'Culture' as a tool and an obstacle: missionary encounters in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan

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The relatively large number of converts from Islam to evangelical Christianity in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan is exceptional in the Muslim world and has challenged local confidence that Islam is an inseparable element of Kyrgyz nationality. I argue that part of the missionary success stems from unexpected synergies between communist cultural legacies and new evangelical approaches. Both communists and evangelicals attempted to advance their ideals by disconnecting religion and culture. But although these efforts delivered tangible results, they also had the (unintended) consequence of folklorizing and objectifying 'culture', thereby partly re-inscribing the ethnic boundaries that they intended to overcome.

In May 2004 an American evangelical missionary invited me to attend the circumcision feast (*sunnet toi*) of an Uzbek pastor's son in the south of Kyrgyzstan.[1] The host and his family had made extensive preparations for their numerous guests, including twenty-five foreign missionaries and about a hundred Kyrgyz and Uzbek Christians.[2] In many respects the celebrations resembled similar non-Christian festivities. The guests were seated at long tables covered with typical party food: fried bread, colourful candy, melons, nuts, rice dishes, mineral water, and soda, though no alcoholic drinks. Professional musicians played local instruments as well as a Yamaha synthesizer, once in a while interrupting the music to announce the arrival of new guests. Less usual were the dance ensembles that performed throughout the day, featuring missionaries and representatives of various ethnic groups – Uyghur, Kyrgyz, and Uzbek. Speeches were made. An American missionary spoke of the biblical origin of circumcision, arguing that although in Kyrgyzstan circumcision is often thought of as a Muslim custom, it had biblical roots. He cited passages from the Bible that described the 'covenant of circumcision' between Abraham and God (Genesis 17: 9-11), insisting that such similarities between Central Asian and Hebrew customs highlighted that Christianity should be seen as an Eastern instead of a Western religion.

What made this celebration special was that it simultaneously employed and challenged locally popular ideas of culture and religion. The celebration was provocative because the Christian participants actively appropriated cultural markers –

circumcision itself as well as 'national' dresses, foods, dances, and music – that in Kyrgyzstan are usually associated with Muslimness. From an evangelical perspective, this Kyrgyz-Uzbek atmosphere was the feast's prime attraction. It ostensibly demonstrated that missionaries were sensitive to local culture and showed that Christianity was compatible with Central Asian cultural identities. At the same time, the conspicuous role of foreign missionaries in financing, organizing, and consuming the event raised pertinent questions concerning the nature of this 'identity'. A remark by an American missionary during the festivities was telling in this respect: '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'.

Statements such as these underscore the argument that the employment of culture by indigenous rights groups, national elites, international NGOs, and missionaries have infused 'culture' with new ethnographic importance, while complicating its analytical use (Hann 2002; Kaneff & King 2004). That is, the divergent uses of 'culture' by various interest groups highlight that there is no underlying stable core to the concept. Therefore, as Gupta and Ferguson have argued, recognition of the contingent nature of what counts as culture requires that analysis focuses on the 'processes rather than essences [that] are involved in present experiences of cultural identity' (1992: 9). Moreover, since much is at stake in defining and defending the meaning of cultural identity, it is crucial to examine 'the processes through which the state, conflicting groups and/or elites, and people in general tend to appropriate "culture" in pushing particular agendas' (Andrade 2002: 236). While some authors have celebrated the empowering potential of 'culture' for indigenous movements, others have insisted that it is a 'double-edged sword: both a weapon of the weak and yet a potentially dangerous tool for nationalisms and oppression' (Kaneff & King 2004: 16). In post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan, where missionaries, national elites, individual Muslims, and new Christian Kyrgyz compete over the definition of 'culture', these oppressive and empowering elements of 'culture' need to be analysed in specific social contexts.

Although this short discussion highlights the unstable nature of 'culture', it is equally important to note that what counts as culture cannot be freely confiscated, appropriated, or created. The history of Christian missions has abundantly demonstrated that cultural translations of biblical messages often have unforeseen consequences (e.g. Jordan 1993; Keane 1996; Meyer 2002; Orta 2004). In this article I analyse such unintended consequences, but also aim to explain why, in this post-Soviet context, the cultural endeavours of evangelical missionaries found acceptance among certain layers of the Muslim Kyrgyz population. This question is particularly relevant because Christian missions have often found themselves incapable of making significant inroads among Muslims (Sharkey 2005: 47).

The communist attacks on Muslim structures and the socio-economic disruptions that occurred after the collapse of socialism account in part for the relative evangelical success in Kyrgyzstan (Pelkmans, Vaté & Falge 2005). Beyond such structural factors, however, I suggest that only by analysing the particular ways in which culture is appropriated, defended, and mobilized is it possible to capture the dynamics and implications of post-socialist religious encounters. What makes the case at hand especially interesting is that the notions of culture applied by evangelicals build upon seventy years of Soviet cultural politics that simultaneously objectified ethno-national categories and fostered a folkloristic understanding of culture (Peyrouse 2004; Slezkine 2000).[3] My central argument is that unexpected synergies between communist cultural

legacies and new evangelical cultural appropriations are particularly relevant in explaining the attraction of Christianity as well as the unintended consequences of evangelical efforts. Despite the seemingly unbridgeable difference between Soviet 'atheizers' and Christian evangelizers, their efforts at cultural appropriation (or their efforts to apply culture) show striking similarities. Both communists and evangelicals endeavoured to disentangle the ties between religion and culture. Ironically, in doing so they unavoidably folklorized and objectified 'culture', setting the stage for the emergence of new lines of inclusion and exclusion, sometimes along the ethnic boundaries they intended to overcome.

