

Common Patterns of Religious [Islamic] Revival in Central Asia and Challenges to Develop Human Rights and Inclusive Society

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GALYM ZHUSSIPBEK, Independent scholar, Suleyman Demirel atindagi Universitet

Disclaimers

- The author does not intend to target anyone for their religious and other views; the critical analysis is about the ideational trends, the conceptual framework of a particular viewpoint.
- The author adopts the naturalistic conception of human rights, which is one of the leading in today's academia and which by default is promoted by the primary international human rights documents.
- The author, a-priori, accepts that society by its nature is a diverse phenomenon. Moreover, society in Central Asian countries has been getting more diversified in recent years because of globalization, new generations becoming active in social life, the spread of digital technologies, modern education, human rights, equal rights, and academic freedom.
- The information in this presentation and comments of the author should not be taken as attacking the religious beliefs of any group and aiming at the discrimination of anyone or any group.

The concepts

- human rights, inclusive society;
- formal Institutions, informal institutions;
- “conservative Islam”, epistemological crisis in conservative Islamic scholarship
- Hanafi-Maturidi Islam, Islamic rationalism, "de-modern" Central Asian Islam.
- authentic culture, “traditional religion;”
- Some of our papers where the ideas presented in this seminar are discussed:
 - 1) Liberalism and Islam, Routledge Handbook of Contemporary CA, 2021.
 - 2) Epistemological Reform and Embrace of Human Rights, Open Theology, 2019
 - 3) Some Common Patterns of Islamic Revival in Post-Soviet Central Asia, Religions; 2020.
 - 4) Human rights of daughters-in-law (*kelins*) in Central Asia: harmful traditional practices and structural oppression, Central Asian Survey, 2020

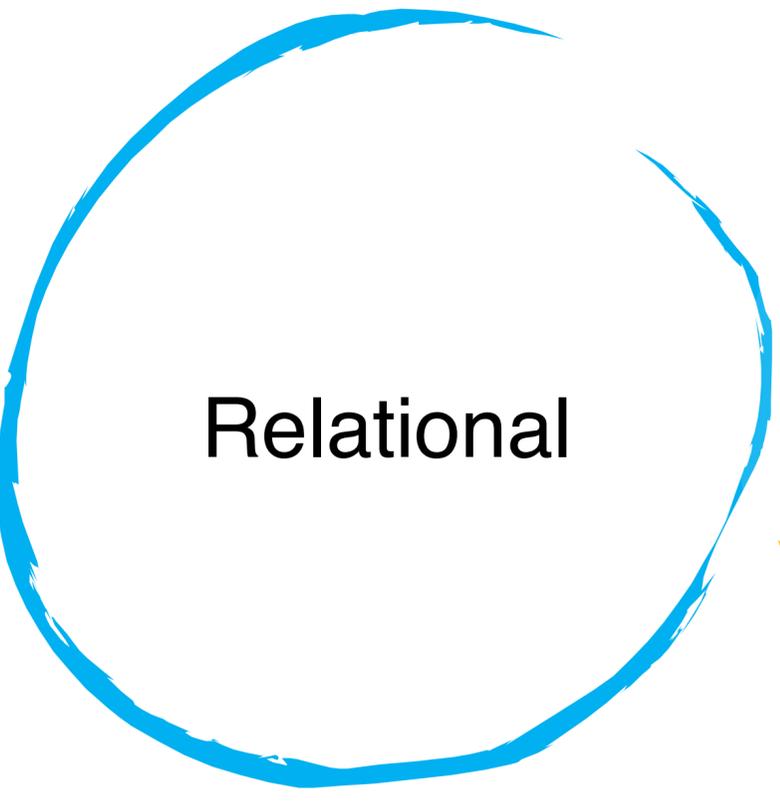
Nicky RM Pouw (PhD),



Joyeeta Gupta

University of Amsterdam)

Inclusive development is about



[a set of policies aimed at improving the [1] economic & social well-being of [2] all segments of society by maintaining relational inclusiveness and achieving [3] environmental friendliness of [4] (social, economic and political) development models.



