THE INTERCONNECTION OF ISLAMIC HERITAGE AND ENLIGHTENMENT THOUGHT IN CENTRAL ASIA

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Abstract. This paper examines the intellectual relationship between the Islamic scholarly heritage of Central Asia and the Enlightenment thought that emerged in the region in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Challenging the widespread view that religion and Enlightenment stand in opposition, the study argues that the Central Asian Enlighteners (the Jadids) drew their central ideas from within the Islamic tradition itself: the high value placed on knowledge, the rational theology of the Maturidi school, the ethical teachings of Sufism, and the legacy of the region’s medieval scientific flourishing. The paper concludes that this synthesis of faith and reason offers a valuable conceptual model for contemporary Uzbekistan, where the principle of “enlightenment against ignorance” has become part of state policy.

Keywords: Central Asia, Islamic heritage, Enlightenment, Jadidism, Maturidi theology, reason and revelation, ijtihad, religious tolerance, New Uzbekistan.

Introduction. The relationship between religion and Enlightenment is one of the enduring questions of modern philosophy. In the European tradition, Immanuel Kant defined Enlightenment as humanity’s emergence from its self-incurred immaturity and summarized it in the motto “Sapere aude!” – “Have the courage to use your own understanding” [1]. This conception is often associated with the emancipation of reason from religious authority. The intellectual history of Central Asia, however, demonstrates a different pattern: here, the call to reason, education and social renewal was formulated largely in the language of Islam and was justified by reference to its own sources. Understanding this distinctive relationship is important

both for the history of philosophy and for the spiritual and educational policy of present-day Uzbekistan.

Historical and philosophical foundations. Central Asia possesses one of the richest intellectual traditions of the Islamic world. Between the ninth and the fifteenth centuries, thinkers such as al-Khwarizmi, al-Farabi, al-Biruni and Ibn Sina made outstanding contributions to mathematics, astronomy, medicine and philosophy. S. Frederick Starr has described this period as Central Asia's "lost Enlightenment", emphasizing that rational inquiry flourished within a predominantly Islamic cultural environment [2]. In theology, Abu Mansur al-Maturidi of Samarqand developed a doctrine in which human reason ('aql) is recognized as a legitimate source of knowledge alongside revelation, capable of grasping the existence of God and distinguishing good from evil [3]. The ethical teachings of the Naqshbandi order, founded in Bukhara, likewise stressed the unity of spiritual devotion and active engagement in worldly labor. These traditions formed a deep intellectual reservoir upon which later reformers could draw.

The Jadids: reform from within the tradition. The Jadid movement, inspired in part by Ismail Gasprinsky's "new method" (usul-i jadid) of teaching, emerged in Turkestan and Bukhara at the turn of the twentieth century. Its leading figures – Mahmudkhoja Behbudi, Munawwar Qari Abdurashidkhanov, Abdulla Avloni and Abdurauf Fitrat – were themselves educated in the Islamic sciences. As Adeeb Khalid has shown, the Jadids framed their program of cultural reform in Islamic terms, presenting the acquisition of modern knowledge as a religious duty and the decline of Muslim society as a consequence of the neglect of that duty [4].

Abdurauf Fitrat's "Munozara" (The Debate, 1909) is a particularly telling example. Structured as a dialogue between a Bukharan teacher (mudarris) and a European visitor, the work criticizes the stagnation of the madrasa curriculum and argues that true Islam encourages the study of the natural sciences, geography and

history. In “Rahbari najot” (The Guide to Salvation, 1915), Fitrat further develops the view that religious faith and rational activity are complementary rather than contradictory [5]. Abdulla Avloni, in his textbook “Turkiy guliston yoxud axloq” (The Turkic Rose Garden, or Ethics, 1913), integrated Islamic ethical concepts with modern pedagogical ideas, declaring that upbringing is for the nation “a matter of life or death, salvation or destruction, happiness or disaster” [6].

Three key features characterize this synthesis. First, the Jadids opposed blind imitation (taqlid) and called for the renewal of independent reasoning (ijtihad), thereby legitimizing intellectual innovation through an internal Islamic concept. Second, they connected moral perfection with knowledge, continuing the classical ideal of the “perfect human being” (insan-i kamil). Third, they understood enlightenment not as an individual achievement alone but as a social responsibility towards the community (millat).

Comparative perspective. Comparing the Central Asian experience with the European Enlightenment reveals both convergence and divergence. Both traditions affirmed the dignity of reason and opposed ignorance and superstition. Yet whereas a significant strand of European Enlightenment thought sought to separate reason from religious authority, the Central Asian Enlighteners sought to reconcile them. This difference is significant: it suggests that modernization does not necessarily require a rupture with religious tradition, and that a society can renew itself by reinterpreting its own spiritual heritage.

Relevance for contemporary Uzbekistan. The legacy of this synthesis has acquired new significance in contemporary Uzbekistan. At the 72nd session of the United Nations General Assembly in 2017, the President of Uzbekistan proposed a resolution on “Enlightenment and Religious Tolerance”, which the General Assembly adopted in December 2018 [7]. The principle of “enlightenment against ignorance” is directly rooted in the historical experience described above. It offers an effective

conceptual basis for countering religious extremism, which typically relies on ignorance and a distorted reading of religious sources, and for educating young people in the spirit of tolerance and critical thinking [8].

Conclusion. The study demonstrates that the Enlightenment thought of Central Asia did not emerge in opposition to the Islamic heritage but grew organically out of it. The rational theology of the Maturidi school, the scientific legacy of the region's medieval scholars and the ethical teachings of Sufism provided the intellectual foundations upon which the Jadids built their program of renewal. Their synthesis of faith and reason, tradition and innovation, national identity and openness to the world remains a valuable model for contemporary societies. Further research should focus on critical editions and English translations of Jadid texts, which would allow this distinctive intellectual tradition to enter more fully into international philosophical discourse.

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