Religious and national categories in Soviet Kyrgyzstan

Estimates of the number of Kyrgyz converts to Christianity vary widely from 10,000 to 100,000 (Iarkov 2002: 84; Murzakhalilov 2004). My own estimate – based on oral information, internet data, and church visits throughout the country – would be around 20,000 Kyrgyz converts.[4] If this estimate is roughly correct, then approximately one per cent of the titular Kyrgyz population has converted to Christianity. Since these new Kyrgyz Christians are not evenly distributed over Kyrgyzstan's territory, but live concentrated in the north and especially in urban areas, conversion has in certain locations become a phenomenon that is both socially visible and threatening to many Kyrgyz.

To appreciate the challenge that evangelical Christianity poses to established ideas about culture and nationality, it is crucial to review how the relationship between religious and ethnic categories developed during Soviet times. It has by now been well documented that the Soviet regime did not act as a 'breaker of nations', but rather served to channel and institutionalize ethno-national categories in specific ways (Hirsch 2005; Pelkmans 2006; Slezkine 2000). What is important to point out here is that Soviet nationalities policies also greatly influenced the trajectories of religious categories. The following discussion, taken from historian Lemercier-Quelquejay, between a Soviet 'atheizer' and a young Kyrgyz member of the Komsomol (Communist Union of Youth), provides a telling example of the ethno-religious dilemma in the late Soviet period: ' "Why do you pretend to be a Muslim?" a Soviet anti-religious lecturer, Dorazhnov, asked a young member of the Kirghiz Komsomol. The answer was: "Because I am a Kirghiz" ' (1984: 22). Lemercier-Quelquejay used this two-line dialogue to illustrate the tight connection between ethno-national and religious categories in Central Asia in the 1980s. Because of this tight connection, she contended, it was not uncommon that devoted communists and atheists would also stress that they were Muslim. In effect, what had developed – and was labelled as such in Soviet literature – was the formation of non-believing, 'atheist Muslims' (1984: 22).

Rather than attributing the continued relevance of the label 'Muslim' to the presumed strength of pre-Soviet religious traditions, it is more fruitful to point out that the links between religious and ethnic identification were inadvertently perpetuated by Soviet national and cultural politics. Whereas the Soviet regime de-legitimized religious structures and repressed most aspects of religion's public manifestations, the regime ironically also encoded religious identities through its nationality politics. Kemal Karpat shows that in Soviet Central Asia the appeal of newly created national categories derived (in part) from 'the incorporation of many elements of the religious culture in the emerging "national" cultures [which gave] the adherents of the latter a sense of the historical continuity, strength, and durability of their cultures' (1993: 416).

Importantly, this process also backfired: the incorporation of religious elements in ethnic definitions also enshrined the position of Islam. Shahrani writes in an article on identity dynamics in Central Asia: 'The modern concept of nationalities has provided "legitimate" basis through which some of the most critical traditional notions of *Muslim* Turkestani identities and loyalties are communicated, and in which traditional values are reinvested' (1984: 35, emphasis original). Following Shahrani, it may be said that the creation of Central Asian 'nations' was facilitated and given legitimacy by the mobilization and institutionalization of local Muslim registers. Vice versa, it may also be said that Islam continued to be an important frame of reference because of this amalgamation of religious and national categories.

The relaxations on religious expression in the late 1980s and the sudden independence of Kyrgyzstan in 1991 led to a renewed interest in cultural and religious roots, much like elsewhere in the post-socialist world. As the political leadership looked for nation-binding themes, and large layers of the population explored their 'national religion', the ethno-religious amalgamation – the connection between Kyrgyz and Muslim identity – achieved a visible and public profile. At the same time, this 'ethnicization' of religion (Saroyan 1997: 95) invited critical responses from within, and recruitment attempts from the outside. This has been very true for the Muslim-Kyrgyz composite, which has become more vulnerable in the post-atheist era. Although most Kyrgyz continue to conceive of their ethnic identity as inseparable from Islam, this claim is now increasingly under attack. 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 interrogators are no longer atheists (who have ceased to exist, at least in public) but Christian and Muslim 'believers'. Both 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. Clearly there are differences between both groups as well. Many newly pious Muslims (Hefner 2005) interpret the identification of Islam with Kyrgyz tradition as a perversion of their faith. Thus, their anti-syncretism challenges aspects of 'Kyrgyz culture' – like weddings, funerals, and healing practices – that are seen as incompatible with Islam, and that prevent people from becoming 'true Muslims' (see also McBrien 2006). By contrast, evangelical Christians direct their primary criticism not at culture but at religion, claiming that Islam not only is a false religion but also distorts Kyrgyz culture. Instead, they propose a Christianity which they see as culturally consistent with Kyrgyz ways of life.