**Inclusive development (human rights-based development).
The focus of this seminar is only the development of human rights.
Inclusive society and human rights are closely related**

**Social welfare/
protection**

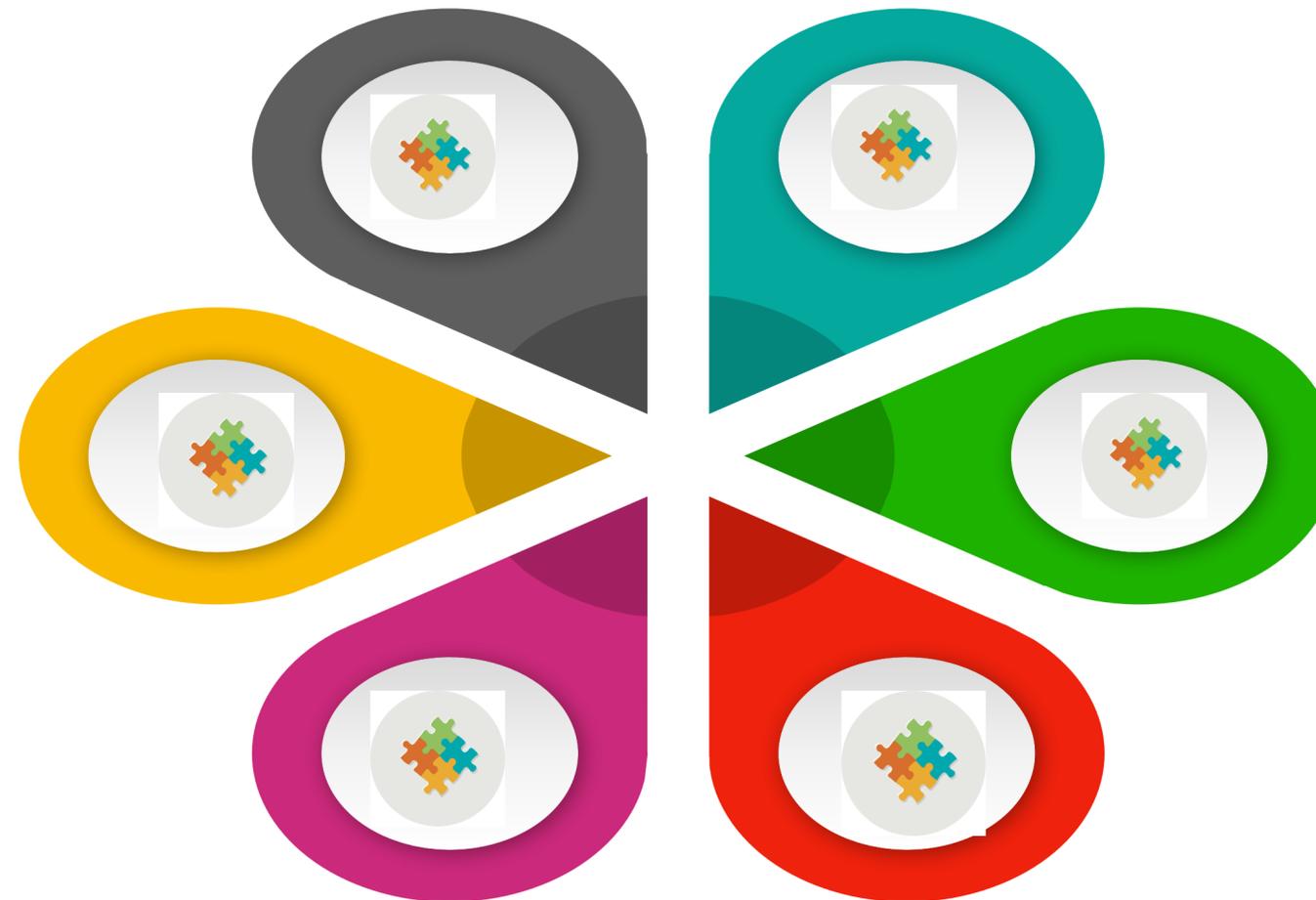
**Care about nature/
environment**

**Relational
inclusiveness**

**Social
inclusiveness**

**Economic
inclusiveness**

**Development of
human rights, non-
discrimination**



Human rights

- Universal, inherent, indivisible, interrelated/ interdependent and inalienable.
- The universality of human rights is not an abstract philosophical and Western/ European notion. It is a response to the universality of the modern state as a globally convergent mode of governance and challenges of the modern market (Afshari, 2001: xvii).
- According to the naturalistic/ moral conception of human rights, being human is the essential & fundamental reason to enjoy human rights. The legal documents, both international and domestic, only confirm human rights and have to undertake the duty of protection of human rights. This conception of human rights implies that: “human rights are (1) moral rights that all human beings (2) possess at all times (3) and in all places (4) simply in virtue of being human (5) and the corresponding duty-bearers are all able people and state organs in appropriate circumstances”.

