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Missionary Encounters in Kyrgyzstan: Challenging the National Ideal

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> "Why do you pretend to be a Muslim?" asked a Soviet anti-religious lecturer, [...] a young member of the Kirghiz Komsomol. The answer was: "Because I am a Kirghiz." [Dialogue quoted in Lemercier-Quelquejay (1984: 22).]

This short dialogue between an anti-religious lecturer and a Komsomol member was used by Lemercier-Quelquejay to illustrate the tight connection between ethno-national and religious identities in Central Asia in the 1980s. Because of this tight connection, she continued, it was not uncommon that devoted Communists and atheists would also stress that they were Muslim (1984: 22). At the time, this observation was surprising because it contradicted received wisdom concerning the place of religion in an "atheist" society. Since then it has become clear that the ties between religious and ethnic identity were to a significant degree actually fostered by Soviet national and cultural politics. Though the Soviet regime delegitimized religion, it simultaneously encoded religious identities through its nationality policies. As many authors have argued, the creation of the Central Asian "nations" was facilitated and given legitimacy by the mobilization of local "Muslim" cultures (e.g., Shahrani 1984, Karpat 1993). Conversely, it may also be said that Islam continued to be an important frame of reference, precisely because of this pairing of religious and national cultures.

The relaxation of laws against religious expression in the late 1980s and the sudden independence of Kyrgyzstan led to a renewed interest in cultural and religious roots. It could have been expected that as a result connections between Kyrgyz and Muslim identity would intensify. Instead, the Muslim-Kyrgyz composite has become more vulnerable in the post-atheist era. In fact, the challenge posed by the anti-religious lecturer who asked "why do you *pretend* to be a Muslim?" has returned with renewed force. The new interrogators are no longer atheists (who have ceased to exist), but Christian and Muslim "believers." Both Islamic purists and Evangelical Christians speak of the Kyrgyz as "people who *call* themselves Muslim" but "in fact" are only superficially so. Moreover, both groups view the pairing of religious and ethnic identity as unfortunate, because in their view faith should transcend ethnic or national categories. This is where similarities between both groups end. Islamic purists interpret the identification of Islam with "traditional" Kyrgyz culture as a perversion of Islam. As a consequence, it is people's customs and practices that have to be changed so that people can become "true Muslims." Protestant Evangelical Christians, by contrast, challenge not culture but religion, claiming that Islam is not only wrong, but also distorts Kyrgyz culture. Instead, they propose a Christianity that they see as culturally consistent with Kyrgyz ways of life.

My research focused on Evangelical Christian challenges to the ethno-religious composite in Kyrgyzstan. The topic is particularly relevant because of the large influx of Evangelical missionaries to the country in recent years. According to official sources there are now about 1,000 missionaries active in Kyrgyzstan, 700 of whom are Protestant Christians (Mamaiusupov 2003: 305-6). This sudden and large influx needs to be seen in light of increasing Evangelical attention to Muslim and post-socialist countries since the early 1990s. As Kyrgyzstan meets both criteria, and is seen as one of the most liberal post-socialist Muslim countries, it has developed into a sort of missionary hotspot.

Initially the successes of this missionary effort seemed very modest. In the mid-1990s the number of Kyrgyz converts was only around 500. But since then a rapidly increasing number of Kyrgyz have converted. Rough estimations of Kyrgyz converts to Christianity range from 10,000 to 50,000 (Iarkov 2002: 84). My own estimate — based on interviews and church visits — is that there are around 25,000 Kyrgyz Protestant Christians. Because these Christian Kyrgyz are not distributed evenly over the country's territory, but rather live concentrated in the north and especially in urban areas, conversion has in certain areas become a phenomenon that is both socially visible and threatening. In particular, the expansion of Protestant churches challenges common ideas about ethnicity and culture.

Challenging Identity, Employing Culture

The decentralized and diversified nature of Protestant Christianity means that no overall missionary strategy exists in Kyrgyzstan. Missionaries arrive from countries as different as the United States, South Korea, and Germany. They include Presbyterians, Mennonites, Pentecostals, and others, who differ in their theology and missionary approach. I will not attempt here to sketch the differences among these denominations, but rather focus on what I see as a growing trans-denominational effort to promote a "Kyrgyz church." Missionaries who have embraced this goal typically see the "ethnic barrier" as the main obstacle to conversion of the Kyrgyz. In the words of a German pastor:

> Negative attitudes of the Kyrgyz towards Christianity should in most cases not be attributed to people's Islamic conviction, but to their quest for national identity. At the religious level they connect their national identity with Islam and traditional beliefs. A change towards another religion will thus be seen as betrayal of the nation. [Therefore] it is crucial that a Kyrgyz stays a Kyrgyz after his conversion (Zweininger 2002).