Evangelical logics

Official sources in Kyrgyzstan claim that there are about 1,000 foreign missionaries active in the Kyrgyz Republic (population five million), of whom 700 are Protestant Christians (Mamaiusupov 2003: 305-6; Murzakhalilov 2004: 84). The actual numbers may be still higher, because not all missionaries register with the authorities. Many short-term missionaries, for example, do not have the time (nor face the necessity) to undergo the protracted registration procedures. Others are registered as development workers, even though they acknowledge that missionary work is a major part of their activities.[5] This interest in Kyrgyzstan reflects a broader trend of increased evangelical attention for post-communist as well as Muslim societies. In the early 1990s post-communist societies were considered to be 'virgin fields' in which it was an 'exciting time to be ministering as God is bringing in the harvest'.[6] Likewise, since the first Gulf

war and especially after 9/11, evangelical interest to work among Muslims – considered the largest group of 'unreached people' – has sharply increased (Love 2000).[7] As a post-communist and Muslim region, Central Asia combines the attractions of both evangelical dreams. Moreover, of the Central Asian republics Kyrgyzstan stands out as the most liberal one. In the words of a commentator: 'Kyrgyzstan is what the US Center for World Missions is calling the most open Muslim country'.[8]

Missionaries arrive from countries as diverse as the United States and Ukraine, South Korea and Germany. They have ties to denominations like the Mennonite Brethren, Southern Baptists, Evangelical Lutherans, and various Pentecostal churches, which differ in their theology and missionary approach. Some of these missionaries establish churches along strictly defined denominational lines and maintain close contact with their congregations at home. A significant group of long-term missionaries, however, aims to escape denominational categorization and present themselves as non-denominational or as evangelical. My focus is on this group of long-term missionaries who are involved in promoting and assisting the emergence of what they called a *Kyrgyz* church. Associated with four American and German organizations – Youth with a Mission (YWAM), Aslan Alliance, Central Asian Partnership, and Logos – these approximately 100 missionaries all know each other and frequently co-operate in specific mission activities.[9] Most significantly for the purpose of this article, they all see a so-called 'ethnic barrier' as the main obstacle to the conversion of the Kyrgyz. In the words of one missionary associated with Logos:

> Initial negative attitudes of Kyrgyz towards Christianity should in most cases be attributed not to Islamic conviction, but to people's quest for national identity. At the religious level they connect their national identity with Islam and traditional beliefs. A change towards another religion will therefore be seen as betrayal of the nation ... In order to weaken the argument that Christianity is a religion of Russians or Germans, it is crucial that a Kyrgyz stays a Kyrgyz after his conversion (Zweininger 2002: 89, translation MP).

What is at issue here are the ties between belief, religion, and ethno-national identity, which the evangelicals aim to untangle and reassemble. To many evangelical Christians, the term 'religion' has negative connotations, as it reeks of ritualized performance and of clerical hierarchies. To them, religion is only the *form* or the social cover, and should always be secondary to the real issue: belief in the fundamental tenets of the Christian message. This stance is grounded in the evangelical Christian discomfort with the relation between spirit and matter and the resulting effort to maintain or produce, as Keane (2007: 28) phrased it, 'discrete boundaries between materiality and meaning'. In this particular missionary encounter the stress on meaning – on the fundamentals of Christianity – has been combined with an internal critique of previous 'imperialistic' roles played by missionaries, triggering renewed attention to 'cultural contextualization' as a precondition to missionary success.[10] Analysis of evangelical missionary work in Kyrgyzstan reveals three – often implicit – basic logics that underlie their activities. Respectively I have termed these 'de-Russifying Christianity', 'de-Islamizing Kyrgyz culture', and 'Kyrgyzifying Christianity'.

The first theme addresses the Russian connotations of Christianity, as reflected in common parlance among Muslim Kyrgyz that 'Jesus is a Russian God'. This conflation of Christianity with Russianness can be traced back to the incorporation of Kyrgyzstan into the Russian Empire in the mid-nineteenth century as well as to Soviet

anti-religious propaganda. As a result, Christianity came to be associated with people worshipping icons and crossing themselves, and with bearded priests dressed in long black cassocks uttering religious formulas. Among Kyrgyz these images often arouse negative emotions. As an acquaintance told me while referring to Orthodox Christian practices: 'All this is barbaric to us'. De-Russifying Christianity is not only crucial for overcoming such negative stereotypes, it also allows evangelical missionaries to exhibit their dissimilarity from Orthodox Christianity. Part of this 'de-Russification' comes naturally, as the services of evangelical congregations are very different from Orthodox services and show none of the Orthodox symbols and signs. In fact, the absence of visual religious symbols in evangelical churches allow missionaries to claim that they are not just proposing a different religion – a different branch of Christianity – but that they are a 'gathering of believers', who have *overcome* religion. Religion, in this line of thinking, is just 'form': at best it distracts, at worst it leads people astray. Thus, because of its Russian 'religious' connotations, some evangelicals avoid the word 'Christian' altogether, and instead talk about 'followers of Jesus'.

While the visual characteristics of evangelical churches and services may be sufficiently different from Russian Orthodoxy, missionaries have taken more active steps to adjust Christian *language*. This is not simply an issue of translation into Kyrgyz. In fact, many urban Kyrgyz are more fluent in the Russian than in the Kyrgyz language. But even if some Kyrgyz converts prefer to go to Russian-language services, the ethnic connotations of many Christian terms still arouse negative sentiments. To counter this problem, evangelicals often employ what they call 'Central Asian Russian' in their writings. This is standard Russian with the difference that Christian names and terms have been replaced with Turkic or Arabic equivalents. Thus, the Russian word *Biblia* is substituted with the Arabic *Injil* (Gospel or New Testament) or *Yiyk Kitebi*, which literally means 'holy book'. Likewise, the name for Jesus, known by most Kyrgyz as 'the Russian God' *Isus Khristos*, has become *Isa* or *Isa Mashayak* (Jesus the Saviour). The word for church is equally problematic. The Russian word *tserkov* as well as its Kyrgyz derivative *tsirkö* both indicate an Orthodox church. Because of these connotations the word 'church' is preferably avoided, and the term favoured instead is *jiin* (meeting), or less frequently *syiyny üiü* (house of prayer). These innovations reduce associations with Russianness and offer the additional advantage that Kyrgyz Christians can speak in public about religious affairs without revealing their religious affiliation. At the same time, though, these discursive techniques provoke accusations of deception. In particular, voices in the national media have repeatedly criticized the use of Islamic vocabulary by missionaries as an attempt to hide Christianity in Islamic guise and thus mislead people into conversion.[11]