The following patterns may explain the ongoing Islamic revival in Central Asia:

- (1) the so-called “de-modern” and “ethnicized” Islam as an enduring legacy of the Soviet period;
 - A) “de-modern” Islam may evolve and has evolved [under some contexts] into “conservative” Islam. There are some serious problems in conservative Islamic scholarship in accepting wholeheartedly the contemporary concept of human rights (later);
- (2) penetration of different branches of Salafi Islam;
- (3) securitization of the so-called “non-official” Islam and religious groups by state and non-state actors;
- (4) the rise by default of conservative Islam which goes hand in hand with retraditionalization.

These patterns/factors, in their turn, pose serious challenges to developing inclusive society and human rights in Central Asian countries. Overall, I argue that religious [Islamic] revival in Central Asian countries has come to the point when it can be analyzed under the prism, whether it impedes the development of inclusive society and human rights or not.

A primary focus of the seminar is to analyze the challenges posed by the rise of conservative Islam to the development of an inclusive society and human rights. The rise of conservative Islam is a result of combination of the factors ranging from the state policy, the grassroots re-traditionalization, securitization of non-traditional Islamic groups, to global spread of scripturalistic (furthermore, literalistic/Salafi) Islamic discourses.

These challenges are divided into three sub-sections: (a) women's rights, (b) children's rights and individual human rights at the family level, (c) ethnic minorities of "traditionally" Muslim origin.

In general, these challenges can be conceptualized as clash of rights

Securitization of the so-called “non-official” Islam and religious groups by state and non-state actors

- Post-Soviet Central Asian countries have not successfully tackled the dilemma of how to create a balance between being alert to religious radicalism and respecting the human right of freedom of consciousness, religion, and association.
- The securitization (threat construction) mechanism can explain how non-traditional Islamic groups are presented and constructed as existential threat.
- The securitization of some religious groups led to the situation when religion itself or different from “locally approved” religious schools became stigmatized.
- The application of this concept can explain the reasons and underlying factors why the political regimes in these countries resorted to adopting more restrictive, even repressive policies in the religious field, which had repercussions in social and political life. Moreover, the intensity of securitization of non-traditional groups may shed light on different questions ranging from the nature of the political

Informal institutions and religious revival

- I argue about the importance of informal institutions (such as informal social norms, patterns of behavior, traditions, the influence of religious teachings and interpretations) in the countries-in-transition, e.g., Central Asian countries.
- Informal institutions are dynamic; therefore, it is important to study religious revival and development of religious discourses.
- There is a direct association between (1) “ethnic” and “national”, (2) “ethnic” and “religious” because of the ethnic status of religion and Soviet legacy of equalizing ethnicity and nation/ ethnic and national.
- The concept “ulttyq” and “ult” in Kazakh (“ulut” in Kyrgyz) or “milli” in Uzbek or Tajik (e.g. “ulttiq qundiliqtar”, literal translation “national values” but in fact “ethno-conservative-patriarchal-paternalistic values” as they understand in conservative Central Asian society).
- There is a close interaction between formal and informal institutions, including between official education and informal norms spread in society, inter alia shaped by religious norms which are dynamic because of religious revival.
- Some effects of the rise of conservative Islam can be observed in formal and informal education.

“Unconscious” Political Claims of mainstream religious (Sunni Islamic–Hanafi) communities in Central Asia

- Ethnic status of religion leads to the perception that choosing a religion is not an individual right but a collective, communal right which fundamentally contradicts the fundamental human rights.
- The choice to practice a religion or not is an inalienable human right.
- Ethnic status of religion, if combined with the perception that nation equals ethnicity, produces the situation when this religion (the adherents) makes political claims, “aspires” (“unconsciously “) for power.

“De-modern” and “ethnicized” Central Asian Islam and conservative Sunni Islam are two different concepts in my research. While the former is less rigorous and less scripture- and “tradition” (hadith)-based and the latter is essentially rigorous and scripture-/and “tradition” (hadith)-based, however, both are characterized by lack of, even deficiency of rationalism.

Custom-based and infused with superstitions, “de-modern” and “ethnicized” Central Asian Islam has the potential to evolve into conservative scripturalistic Sunni Islam. These, at first glance, contradictory phenomena (de-modern non-scripturalistic and conservative scripturalistic Islam), in close inspection in recent years, appear to be mutually supportive.

