

Nathan Spannaus. *Preserving Islamic Tradition: Abū Naşr Qūrşāwī and the Beginnings of Modern Reformism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019. xviii + 352 pages. ISBN: 9780190251789.

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From the mid-18th to mid-20th centuries, Muslim populations around the world witnessed many ‘ulamā’-led revivalist movements that displayed varying ideological forms and preferences. This trend was partially a result of the internal dynamics of Muslim societies themselves but can be ascribed primarily to the waves of European cultural and political colonization that swept through what had previously been Islamic lands. In comparison to Middle Eastern and North African area studies, the history of Islamic civilization in the Volga-Ural region can best be described as an understudied and, perhaps more importantly, under-theorized area of research in Western academia. Regardless of the political and practical causes of this phenomenon and despite the vastness and long history of what had been predominantly Muslim territories, a perceptible lacuna is found in the intellectual history of Muslim peoples in general and in the response of the ‘ulamā’ class to the modernization efforts of Russian imperial rule throughout this vast region. This much-needed scholarly overview is what Nathan Spannaus’ book purports to provide, thus filling a substantial gap in current historiography. The book arguably seeks to reach a non-specialist, first-time Western reader audience while covering highly sophisticated, intra-religious teleological debates in an admirably detailed and scholarly fashion.

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The book's 10 chapters span a wide range of subjects: the historiography of reform and tradition, the role of the 'ulamā' in the Russian Empire, epistemological critique, *ijtihād* and the function of legal theory, the question of divine attributes, postclassical *kalām*, reform within the scholarly tradition, modernity, and the transformation of the religious environment, all with a guiding introduction and a conclusion that distinguishes Abū Naṣr Qūrṣāwī (d. 1227/1812), the book's focus, from Jadidism. The chapters are divided into 55 sub-chapters and includes a detailed bibliography, footnotes, and index. Spannaus has written a book that flexes the curious mind and stands out as an excellent resource for reading and future reference.

At the outset, the author asks two probing questions: What is Qūrṣāwī's reformism about, and why is it remembered so differently in most historical sources? Abū Naṣr Qūrṣāwī was born in the village of Qurṣa, northeast of Kazan, and completed his earthly pilgrimage at the young age of 36 years, falling victim to a cholera epidemic in Istanbul in the Üsküdar district where he is now buried. In spite of the isolation of his village and his small number of students and companions, his courageous ideas of reform transcended his life and times. He survived false accusations of heresy and a death sentence in Bukhara by returning to his native village.

In order to contextualize the religious, social, and cultural changes of Volga-Ural Muslim history, especially during the Russian imperial period, the author thoroughly examines the concept of Jadidism, the early 20th century modernist movement that had grown to prominence in the region. The main theme is the struggle to preserve Islamic tradition through changing times, especially modern times. The book combines a biography of Qūrṣāwī and the history of his time and place, constructed upon a sound epistemological foundation. For the tradition to be preserved, it must be adapted to remain constant and relevant; this inspired reformism without altering Qur'anic principles and the practices derived from the Prophetic *Sunna*.

At this point, let us examine more closely the history of Muslim civilization and culture in the region. According to the information provided in the book, the 600-year timeline of the Muslim history of the Volga-Ural region can be summarized as follows: The presence of Islam in the Volga-Ural region dates back to the early 10th century with the Volga Bulgarian kingdom's initial conversion to Islam through the religious and military assistance of the Abbasid caliphate in Baghdad. In the late 10th century, the Russians were converted to Orthodox Christianity, which

dominated the Russian environs until the Mongols invaded Eastern Europe in the 13th century and established the Chinggisid rule of the Golden Horde, centered in lower Volga. In 1313, Ūzbek Khān (d. 740/1340) established Islam within the Golden Horde. In 1328, the Khan appointed Ivan I of Moscow (d. 1340) as the Grand Prince, which marked the beginning of Muscovite domination amongst the Rus. Between 1394-1396, Timur (d. 807/1405) invaded the lands ruled by the Golden Horde and sacked the city of Bolghar; in 1431, the Muscovite armies destroyed it. The mid-15th to the mid-16th century saw constant war between Moscow and Kazan that ended Chinggisid suzerainty over Moscow. In 1475, the Ottomans established domination over the Khanate of Crimea, and the Grand Prince of Moscow, Ivan Grozny “the Terrible” (d. 1584), proclaimed himself Tsar of All Russia in 1547. In 1552, Moscow conquered the Khanate of Kazan, enabling Moscow to penetrate the Ural region. In 1556, Moscow conquered the Khanate of Astrakhan, and 30 years later it conquered the Khanate of Siberia. In the 190-year-period from 1598 to 1788, many new historical developments occurred in the region, over which Christian Russia had established its political, military, and religious hegemony. In 1788, the Foundation of Spiritual Assembly (FSA) of Mohammedan Law – subservient to Christian Russian hegemony – was established in Ufa province. In the 9-year-period between 1864-1873, Russia conquered and colonized the Central Asian Khanates, thus extending the Volga-Ural historical timeline under Russian ideological and political hegemony.

