



Visions of Islamic Culture and the Transformation of Post-Soviet Central Asia

Dr. John Schoeberlein

Monday, September 22, 2008

12:00-2:00 pm, Georgetown University, McGhee Library, 301 ICC

Sponsored by the Center for Eurasian, Russian and East European Studies (CERES)

<http://ceres.georgetown.edu>

Islam's evolving role in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan provoked serious discussion following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Challenges presented to governments by emerging debates on religion, as well as the current tendency to focus only on "radical" or "moderate" Islam in Central Asia, demonstrate the need for a broader approach to the study of transforming views of Islam in these societies. On September 22, 2008, CERES hosted a lecture by Dr. John Schoeberlein, Director of the Program on Central Asia and the Caucasus at Harvard University, whose lecture "Visions of Islamic Culture and the Transformation of Post-Soviet Central Asia" addressed the question of how citizens and governments in the post-Soviet Central Asian states are re-conceptualizing the roles of Islam in their societies.



**Dr. John Schoeberlein and CERES Associate Director
Dr. Jennifer Long**

Dr. Schoeberlein began by reviewing some of the key discussions surrounding Islam in the region. These issues include whether Soviet policies resulted in the effective suppression of Islam, that is, if Islam continued to exist "under the surface, ready to reemerge," and if Central Asia's diversity and inherently moderate religious traditions make it "culturally immune from radical Islam." Despite contrasting scholarly interpretations of radical Islam's capacity to take hold in the region, Dr. Schoeberlein concluded that current examples of such radicalism are limited, and it is difficult to say that they pose a threat to the existing governments. He discounted theories that radical Islam would spread to other Central Asian countries from Tajikistan or the Middle East or that the collapse of the Soviet Union created an "ideological vacuum" that would be filled by radical Islamism.

The reform and resurgence of Islam in Central Asia is often viewed as either "bringing Islam back to its natural roots or bringing Islam in line with Western values." Dr. Schoeberlein argued that such an approach focuses too narrowly on the subjective analytical concepts of "radical" and "moderate." He cited *sharia* law as one example of an idea that is frequently considered radical

in the West but has been regarded by Muslims in many parts of the world and through much of history as one of the most basic attributes of a Muslim society. Rather, Dr. Schoeberlein said, “The most important developments are those which occur between these extreme [“radical” and “moderate”] poles.”

Cultural practices in Central Asia include a mix of both Islamic and Western traditions, and a re-conceptualization of such practices is currently taking place in shrines and mosques throughout the region. Some argue for rebuilding and reemphasizing holy places, while others believe that shrines are incompatible with Islam and should be torn down. Debates over appropriate Islamic dress, the use of alcohol and how long-standing traditions such as tying small pieces of cloth to trees at shrines and practices at funerals and weddings conform to Islamic doctrine have become part of the Central Asian public discourse. Dr. Schoeberlein noted that the debate over both the cultural and political functions of Islam in Central Asia intensified in 2000. During the same period, regional governments began to assert more control over Islam, perhaps in an attempt to “make people careful by making them uncertain.”

Dr. Schoeberlein pointed out that Central Asian governments have not yet fully recognized the evolving role of Islam in their societies and the “potential stresses” that such changes could bring. Political transformations after the collapse of the Soviet Union, generational changes, new relationships between citizens and their governments, and examples of Islamic movements abroad have all contributed to the re-conceptualization of Islam in Central Asia. Dr. Schoeberlein emphasized the need for broad public dialogue to reconcile opposing views and achieve a societal consensus, yet he concluded by saying, “In most cases, there will not be a social process to address these tensions adequately.”

Amy Wilson, CERES MA Candidate