Being a part of the global Muslim community, Central Asian Muslims are not immune against the broader problems of traditional conservative Islamic teachings, such as the epistemological crisis of the traditional Islamic scholarship, manifested among other things in insufficient protection of human rights under the conservative Islamic teachings (if to approach from the prism of naturalistic/philosophical conception of universality of human rights - as I try to do).

Clash of rights

“De-modern” ethnicized Islam in Central Asia, and to a greater extent, the “conservative” scripturalistic Islam can be discussed within the framework of “epistemological crisis.”

The epistemological crisis of conservative Islamic scholarship manifested in the lack, even the denial of rationalism, anti-rationalism, which appeared especially as a response to the challenges posed to Islamic thought by modernity and post-modernity.

Two BIG Epistemological Problems of conservative Islamic scholarship:

A] confinement of reason within the strict boundaries;

B] “Hadithification” of “Sunnah” which means that the written hadith-based body of knowledge became Sunna’s only vehicle of transmission and embodiment. Naturally, conservative believers may literally refer to sound and written hadiths for direction in life, of which literal meanings may contradict not only contemporary legal standards and norms, but also human reason (Duderija 2015).

C] ethical voluntarism, which means that whatever God (e.g., in Scripture) wishes are good, whatever God forbids/prohibits is bad, no place for reason-based thinking, in opposition there is ethical objectivism -- what God wishes is morally/ethically good (can be perceived by the mind/reason that it is good); hence, God does not order what is evil and horrible according to human reason. No contradiction between ethics/ moral rules and religious prescriptions.

Clash of rights (when the claims about some rights, e.g. pertaining to religious freedoms, may lead to the violation of the fundamental human rights of other people)

Critical issues for conservative religious communities:

(a) gender relations;

(b) freedom of thought (the emergence of unthinkable / impediment to development of critical thinking), normally, freedom of thought is an absolute human right which can be limited under whatever condition or reason;

c) freedom of expression (however, this right does not entail the right not to be offended); d) freedom of consciousness; e) status of religious, gender minorities;

f) the main principles of children's rights (the denial of children from enjoying some fundamental human rights, foremost freedom of religion, prohibition of corporal punishment, etc.)

Reasons laying the grounds for clash for rights

A] Conservative Islamic discourse in gender relations based on three pillars:

1) traditional masculinity,

2) gender oppositionality, and

3) patriarchal concept of honor (Duderija 2019, p. 97).

B] Conservative Islamic discourse in the views concerning the fate of “other” tends to be exclusivist. Exclusivist religious doctrine accepts that salvation belongs only to the adherents of “only one true” interpretation;

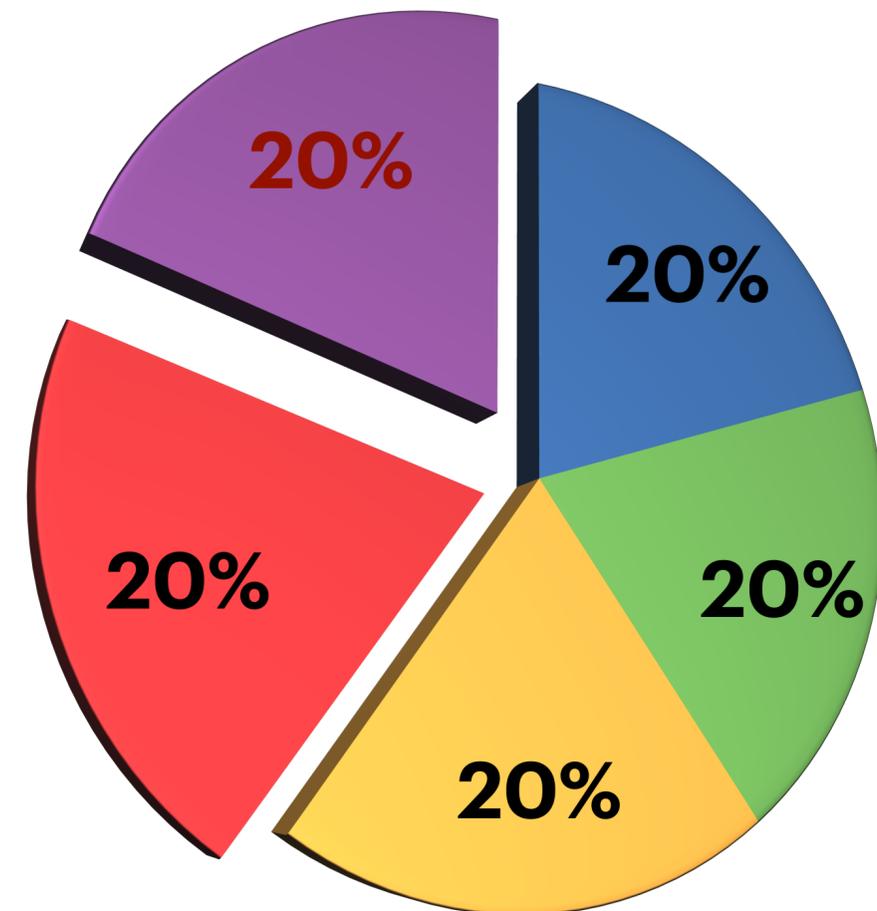
C] if not obvious but tacit and concealed practice of excommunication from Islam of one Muslim by another (“takfir”, the concept which is found in neither the Quran or Sunnah).

