Response to the Provocation for the Indiana University Roundtable on Post-Communism 2008: Islam and Post-Communism

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Chinese state policies towards Muslims and other religious groups have oscillated between radical intolerance, based on the full imposition of Marxist-Leninist ideology (which broadly marked the period from the 1950s to the late 1970s), to a limited tolerance of religious institutions and practices that have been officially endorsed and co-opted by the state. Government authorities in contemporary Xinjiang distinguish between "normal religious activities" (Uyg.*"normal diniy paaliyätlär")*, which are associated with officially licensed mosques and clergy, and "illegal" ("*qanunsiz"*) religious activities which cover a wide range of ritual activity that lie outside the parameters of official endorsement. Such a distinction can be interpreted in Foucaultian terms as a "dividing practice"; [1] one of the primary modes of domination in which social groups are demarcated from a previously undifferentiated whole in order to be subjected to classification and control.

Traditionally, it has been difficult to make a clear-cut distinction between "orthodox" or mosque-based Islam and Sufi Islam in the region of what is now known as Xinjiang. Sufi rituals, including the practice of attending the shrines (*mazar*) of holy people, have been one dimension of a broad spectrum of religious beliefs that individuals may draw upon. Senior religious leaders in certain mosques and madrassahs throughout Xinjiang have been known to undertake leading roles within Sufi brotherhoods. Yet in the contemporary era, attendance at officially recognised mosques is endorsed whilst Sufi activity is liable to state repression in many parts of Xinjiang. The proclivity of official discourse to gloss all religious activity that is not officially sanctioned as belonging to either backward 'superstition' (*khurapat)* or as being linked to religious extremism and 'splittist' (separatist) activity (*milliy bölgünchilik*) entails a collapsing of space for religious activity outside narrowly defined official channels.

Such surveillance of ritual practices and the employment of various discursive strategies to distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable religious beliefs, groups and institutions has certain parallels with the situation in Uzbekistan and other post-Soviet states where government authorities seek to register and monitor public religious rituals, whilst labelling religious activity that is not officially endorsed as being extremist or "Wahhabi" in nature. The historical antecedents of such strategies can be found in the Soviet regime's efforts to tolerate and regulate a limited field of religious activity whilst seeking to curb all other forms of ritual activity which could only function on a covert basis, a situation that was conceptualized by several Soviet and Western scholars in terms of a distinction between "official" and "parallel" Islam. Yet one should be wary of assuming that contemporary projects to officially alter and manage the religious landscape in Central Asia and China are exclusively rooted in the socialist legacy. Such developments are merely a particularly conspicuous and extreme manifestation of a

[1] Dreyfus and Rabinow (1982: 208)

global trend whereby government authorities have sought to officially regulate religious institutions (evident in the widespread licensing of religious clergy in the Middle East) as well as utilise sites of religious worship and instruction for strategic and utilitarian purposes, which has been described by the anthropologist Gregory Starrett, in the Egyptian context, in terms of the "functionalization of religion."[2]

In contemporary Xinjiang, government efforts to regulate religious activity together with the legacy of previous eras of radical intolerance of religion have had a major impact on religious knowledge and authority at the local level. The onset of the so-called "reform era" from 1978 onwards has seen a rapid repair and rebuilding of mosques by local communities throughout Xinjiang. The mosque and its associated community of regular worshippers (*jamaät*) has returned as a key institutional focal point of the local neighbourhood (*mähällä*). Yet disruption to religious education, together with the secular appropriation of the modern education system and print media, has led to extreme reliance on traditional religious clergy who received their education in madrassahs prior to the late 1950s. State authorities have sought to co-opt these religious figures into the official religious establishment whilst also training up a new generation of leaders who have received a combined political and religious education in officially approved religious colleges.

The increasing opening up of Xinjiang to travel and trade with neighbouring states, and the subsequent dissemination of a broader range of religious ideologies to the region, has had major implications for challenging local patterns of religious understanding. The term "Wahhabi" has emerged in Uyghur popular discourse over the last 10 years as a gloss on various individuals and groups who seek to establish what they perceive as more "orthodox" forms of Islam. Religious figures who have travelled to Saudi Arabia and adopted religious ideologies that have emphasized and more stringently applied the concept of "tawhid" (oneness of God) have been particularly instrumental in spearheading the critique of a range of local religious practices, such as attendance at the cemetery to pray on behalf of the deceased and the undertaking of ritual feasts, that have previously been seen in Xinjiang as being central to the Muslim faith.[3]

Despite major political restrictions on so-called "Wahhabi" Muslims, the goals of reformist Muslims and government authorities can occasionally coincide. The notable decline of the holding of memorial feasts known as *näzir* (traditionally held on the third, seventh, fortieth days and one year after death) from the mid-1990s onwards can be attributed to the accidental convergence of new reformist ideologies that seek to contest any form of religious practice that is not strictly grounded in scripturalist traditions with the efforts of government authorities to curb religious activity that takes place outside officially sanctioned sites.[4] Talal Asad has persuasively argued that 'orthodoxy' rather than corresponding with a normative set of religious beliefs is shaped by power relations in specific contexts: "Wherever Muslims have the power to regulate, uphold, require, or adjust *correct* practices, and to condemn, exclude, undermine or replace *incorrect* ones,

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[2] Starrett (1998: 9-10).
[3] Waite (2006)
[4] Waite (2008: 173-177)

there is the domain of orthodoxy."[5] In the Xinjiang context, what is or is not regarded as "orthodox" Islam is shaped by the complex interaction between new forms of religious understanding (made possible by growing trans-national linkages) and state-disseminated versions of acceptable religious conduct.

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[5] Asad (1986: 15)