A second crucial element in evangelical efforts is to 'de-Islamize' Kyrgyz culture. It is telling that evangelical Christians rarely speak of Kyrgyz people as Muslims point blank, 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, a Muslim background, or Muslim customs. And when talking about the religious situation in Kyrgyzstan, phrases like 'communist oppression', 'spiritual vacuum', and 'religious degeneration' predominate. In conversations they further trivialize Islam in Kyrgyzstan by insisting that it only has a superficial influence on Kyrgyz culture or by insisting that Islam in Kyrgyzstan is 'just about identity', an identity that makes sense only in opposition to Russians. Implicitly, like the previously mentioned Soviet atheizer (see above), these missionaries basically ask Kyrgyz people 'why they

pretend to be Muslim'. There appears to be a twofold logic behind the described discursive practices. By implying that Kyrgyz are not *real* Muslims, they create the possibility of a directed dialogue in which the missionaries may raise their objections: you drink alcohol, you don't pray five times daily, those are actually shamanic healing practices, etcetera. In such dialogical encounters, the discursive practices function to dissociate the respondent from Islam. Moreover, by dissociating local religious practices from Islam, the evangelicals imply that there is only one true Islam, which they see as dogmatic by nature.[12] In essence, by stressing an essentialist core to Islam – with which very few Kyrgyz identify – evangelicals are able to argue that Islam and Kyrgyz 'culture' are incompatible. This way, they tempt people to make a decisive choice. And Christianity, they suggest, is far more in line with Kyrgyz ways of life.

This brings us to the third element – Kyrgyzifying Christianity. I repeatedly 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. One American missionary (linked to YWAM) told me that the Bible had captivated him since he read it for the first time, yet that translating its messages to contemporary North American life was often challenging. 'But when I came here', he continued, 'it was amazing. For these people reading the Bible must be like reading about their own forefathers, about their own culture!' A significant number of young American missionaries claimed to value the preservation of Kyrgyz culture among converts. After having attended a festive service in a Kyrgyz-led church in Bishkek, a YWAM missionary who speaks Kyrgyz told me how pleased he was with the use of Kyrgyz cultural idioms in the service: 'The way they were dancing in the church and then went outside and slaughtered a cow. I love that, they were not asked to do anything that was not part of their heritage, of their culture'. Similar ideas surfaced in other practices. The set-up in several churches, for example, was arranged to stress Kyrgyzness. Everyone, including the pastor, sat on felt carpets (*shyrdaks*) on the floor; the elderly received seats of honour, whereas young people sat near the entrance. The songs were in Kyrgyz, accompanied by music played on 'typical' Kyrgyz instruments. The intentionality behind such arrangements may be seen from the comment of a German missionary to Kyrgyzstan, who wrote that church services 'are deliberately designed to be as culturally relevant as possible' (Rempel 1999: 6).

So what is happening here? The missionaries want to carry across the message that Jesus is for everyone and that all cultures are equal, or equally special. But the contextualization of Christian messages, and the resulting stress on 'local culture' in missionary discourse and church activities, raises questions concerning the involved definition of culture. As the examples presented above showed, in the hands of evangelicals, Kyrgyz 'culture' implied a selective rendering of national symbols and signs, with an obvious emphasis on the visual and oral through music, dance, and public displays. In short, the kind of culture that evangelicals promoted was Kyrgyz in form and Christian in content. Indeed, there were clear parallels with Soviet uses of culture as condensed in the communist slogan 'national in form and socialist in content'. Both communists and evangelicals heralded the external manifestations of 'national cultures' as evident in dressing-styles, cuisine, handicraft, and the like, while simultaneously advancing specific ideologies. Like in the communist parallel, the culture promoted by evangelical Christians was of a folkloristic nature. And like in the communist parallel, there was always the risk that 'form' would take predominance over 'content'.[13]

Challenging identity: employing culture in the 'Church in Bishkek'

The relevance of discussing missionary practices is, of course, dependent on the question of how the ideas advanced by missionaries are interpreted, appropriated, and modified by Kyrgyz Christians. As Terence Ranger argued for the African context, the common tendency to focus exclusively on missionaries, and to see missionaries and local Christians as opposing categories, fails to recognize the complexity of missionary encounters and of religious change (1987*a*: 182-3). Instead, he argued, 'we should see mission churches as much less alien and independent churches as much less "African" ' (1987*b*: 31, quoted in Meyer 2004: 454-5). Since this article focuses on evangelical Christians who actively try to 'contextualize' religious messages and practices, tend to de-emphasize denominational differences, and aim to foster the emergence of a 'Kyrgyz church', assuming a straightforward division between missionaries and local Christians would be particularly problematic.[14] Indeed, although some of the missionaries led their own 'missionary church', they also actively supported 'independent churches' by providing financial support and technical assistance, facilitating study visits, and providing theological training.