Qūrṣāwī’s life intersected with the 1778 establishment of FSA and the rise of a compliant ‘ulamā’ establishment, which promoted a flawed interpretation of traditional Islam to the pleasure of the Russian rulers. Qūrṣāwī fearlessly criticized the ‘ulamā’ for their overreliance on *taqlīd* (the acceptance of a statement without evidence) at the expense of *ijtihād* (legal reasoning). The relationship between *taqlīd* and *ijtihād* recurs throughout the book in the form of scholarly discussion. On this basis, Qūrṣāwī called for renewed scrutiny of theological issues and a broad reformist project to maintain the moral foundations of the Muslim community. The author notes that the project unsurprisingly did not gain the support of the ‘ulamā’ of the Russian establishment. In fact, the ‘ulamā’ of Bukhara labeled it heresy, and the ruling Amīr Ḥaydar (r. 1800-1826) arbitrarily pronounced the death sentence on him in 1808.

In explaining the distinct characteristics of Qūrṣāwī’s thought, Spannaus notes that Qūrṣāwī was not directly reacting to the corrupting power of Russian colonial ideology in developing the strategy for a reformist project but propounding a

strategic project based instead on the Holy Qur'an and Prophetic *Sunna*. As such, it expands the reader's understanding of the intersection of post-classical thought (mid-13th century onwards) with religious reformism and the early modernist movements. His life coincided with a transitional historical era in which the relationship between the Russian state and its Muslim subjects was irrevocably altered. The 'ulamā' had lost their foremost authorities within their communities and had become submissive to the Russian state. Spannaus's book describes in detail the Islamic scholarly tradition as the essential lens for understanding the reformist project, its main focus.

The author argues that Qūrṣāwī's reformist project has a thought-system as its foundation in which the Qur'an and *Sunna* reign supreme. Qūrṣāwī calls this system "the way of the righteous ancestors" (*madhhab al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*), which functions as the core position on all legal, theological, social, and moral issues, thus articulating correct belief and action and eliminating doubt (91). As scholars are indeed capable of error, truth needs to be safeguarded by subjecting their pronouncements to verification (*taḥqīq*) against the only two primary sources of Islam: the Qur'an and *Sunna*. However, this attitude is what brought him into conflict with the bureaucratic 'ulamā', whose distinguishing characteristic was loyalty to the Russian state. The focus of his epistemological critique is not the Muslim-state relationship but the moral wellbeing of Muslims, a concept that informs his management of the *taqlid-ijtihād* relationship. He considers *ijtihād* as the conventional opposite of *taqlid* and treats *taḥqīq* as the investigation into the underlying premises and the basis of a position that does not permit the acceptance of a statement without evidence, which is what was being preached and practiced by bureaucratized 'ulamā' while Muslims were being constantly exposed to *taqlid*.

By combining a comprehensive historical account of Qūrṣāwī's life with in-depth analyses of the teleological views that distinguish him from the rest of the region's reformist 'ulamā', the author brings a fresh interpretation and offers a new theoretical prism for understanding the Islamic intellectual history in the Volga-Ural region. That having been said, however, consulting a comparative analysis of concurrent revivalist movements in different geographical locations in this area is perhaps what one might want so as to gain a better understanding of the phenomenon. For example, the time period when Qūrṣāwī was alive is considered by many historians to be one of the most crucial periods of the Ottoman Empire in terms of reform debates. Sultan Selim III (d. 1808), who