What is at issue here are the ties between faith, religion, and culture, which the Evangelists aim to untangle and reassemble. Roughly speaking, their strategy can be reduced to three major steps, which I provisionally termed "De-Russifying Christianity," "De-Islamizing Kyrgyz Culture," and "Kyrgyzifying Christianity."

De-Russification basically addresses the commonly held idea among Kyrgyz that "Jesus is a Russian God." Indeed, most Kyrgyz equate Christianity with Russian Orthodoxy, which they associate with images of people worshipping icons and crossing themselves, and of bearded priests uttering incomprehensible religious formulas. All this, a secular Kyrgyz acquaintance confided to me, "is barbaric to us." To Evangelical missionaries, eliminating associations with Russianness is not only a crucial step in overcoming the "ethnic barrier," it also allows them to exhibit differences between Evangelical and Orthodox Christianity. Part of this effort comes naturally, as the services of Protestant congregations show none of the Orthodox symbols and signs. Moreover, the absence of *visual* religious symbols enables Evangelicals to claim that they are not just proposing a different "religion," but rather are a "gathering of believers" who have overcome religion. While the visual characteristics of Evangelical churches and services may be sufficiently different from "Russian Christianity," this is not the case with Christian *language*. Thus, missionaries have taken active steps to make the difference clear. For example, new Christian literature is often written in "Central Asian Russian," which is standard Russian except that Christian names and terms are replaced with Arabic and Turkic equivalents. For example, the name for Jesus, which most Kyrgyz knew as "the Russian God" *Isus Khristos*, became *Isa* or *Isa Mashaiak* [Jesus the Savior]. Likewise, since both the Kyrgyz word for church [*tsirkö*] and its Russian root *tserkov'* indicate an Orthodox church, the word "church" is preferably avoided; the term favored instead is *jiïn* [meeting].

A second step is to de-Islamize Kyrgyz culture. It is telling that Evangelical Christians rarely speak of Kyrgyz people as Muslims except to prove to their donors that they are working among the largest group of so-called "unreached people." More often, they characterize Kyrgyz people as *having* a "Muslim tradition" or "Muslim customs." Or they insist that it is all about Islamic *identity*, an identity in opposition to Russians. In other words, though the Evangelicals are more subtle than the previously mentioned anti-religious lecturer, they too basically ask the Kyrgyz why they "pretend to be" Muslim. From an Evangelical perspective there is a twofold logic to this question. First, the question conveys their idea that Kyrgyz are not "real" Muslims and thus allows for a directed dialogue in which the missionary can make his objections — *but* you drink alcohol, *but* you don't pray *namaz*, etc. As such the question intends to remove the respondent from Islam. Second, the question suggests that there is

only one "true Islam," which according to many Evangelicals is dogmatic by nature. In essence, by stressing a fundamentalist core to Islam — with which very few Kyrgyz identify — Evangelicals are able to dwell on the differences between Islam and Kyrgyz culture.

This brings us to the last step — Kyrgyzifying Christianity. Repeatedly I heard missionaries say that it is a common misunderstanding to see "Christianity as a Western religion." Instead, they insisted, Christianity is an Eastern religion, and therefore by nature more in line with "Eastern cultures" than with European or American ones. An American missionary told me that the Bible had captivated him since he read it for the first time, but that translating its messages to contemporary North American life was often challenging. He continued, "But when I came here it was amazing. For these people reading the Bible had to be like reading about their own forefathers, about their own culture!" A lot of effort has been made to foster a Kyrgyz image. The setup in several churches, for example, is arranged to stress Kyrgyzness. Everyone, including the pastor, sits on *shyrdaks* on the floor; the elderly receive seats of honor whereas young people sit near the door. The songs are in Kyrgyz and are accompanied by music on traditional Kyrgyz musical instruments. Likewise at Christian cultural events I attended, "typical" Kyrgyz dishes were served, people dressed up in "traditional" dresses, and the events were adorned with Kyrgyz music and dance ensembles.