One 'independent' church – the 'Church in Bishkek' – received particular attention from missionaries, precisely because it embodied the promise of becoming a truly 'Kyrgyz' church. Although not officially linked to a missionary organization, the church received substantial donations from individual missionaries and missionary organizations. The leaders of the church had extensive contacts with missionaries of the previously mentioned organizations (YWAM and CAPS in particular) and its services were almost always attended by several foreigners. At the same time, the wish to be (seen as) 'independent' meant that leaders of the 'Church in Bishkek' publicly stressed difference between their church and missionary churches; they were also critical of foreign missionaries who failed to appreciate the cultural specificities of Kyrgyzstan. A focus on this church, then, can provide important insights into the possibilities and limitations of the cultural endeavours undertaken by missionaries and selectively appropriated as well as enhanced by Kyrgyz evangelicals. To sketch the origins and development of this church, I will start by introducing its founder and senior pastor.

Pastor Tamaz had undergone a tumultuous spiritual journey, which he eagerly described to me.[15] Born in the provincial town of Naryn (East Kyrgyzstan), he had moved to Bishkek to study at a *madrasah* in the early 1990s. While studying at the *madrasah*, Tamaz heard about Kyrgyz people who had converted to Christianity. Outraged by the possibility, he and a friend decided to investigate the situation. Having arrived at the church, his friend entered into a heated debate with the Baptist pastor. Tamaz stood by and observed his friend becoming ever more enraged, while the pastor retained his calm posture and replied patiently and convincingly to the questions and accusations. Tamaz presented the event as a turning-point in his life. Soon after he gave up his studies at the *madrasah* and joined the Baptist church instead. In the following years Tamaz climbed the church hierarchy. He served first as group leader and eventually as pastor leading a congregation across the border in Kazakhstan. However, disagreement over the doctrine of eternal security (in salvation) led to his excommunication from the church.[16] Subsequently Tamaz founded a church in Bishkek together with a Korean missionary. Although it had presumably been agreed that Tamaz would lead the church, once the congregation had grown to fifty members the missionary decided that he himself would be pastor. Tamaz felt abused and claimed that the 'disrespectful' way he was treated characterized a general pattern: foreign missionaries

tend to use Kyrgyz believers to do the hard work (evangelizing) and subsequently impose their faulted Western ideas. Nevertheless, Tamaz was hopeful for the future. He explained that while years ago Kyrgyz pastors 'scolded each other like small children', they had finally come to realize that they could survive without the assistance of foreigners.

In 1998, Tamaz decided to set up his own independent church. Starting with a dozen believers who gathered in his apartment, the church had steadily expanded. In 2004 the church had some 200 regular attendants at the central church in Bishkek, and another 300 people attending six daughter churches. The name of the central church – Church in Bishkek – may be confusing given the fact that there were as many as fifty Protestant churches in the city. Nevertheless, the name was carefully chosen. 'Church in Bishkek', according to Tamaz, was similar to the names of New Testament churches like the 'Church in Antiocha' or the 'Church in Jerusalem'.[17] Thus, the name indicated a symbolic return to biblical models of Christianity and reflected the wish that denominational differences would disappear in the future. Instead, the church Tamaz envisioned would be a church for all believers and fit within Kyrgyz culture.

Constructing a Christian self

The spoken word occupies a central place in evangelical Christianity. In her study of fundamentalist Baptists in the US, Harding shows convincingly that conversion was both produced and revealed through distinctive speech patterns. In this process, she argued, 'listeners become public speakers of the Gospel' (1987: 16). A related question relevant to the purpose of this article is to what extent this principle produces continuity in discourse between foreign missionaries and Kyrgyz church members. In this section I will show that the ideas about culture promoted by foreign missionaries tended to be replicated in self-portrayals and conversion accounts, not least because these ideas allowed Kyrgyz Christians to counter allegations of national betrayal. The importance of speech – of recounting conversion stories in particular – also means that the stories I was told were in no sense 'hidden scripts' that needed to be painstakingly solicited; they were public statements repeated for potentially interested audiences. They were simultaneously narrations of experiences and invitations for the listener to accept Christ (see also Harding 1987). In my discussion I focus on this first aspect in order to illustrate how conversion stories connect ideas of cultural and ethnic belonging with notions of faith.[18] The story of Mirgul, a member of the Church in Bishkek, is illustrative of how converts carve out Christian space in Kyrgyz society and how they constitute themselves as culturally specific persons.

Almost immediately after we started talking, Mirgul stressed that she did not belong to any particular religion or denomination. In her view, religions hinder people from finding the truth: 'God told me that he didn't create religions – he didn't create Islam. The only thing you need is faith'. She continued by describing how 'religion' had hindered her when she was a child. Her parents had died at an early age and Mirgul was raised by her grandparents in a village in Talas province, 200 kilometres southwest of Bishkek. As she told it, being deprived of parental love had caused an 'emptiness in her heart' which made her sensitive to existential issues. At that time she considered herself a Muslim and was proud of it. Whenever she was afraid, she would repeat the phrase *la ilaha illa llah wa* (there is no god but God), which her grandmother had taught her. Also, she felt protected by the magical power of stones she collected at the burial site of the Kyrgyz hero Manas. Mirgul may well have discussed these and other instances to

show how 'hopeless' her previous beliefs had been, because she concluded: 'At that time I wanted to believe so badly, but [my religion] didn't give me anything'.