reigned from 1789 to 1807, personally demanded that the ‘ulamā’ and the high-ranking military and civil servants of the Empire draft memoranda on how to reform the Empire’s governmental institutions. Terms such as *tajdid*, *işlāh*, reform, and the New Order were the favored terms of the age. Dozens of treatises were submitted to the Sultan, each of which contained invaluable suggestions about the state of affairs that closely resembled Qūrşāwī’s reformist approach. Being the seat of the Caliphate for the entire Muslim *Ummah* and having forged strong relationships with Muslim communities all around the world, Istanbul was the natural gathering place for meetings of the ‘ulamā’. Either on their way to perform the pilgrimage, as was the case with Qūrşāwī who had passed away in Istanbul on his way to Mecca, or as a result of royal invitations, many of the ‘ulamā’ from the periphery came to Istanbul, met with local scholars, exchanged their views and experiences and, when necessary, asked for imperial assistance to overcome the challenges they faced. For instance, Ismail Gasprinskii (Gaspıralı İsmail Bey; d. 1332/1914), whom the author describes as “the most influential figure for the development of Jadidism” in the Volga-Ural region, had been heavily influenced by the revolutionary Young Turks movement both in Istanbul and during his sojourn to Paris (289). Moreover, recent studies should be noted as indicating that, despite the chronological differences, similarities occurred in the trajectory of the reform process of Russia’s Peter the Great (d. 1725), Egypt’s Kavalalı Muḥammad ‘Alī Pasha (d. 1265/1849), and the Ottoman Sultans Selim III and Mahmud II (d. 1255/1839). A future comparison of and demonstration on the interconnectedness of these regional experiences in terms of their public reception and/or their confrontation with modernity would be interesting.

By way of illustration, this “seismic shift” both in the Ottoman Empire and Egypt occurred by undermining the epistemic authority of the ‘ulamā’ class by virtue of the centralization of the religious endowments, (i.e., *awqāf* [sing. *waqf*]), which for many centuries had historically played a pivotal role in ensuring the economic freedom of the Muslim scholarly community. According to some historians, this pattern moreover had been inspired by and in line with the immovable church properties in Europe being brought under state control. In other words, the motivations and consequences of both trajectories shared similarities with that of the European precedent.

Though perhaps beyond the scope of the current study, a comparison of the Russian reshaping of Islamic institutions, one of the major themes of the book, with other similar historical cases might well provide insightful contextualization

for the reader. As Spannaus rightly points out, altering religious institutions inevitably leads to altering religious discourse. Such a comparison would not only show that the reform initiative has not been an isolated phenomenon but would also lead to a better understanding of the real consequences of the tsarist state's engagement with the Muslim institutions to which the author consistently refers in the book. Furthermore, a comparative study on the reaction of the 'ulamā' in the Volga-Ural region to the state-led-modernization policies to the reactions of other revivalist 'ulamā' in other regions would further broaden our horizons.

Nonetheless, the author should be noted to have made important contributions to the existing historiography in more ways than one. Historically, many leading 'ulamā' as guardians of the faith had pioneered revivalist movements in different parts of the Islamic World during and after the colonial periods. An abundance of studies exists examining the ideological and methodological dimensions of such movements. On the contrary, one of the least studied areas is that of the Volga-Ural Muslim revivalism during the Russian imperial period. The book under review here sheds lights on this "terra incognita" and provides a research-based and detailed account of the developments of the region under study. It provides a stimulating contribution to solving the puzzle before us, though we are still far from having the complete picture.

Historians will probably view Nathan Spannaus' refusal to present the legacy of Qūrṣāwī as entirely modernist and choice to instead prove that his program had been structured on the core elements of tradition as one of Spannaus' most original contributions. Undoubtedly, one entirely original facet of this study is the proof that the historical portrayal of Qūrṣāwī is quite at odds with who he actually was; the prevailing historical image not only ignores the role of Islamic tradition in his thought but has in fact positioned him against it. The author's objection to this idea is a bold and significant contribution to the existing literature. Furthermore, labeling the 'ulamā' as reformist and/or traditionalist not only in the Volga-Ural region but also in other parts of the Muslim lands is a prevalent yet reductionist approach. Another praiseworthy aspect of this book is the author's view that looking at Muslim communities through the lens of modernization and describing their religious experiences with Western nomenclature (i.e., Weberian, modernist, capitalist, enlightened) has often led to analytically problematic conclusions in the historiography. Thus, the author's theoretical framework and argumentation in this regard is highly persuasive. One might conclude that understanding the whole process of the intellectual transformation of a vast and equally diverse geographical

region through the writings of one particular scholar is a risky attempt, but the comprehensive and meticulous scholarship presented in the book leaves little room for such concerns.

Finally, the author has unearthed a number of new archival manuscripts in this research as well as employed a number of both published and unpublished primary sources in various languages, many of which were unknown to Western scholars of Islam. Studying the transformation of an intellectual discourse and changes in the narration of scholarly tradition over a long period of time is in fact no easy task as it requires painstaking, multidisciplinary reading, much time, and considerable self-sacrifice. During the years devoted to his project, the author seems to have shuttled among three continents and visited many cities, universities, and libraries in order to complete his research. His book is thus the final product of a challenging graduate research endeavor that had taken many years at one of North America's most prestigious academic institutions, McGill University. I believe that this pioneering and thought-provoking book, written in a highly accessible prose, will prove to be a landmark work for study of the Volga-Ural Islamic tradition for many years to come.