moral self” in contemporary Central Asia, producing in-depth studies based on field research. These studies have put practices and individual experiences at their center, and highlight the various inner and outer aspects of moral education in or for a given community. Yet to this day there has not been a comparative study of moral teaching in the region, and none that looks at its long-term development.

The proposed comparison started with my observation that, in post-Soviet Uzbekistan, several types of ethical norms and values are propagated at the same time, and are thus in competition. These different ethics are propagated in “moral education” schoolbooks commissioned by the state, in sermons of Islamic “fundamentalist” groups and in texts used in the traditional Muslim schools. I argue that this competition has its roots in the struggles for the correct form of ethics that started with the attempt at a “moral reform” by the Central Asian Muslim educational reformers, the Jadīds, at the turn of the 20th century. In the subsequent Soviet period, the state-promoted ideal of a Soviet citizen ran parallel to what might be called the formation of a Soviet Muslim citizen, with either “traditionalist” or “fundamentalist” underpinnings. I aim at identifying continuities, similarities, and differences between these various kinds of moral education, and I highlight resemblances between schools of thought and ideologies that consider each other as rivals or worse. Some of the


