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“Individual Paths to the Global Ummah: Islamic Revival in Northwest China”

Abstract

The ongoing resurgence of religious practice in China features an Islamic revival characterized by rejection of the traditional association of religion with ethnicity, emphasis on individual understanding and devotion, and the embrace of an imagined transnational community that is both modern and universal. This talk is based on ethnographic research in and around Xining, Qinghai Province, among participants in the Salafiyya and Tablighi Jama'at movements, converts to Islam, and “reaffirmed Muslims” who have recently embraced more devout forms of Islamic practice without changing their sectarian affiliations. The history of Islam in China contextualizes these modern revival movements as the latest in a long line of new ideas Chinese Muslims have brought from the Middle East to revitalize and unintentionally destabilize Chinese Islam. Exploring how this revival influences individual experiences of religion and relationships among Chinese-speaking Muslims, the Chinese state, and the imagined global community of Islamic revivalists uncovers profound implications for the relationships among religion, ethnicity and modernity and the role of religion within secular states.