Mirgul's rendering of her pre-conversion background explicitly challenged what she disapprovingly called 'religion'. First, she stressed that her conversion was not about religion or religious practice – which she saw as human inventions – but about truth and faith, as reflected in her search for the meanings of life and death. Second, she depicted the religious ideas taught by her grandmother as ineffective superstitions. Her story thus strongly resembled the discourse of missionaries on 'folk Islam', which, intentionally or not, functioned to trivialize the Muslim affiliation of Kyrgyz.

Mirgul's doubts concerning the effectiveness of her native religion grew more intense after an encounter with a German 'believer' (probably a Mennonite), whom she met after she had moved to Bishkek. She described this person as very different from other people, standing out in honesty and emotional stability. Although she enjoyed his stories about Jesus, she was convinced that they were not meant for her because she was not a German. None the less, she continued to think about Jesus and even approached an elderly Russian Orthodox woman to enquire if she could be baptized. The lady dismissed the idea, saying: 'Girl, you are a Muslim! Anyway, baptism is only for the very young'.

Some time after this disappointing encounter, Mirgul visited her sister and other relatives in Talas province. Mirgul's sister told her about a new group of Christians which included some Kyrgyz. Together they decided to attend a service: 'We entered, and for the first time in my life I experienced that atmosphere. I was in awe to find such a place, such people ... Afterwards it was as if I had wings. The only thing in my head was that Jesus is alive'. Not long thereafter Mirgul returned to Bishkek. Although she considered herself a believer at the time, in retrospect she recognized that she continued 'to live in sin', enmeshed in the 'worldly life' of the city.

This second part of Mirgul's story described the obstacles to finding and accepting the truth – obstacles which she located both in herself and in the social environment. For Mirgul, the faith of the German believer was unattainable because she was not a German. The negative response of the Russian Orthodox woman further affirmed that differences between Christians and Muslims were inborn and ethnically fixed. Only when Mirgul met a Kyrgyz believer was she able to find 'the truth'. But having overcome this 'ethnic barrier' and knowing 'the truth' was not the same as accepting it. The attractions of city life – presented as social pressures in other conversion narratives – kept her from leading a 'holy life' herself.

Mirgul discussed extensively the circumstances under which she finally became a *true* believer. She had travelled to Kazakhstan to assist in selling the apartment of a relative. After several weeks, a potential buyer finally came forward: 'She was a beautiful lady, about sixty years of age, very richly dressed ... She said that she had been to Mecca and that she was a Muslim ... She was also president of all the *ekstrasensy* (visionaries) in central Kazakhstan'. The woman agreed to buy the apartment but negotiated that she would start using it immediately and would deliver the money within fifteen days. When the woman delayed making payments, Mirgul threatened to call the police.

> Then [this lady] started shouting that she would paralyse me and turn me into an invalid, so that I would never again be able to move my arms and feet. And she would do it that very night. You see, she worshipped Satan to bring this harm to me ... Right then and there – on the street while snow was falling – I accepted Christ as the Lord, as Saviour. It was as if I was drunk. I felt so good and strong, and I easily fell asleep ... The next morning I met the woman again. She stood there, shivering as if sick,

and without a word she handed me the money. It turns out that when she [used her magic that very night] she was struck by horrible pains. I was so happy. Since then my life completely changed. My friends, that world, it fell away ... It has been five years since and I still thank God every single day.

Whereas in the first two sections of her story Mirgul described the social and psychological factors that played a role in her conversion, here she staged the active presence of Jesus. She positioned her own conversion experience at the epicentre of the struggle between powers of good and evil, in which she managed to survive only with Jesus' help. Tellingly, evil was represented by a Muslim woman who employed 'occult' powers which – symbolically at least – referred back to the 'superstitious' beliefs Mirgul had held in her youth.

The relation between faith, culture, and religion was important not only in Mirgul's coming to faith, but also in the way she practised it as a believer. Mirgul insisted that she had remained fully Kyrgyz and that her customs all stayed the same:

The only things I disposed of are the occult practices of Kyrgyz people. I no longer worship trees, water, or stones. But for the rest everything stayed the same. We [Christians] have circumcision, we have wedding customs that include the *kalym* [bride-price] and we have all kinds of national celebrations.

Mirgul also explained that she continued to attend funerals of her non-converted relatives. During such funerals she would pray in her own way, but would complete the prayers like the others with '*omen*'.[19] She explained that some new believers start copying foreigners, something to which she objected: 'We don't need American culture. We need Kyrgyz culture'. A little later she added: 'I think that our culture should be a biblical culture. We didn't change our nationality. Instead of [having] religion we now believe. That is all'.

Mirgul was an enthusiastic and compelling narrator. This may well have been the reason why church members introduced me to her in the first place. Significantly, her story closely paralleled stories of converts who were less vocally apt. Stories typically started with a pre-conversion stage in which one was left unsatisfied with available religious beliefs and practices, followed by a move to a city and/or a personal crisis. Subsequently the person had an encounter with believers, dealt with obstacles related to family or social environment, experienced a crisis and miraculous recovery, and finally found joy of assured salvation through Christ.[20] This spiritual journey served not only to highlight the sincerity of conversion, but also to criticize the corruptions of worldly life in post-socialist Kyrgyzstan.