D] Epistemological problem: confinement of reason within strict boundaries

The so-called “conservative” mind

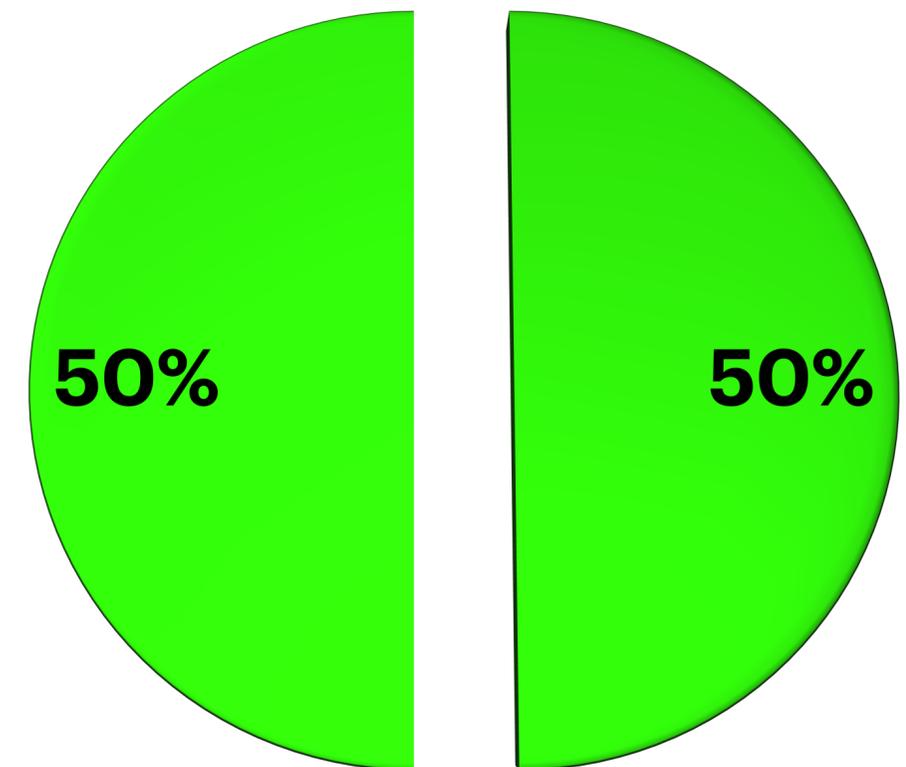
tentative explanation

1] status quo and hierarchy; 2) group's (including the religious communities) interests; 3] respect for “traditions” and the lack and disrespect for rationalism. In totality these three make up 60% on conservative mind. 4] justice and 5] interests of individual. These two may comprise max 40% in the conservative mind]



The so-called human rights-friendly, liberal (in broad sense) mind-set tentative explanation

1] rationalism, critical thinking; 2] justice/fairness and respect for human rights and interests of individual. Each comprises 50% and in totality these values make up 100%.



The concept rationalistic in Islamic tradition predominantly and wrongly, has become associated with Mutazilate school. As a result of association of rationalism in Islam with Mutazilism, rationalism obtained negative connotations for a great majority of Muslims, who tend to denounce Mutazilism as heretical.

To paraphrase Marcus Borg (2001), reason is necessary to be able to read Islamic sources from a historical–metaphorical point of view, which means that they are taken seriously without being taken literally. Furthermore, reason can be seen as the human capacity to shape reality in a humane way, including the development of progressive, human rights-friendly religious interpretations and teachings. Progressive religious teachings are contextual, interpretive, inductive and goal-oriented, and they speak to the current time and context and thus implicitly they are rationalistic.