Responses

The attractions of this cultural "contextualization" may be clear. The cultural displays evoke sentiments of familiarity and even belonging, which is one reason why these techniques are successfully adopted by many Kyrgyz evangelizers. Besides enabling Evangelical Christians to attract potential converts, this cultural "contextualization" also provides Kyrgyz Christians with a positive self-image and a vocabulary that allows them to respond to negative reactions from other Kyrgyz. As one converted Kyrgyz said: "I am Kyrgyz, and my customs all stayed the same. We didn't change our nationality … instead of having religion we now believe. That is all [*vmesto religii my seichas verim. Eto vse*]." The "contextualization" efforts are also clearly intended to show the Christians' deep respect for Kyrgyz culture. As a missionary worded it during a Christian cultural festival, "I know that

missionaries have often been accused of destroying culture. But if you look here, I would say that we are doing the exact opposite."

This active involvement in culture forces us, however, to ask whose definition of culture is being used in Evangelical activities and what are the implications of such uses of culture. Often, "culture" was reduced to a highly selective rendering of "national" symbols and signs which simplified and objectified far more complex webs of meaning and practice. In other words, Evangelicals treated "culture" as a set of free floating images and signs that could be easily attached to new sets of morals and beliefs. Discomfort with this partly explains the negative reactions of my Muslim Kyrgyz acquaintances when I showed them pictures taken at Christian celebrations. They were astounded that the Kyrgyz-looking figures were Christians. According to some, this "misuse of Kyrgyz culture" was even worse than becoming a Russian — an Orthodox Christian. Likewise, the national media have been highly critical of what they see as the manipulative and deceptive techniques of Evangelical Christians. In particular, the media criticize the use of Islamic vocabulary and Kyrgyz traditions by missionaries as an attempt to hide Christianity in Islamic guise and thus deceive people into conversion.

The impact of the missionary influx to Kyrgyzstan is not restricted to the growing number of Kyrgyz converts to Christianity, but has a wider impact on the religious landscape. I would once again like to refer to the dialogue that introduced this paper. When the young Komsomol member answered that he was a Muslim because he was Kyrgyz, he basically gave the only possible answer. Nowadays, the same question, even after removing the normative push — and simply asking, "are you Muslim?" — provokes very different reactions. Most secular Kyrgyz would like the answer to be as it once was: "yes, because I am Kyrgyz." But such answers are now given less often and with less confidence than before. Instead the answers tend to become either more assertive — "yes, because Islam is the true faith," or more apologetic, "yes, I am Muslim," followed by a qualification, "but I am not actively involved." The fight for the souls of the Kyrgyz has only begun and will have unmistakable impact on the way people in Kyrgyzstan see themselves and express ideas of culture and nationality.

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Banquets, Grant-Eaters and the Red Intelligentsia in Post-Soviet Georgia

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In many societies banquets are powerful tools for expressing, attributing and manipulating national identity. Additionally, they often function as social markers of individual passages like birth, baptism and marriage. Banquets are ruled by etiquette and force participants to subordinate themselves to a collective code of behavior.

In post-Soviet Georgia, the *supra*, a highly formalized banquet, is a core element of national culture and a crucial part of both festivities and daily life. The supra is structured by toasts and ruled by a toastmaster [*tamada*]. The toasts follow a generally uniform, yet not entirely fixed, structure. Certain topics are obligatory, such as toasts to the family and the deceased, and a certain pattern is prescribed, such as following a toast to the deceased by proposing a toast to life, often presented as a toast to children. In addition to this, toasts to attributed identity (e.g., family, gender) are most commonly proposed before toasts to acquired identity (e.g., profession, hobbies) (Chatwin 1997).

Some toasts reinforce national values (especially the toast to the motherland, but also more subtly expressed in toasts to culture, song, and history), gender identity (particularly the obligatory toast to women), family values, and peer group identity. Generally the toasts should express honor to the addressee or the topic in hand and should not contain any colloquial expressions, let alone swearwords, gossip, or criticism. The language used is itself characterized by the use of certain formulas (e.g., *gaumarjos* ["May victory be with you!"] at the end of each toast) and a high, grammatically complex, level of speaking (note especially the frequent use of the third subjunctive).

A good toastmaster is generally defined as a person with an extensive knowledge of history, poems, songs and traditions. He (or, in very rare cases, she) should not merely repeat formulas — that would be considered a bad performance. It is very important that the toastmaster is able to improvise and propose toasts in an original, personalized way. Thus, the topics of the main toasts and the general structure are given, but the transmitted factors, or "tradition," have to be acquired and integrated into personal, intentional behavior to complete the performance and make it successful. Consequently, a "correct" performance of the supra is not based on a faithful reproduction of an "authentic" or "true" procedure, but on the willingness and ability of the