However, the selective reading of such stories was clear: potential converts face difficult obstacles but the rewards are worth the pain. Moreover, the implication was that one could accept Jesus and still be a true Kyrgyz. Of course, the message did not ease the social exclusion experienced by most converts, but it *did* provide them with a self-image and a vocabulary that could be used to counter negative reactions. In part, then, the insistence on Kyrgyzness may be seen as a way to neutralize negative reactions of people who accuse converts of selling or betraying the nation, just as it can be seen as a conversion strategy that makes conversion to Christianity acceptable and imaginable. Still, the employed concept of Kyrgyzness as well as the extent to which believers could participate in 'Kyrgyz culture' had limitations. It did not allow full participation in social life, and was not necessarily accepted by non-believers.

Folklorization and deception

The selective reading of Kyrgyzness corresponded closely to the cultural endeavours undertaken by the Church in Bishkek, and especially to the critical connection between cultural 'form' and Christian 'content'. It was almost standard practice at church celebrations or life-cycle rituals to make the events look as Kyrgyz as possible. For example, during one Christian fundraising event (co-organized by the church) dancers were dressed in 'traditional' clothing, while the musician who played the *komuz* (stringed instrument) wore a *kalpak* (felt hat) and *chapan* (long black coat). In the lobby were stalls that sold Christian Kyrgyz handicraft like small *shyrdaks* (felt rugs) with texts in English like 'North, South, West, East, Jesus is for everyone' and 'Pray for Kyrgyzstan'. A central place was reserved for a nativity scene in which Joseph wore a *kalpak* and Mary a 'traditional' Kyrgyz dress.

Such cultural displays may be described as 'folkloristic', in the sense of being systematic attempts to convey notions of tradition and authenticity through stylized displays of culture. Obviously these displays had limited significance in social life, something which Mirgul's story already indicated. It was possible to attend funerals, but not to pray in the same way as Muslims. Likewise, though evangelical codes did not proscribe attending parties, the ban on consuming alcohol limited participation in common forms of conviviality.[21] And although Mirgul stressed that 'everything stayed the same', conversion to her new faith did not only require her to denounce the spiritual ideas held by Muslim Kyrgyz, but also meant that, as she put it, her previous 'friends, that world, it fell away'.

The performances and commodities revealed the tendency to treat 'culture' as a set of free-floating images and signs that could be attached to a new set of morals and worldview. Discomfort with this understanding of culture partly explained negative reactions of several Muslim Kyrgyz acquaintances to pictures that I showed them of the events organized to celebrate the five-year mark of the Church in Bishkek. For this special event a yurt (*boz-üi*) was erected in the church-yard, the worship group was dressed in brightly coloured shiny Kyrgyz dresses, and many men wore *kalpaks*. The pictures also showed the slaughtering of a cow and several sheep, an open-air prayer meeting in the yard, and people praying with arms outstretched. For my acquaintances these visual images signified Kyrgyzness. They were astounded to learn that the people in the pictures were Christians, for what they saw in the photographs indicated Kyrgyzness and could not possibly have had anything to do with Christianity. Since several of them had previously mentioned that abandoning Islam implies a betrayal of Kyrgyz nationality, I asked them to revisit that statement after having seen the pictures of Kyrgyz Christians. One of them said, 'Well yes, they dress like Kyrgyz, they act like Kyrgyz, but still ... inside they must be different'. My acquaintances would not easily give up their convictions about the ties between religion and nationality. One of them exclaimed: 'Dressing up like that is plain deception'. According to him, this 'abuse of Kyrgyz culture' was even worse than becoming a Russian – an Orthodox Christian.

Thus, at least two limitations followed from the evangelical uses of 'culture'. On one hand, the displays were not necessarily accepted by non-Christians, for whom the appropriation of Kyrgyz styles was sometimes a sign of superficiality or of cultural theft. On the other hand, the extensive cultural displays did not mean that believers could fully participate in social life. After having converted, their social world often became centred on other Christians. Precisely because of these challenges and difficulties, there was an inherent tendency to assign a more active role to 'cultural form'.

Cultural objectification and ethnocentrism

The evangelical attempt to disconnect faith, religion and culture runs into its own limits here. There is an unavoidable contradiction in disconnecting Christianity from 'Russian culture' and then abundantly displaying Kyrgyzness. One obvious consequence of this valorization of Kyrgyz culture was that people of different ethnic background became less attracted to the services. Several female Russian believers told me about their disillusionment with the churches that they used to attend. The services had been in Russian and were attended by Tatars, Koreans, Russians, and Kyrgyz alike. One of the women said: 'Suddenly everything had to change into Kyrgyz: the new pastor was a Kyrgyz, we had to sing Kyrgyz songs, etcetera. Just because they think that Russian [language] would make people think of icons and church bells'.

Apart from such 'earthly' exclusionary effects, the objectification of culture also formed the basis for a new ethnocentric cosmology. At the end of a service at the Church in Bishkek, Pastor Tamaz announced the performance of an *Isachi*. The term *Isachi*, he explained, was derived from *Manaschi*, or narrator of the famous Kyrgyz Manas epic. The *Isachi* in question, a woman wearing a pink and black 'national Kyrgyz dress', was seated on a felt carpet on the podium. She closed her eyes for a moment, then lifted her hands with palms up, and started reciting. Her sitting posture and arm movements, as well as the rhythm and intonation of her voice, strongly resembled performances by *manaschi*s. The story she told, however, was that of the life of *Isa* (Jesus). Several people I spoke to after the service, including two Kyrgyz-speaking American missionaries, were full of praise for this remarkable performance. One of them commented that this was such a perfect example of the way the 'good news' can be contextualized, presenting it in a form that was recognizable to Kyrgyz people. When I met Pastor Tamaz again, he mentioned that another five *Isachis* were in training, and would soon be able to perform all over Kyrgyzstan.