Will Central Asian people who are at least “culturally” Muslim accept and internalize the contemporary notion of human rights, individual rights, women’s rights, and, what is the most critical, human rights of LGBTQ, and build an inclusive society? Importantly, Muslim LGBTQ activists can point to the periods of the Islamic past when the Muslims were more liberal when the genre of “gay poetry” flourished or the fact that decriminalization of homosexuality was undertaken by the Ottoman Empire long before Britain and the US (The Economist 2021)?

It is unlikely that this will happen in the short term, but most likely, this is the prospect of decades.

In the end, Islam, like any religion, is a social phenomenon that is prone to evolution.

Conclusion: There is a need to transform informal institutions, development of inclusive understandings of identity, culture; development of human rights; «epistemological reform» of conservative Islam by reviving lost rationalism and “ethical objectivism” to produce human-rights friendly interpretations

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THANK YOU!!

Additional

to shed light on some theological issues covered during this seminar

Retraditionalization and Mirage of cultural authenticity

- Both a top-down and from the bottom-to-top process.
- Provides the political elites with new forms of instrumental meaning-making to create a foundation upon which they could promote tradition as a marker of “national” identity and political reconstruction (Beyer and Finke 2019).
- A grassroots phenomenon, perceived as a genuine “national ideology,” the revival of “authentic culture”, a process of seeking cultural authenticity/ return to “roots”;
- It appears to be a process of (1) re-creating “archaic and patriarchal” social norms (solidification of “gender roles”); (2) legitimizing authoritarian regimes, non-democratic social norms, and practices.
- The claims about cultural authenticity are only about the “mirage of cultural authenticity,” since seeking authenticity in one’s heritage detaches culture and religion from history (Afshari 2001)
- Deliberately seeking cultural authenticity in one’s cultural legacy is inauthentic. Under the impact of modernity, traditionalism became pseudomodernised (Afshari 2001).
- No tradition or idea can exist in a vacuum, detached from social and political environment — today, the primary trend is neoliberal capitalism.

Erosion of rationalism in “historical” Hanafi-Maturidi Islam (1)

- 1. Interestingly and importantly, the theological school to which a majority of CA Muslims (traditionally/classically) belong, might have the potential or possess some grounds to generate “progressive,” “gender-egalitarian/ gender-friendly” and even inclusive Islamic interpretations.
- 2. Two main epistemological principles: (1) **rationalism**; (2) **ethical objectivism** — could characterize historical Hanafism-Maturidism but these qualities became seriously eroded, even lost.
- 3. However, the Sunni-Asharite school accepts ethical voluntarism and limited rationalism; hence, it is literalistic, though officially it claims to follow/accepts “balanced” rationalism.
- 4. Salafism - totally **ethical voluntarist & anti-rationalistic — literalistic**
 - 1. ethical voluntarism - whatever God (e.g. in Scripture) wishes is good, whatever God forbids/prohibits is bad, no place for reason-based thinking
 - 2. ethical objectivism - what God wishes is morally/ethically good (can be perceived by the mind/reason that it is good), no contradiction between ethics/ moral rules and religious prescriptions. What God prohibits is morally/ethically bad (can be perceived by the mind that it is bad).

Erosion of rationalism in “historical” Hanafi-Maturidi Islam (2)

- 1. In historical rationalistic Hanafism-Maturidism, both reason and revelation were important, no contradiction between reason and revelation (“ethical objectivism”). This “rationalistic Islamic epistemology” was historically present in Hanafism but became lost.
- 2. In Asharism, the school which became classic Sunnism and penetrated Maturidism, reason is important alongside revelation only theoretically, in fact, reason is inferior, and revelation is superior in understanding orders and prohibitions (leading to ethical voluntarism).
- Hanafism-Maturidism became eroded since 10-11th cc. & underwent Asharization --“Asharization of Maturidism”, also the influence of Egyptian Hanafite scholars like Tahawi (who was traditionist, whereas Al-Maturidi was a dialectical scholar), even “Salafization of Hanafism-Maturidism,” which happened in Afghanistan.
- One reason why [skeptical to using/ employ reason in understanding Islam] Asharism became dominant and prevalent over rationalistic schools (e.g. Maturidism was against monarchical ruling) was the rise of monarchic dynasties in the Muslim countries and the persistence of the authoritarian regimes in Muslim-majority countries.