Manja Stephan  


In recent years, anthropological and ethnographic research on Muslim communities in Central Asia has significantly increased. Most of these studies have contributed to a more refined understanding how ‘Islam’ works among Central Asian Muslim communities, their daily practices, trajectories, perceptions and beliefs as well as their interaction with the larger society and in particular the government. Importantly, ethnographic research has challenged some of the prevailing paradigms concerning Islamic activism and radicalism in the region. While relevant research frequently focuses on Muslim communities in Uzbekistan and especially the Fergana Valley, Tajikistan’s Muslim communities in comparison attracted less academic attention. Therefore, the dissertation by Manja Stephan, a professor at the Institut für Asien- und Afrikawissenschaften at Berlin’s Humboldt University, is a highly welcomed expansion of our knowledge on Muslim communities in Tajikistan. Her *The Need for Moderation. Moral Education, Islam and Being Muslim in Tajikistan between Secularization and Religious Return* focuses on urban Muslim communities in Dushanbe and their changing perceptions of morality, ethics and religion amidst the post-socialist transformation in Tajikistan. The thesis is predominately based on interviews and to a lesser extent participant observation the author conducted during her fieldwork between 2004 and 2007.

Manja Stephan orders her material in eight chapters: After the introduction, a brief review of the state of research and a summary of her theoretical and methodological framework, Ms. Stephan introduces the particular local setting of her object of research, Muslim communities in post-socialist Dushanbe (chapter 2). She describes the dramatic social and economic disruption after 1991 and Dushanbe’s transformation from a Soviet capital symbolizing modernity to a more traditionalist and ethnically homogenous city during the civil war (1992–97). The political and economic crisis triggered a ‘crisis of morale’ and a return to religion among the urban population of Dushanbe. In this specific context, the author develops the central question of her thesis: How is moral education negotiated discursively and practically among Muslim communities in Tajikistan facing the post-socialist transformation. In the chapter three, Ms. Stephan explores the general concepts of Muslim morality (*odob*) and offers an analysis of the various competing concepts of morality and how
morality is negotiated within the community. In a dense narrative, the author ably describes the generational conflicts within Tajikistan’s lay religious communities and their struggle for authenticity and normativity. A younger generation of Tajiks increasingly challenges the prevalent practices and perceptions of Islam among their parents’ generation – and implicitly the social conservative and regulating function of religion.

The following forth chapter places the debate on morality and religious ethics in the wider context of official government policies promoting a national identity. Morality and (religious) education, in this context, mark a highly contested field in present day Tajikistan. While Muslim communities struggle to establish a system of religious practice and education, Tajikistan’s government restricts ‘grass-roots’ initiatives and largely excludes ‘Islam’ from any official narrative of how to imagine the Tajik nation. Unfortunately, the author’s contextualization and narrative in this part of her thesis is less convincing than in previous parts: her sample of respondents is relatively selective and therefore does not sufficiently reflect the inconsistencies and ambiguities of official politics regarding religion, national identity and projections of ethics and morals. Ms. Stephan’s analysis follows a linear argument that does not consider the particularities of Tajikistan’s post-civil war political economy (rather than the post-socialist one) carefully enough.

In the fifth chapter, the author frames educational practices and the transmission of knowledge within the family into the wider Islamic context. Various case studies in the context of local families offer differentiated insights into how morality and ethics are narrated and negotiated in different contexts. Religious textbooks, Stephan argues, play an important part in providing a normative guideline in this context. However, the author only cursory consults these textbooks and does not include them in her analysis. Perhaps, an inclusion of textbooks would have shed a light on the reciprocal relationship between the communities’ religious needs / expectations and a ‘normative’ scriptural projection by religious authorities.

Chapter six deals with private religious instruction with a specific focus on gender roles and norms. Ms. Stephan exemplifies the different societal expectations to women and men’s morality: While women’s morality is focused on shame and chastity, constructs of male morality concede (and implicitly sanction) the violation of norms and ethics as a ‘natural’ male trait. Eventually, the author concludes, that at times private religious education for youth can have relatively mundane intentions: the lack of alternative leisure time facilities as well as punishment and discipline. The following seventh chapter presents public schools in Tajikistan as social spaces in which official