Pastor Tamaz's efforts were not just attempts to contextualize Christian messages, but also reflected what he imagined to be God's plans with the Kyrgyz. Tamaz had become convinced that the Kyrgyz were descendants of one of the lost tribes of Israel.[22] He based this view on certain similarities between the Old Testament and the Manas epic. This epic tells the story of the hero Manas, who managed to integrate feuding Kyrgyz tribes into one nation and to defeat its enemies. Aside from the fact that the Manas epic pays as much attention to bloody battles and etiquette as the Old Testament does, Pastor Tamaz was especially intrigued by several more specific similarities. One of these was a semblance of personal names. The hero Manas has a father called Jakyp, which resembles the biblical story of Jacob, who adopts as his native son his grandson Manasseh (Genesis 48:5). Moreover, this grandfather-grandson adoption corresponded to the Kyrgyz custom to allow grandparents to adopt their first-born grandson. The hero Manas, according to Tamaz, was at times 'like David, who also had forty commanders of whom three stood out', and at others like Jesus, because it was likewise predicted that Manas 'would come to save his people'. Moreover, Tamaz continued, 'After Jesus was born, all infants were killed. When Manas was born they also killed all the children his age'. To Tamaz such similarities indicated that the Manas epic was rooted in the Bible. The biblical stories had been orally transmitted within the Jewish Manasseh tribe (the Kyrgyz, that is), meanwhile being changed and transformed into what is now known as the Manas epic.

Tamaz was not the only one to cherish these views. One of his friends, an American missionary associated with YWAM, had written a booklet titled *Ak Kalpak* in which he

documented what he called 'God's fingerprints' on Kyrgyz culture, paying particular attention to the similarities between the Manas epic and the Old Testament. The booklet was translated in Kyrgyz and distributed by the 'Church in Bishkek'.[23] More-over, in June 2004, Aslan Alliance (mentioned above) organized a public event, titled 'Who is Manas?', in which (mostly foreign) evangelical Christians approvingly discussed similarities between the characters in the epic and the Bible.

While this cross-fertilization between missionaries and the Church in Bishkek forms an important backdrop to the story, it is equally important to note that the 'lost tribe' thesis was controversial within evangelical circles. Some Kyrgyz Christians and foreign missionaries had second thoughts about the ideas that Pastor Tamaz was propagating so actively. For example, a German lecturer of Central Asian church history at a theological seminary in Bishkek pointed out that even though he considered the similarities to be remarkable, they could just as well be the result of interaction between Kyrgyz bards and Nestorian monks in medieval times. However, Tamaz and his fol-lowers were convinced that such cynical remarks would be proven false in the future. Certain that the Kyrgyz were actually Israelites, Tamaz foresaw a special role for the Kyrgyz in the last wave of missionary activity before the second coming of Christ. According to Tamaz, the Kyrgyz are more charismatic, spiritually predisposed, and energetic than Europeans and Americans. The latter might have organizational quali-ties but are unable to ignite the passion in others.

> It seems to me that God needs humble, open-minded people. Not like Germans or Dutch, who have a lot of money and a technocratic way of thinking. They may have big plans, but they are not able to establish large churches [i.e. attract many believers]. Simple Kyrgyz people can achieve much more. Probably God meant it to be that way. Because otherwise people would say, 'oh well, it is just because of those rich Americans, that is why they [converted]'.

In January 2004, at a national evangelical convention, Tamaz expressed these ideas to a broad audience of Kyrgyz pastors. His ideas met with strong opposition from several pastors, who threatened to excommunicate him because they felt that his preoccupation with Kyrgyz history was distorting Christian teachings. But the controversy sub-sided and Tamaz continued to popularize his idea of the Kyrgyz as a lost tribe of Israel. Just before I left the country in August 2004, Tamaz arranged a nationwide competition to search for hidden similarities between the Manas epic and the Bible and had this broadcast on regional and national television channels. The emphasis on the Manas epic and the idea of 'spiritual superiority' based on biological descent go a long way in infusing Kyrgyz Christianity with new 'racial overtones'. Ironically, this Kyrgyz Chris-tian ethnocentrism was a logical, if unintended, outcome of evangelical attempts to contextualize biblical messages in a post-Soviet context.

The core of the evangelical message is that people should pursue a personal rela-tionship with God, and that Jesus died for people from all nations. The efforts to disconnect the Christian message from its Russian connotations and to prove that it is possible to remain Kyrgyz after conversion were part of this ideal. But although the intent was to disconnect the biblical message from its Russian cultural connotations so that it would be accessible to Kyrgyz as well, these efforts created new divisions within the community of believers. Ironically, dissolving one ethnic barrier meant that new boundaries were created in the process. This is so because actually practised faith, even in the case of evangelical Christianity with its stress on personal salvation, is deeply social. Therefore, 'form' and 'content' can never be durably separated.

Culture and religion

Almost a century ago, Émile Durkheim made his classic argument that religion expresses collective realities, indeed that 'the idea of society is the soul of religion' (2002 [1912]: 48). Durkheim saw religion as 'an eminently social thing' (2002 [1912]: 38), a view that still forms the basis of many anthropological studies of religion. But how does this principle hold in relation to religious groups that stress individual relations with God, operating in a country that has experienced seventy years of state atheism? As I outlined above, the social nature of religion took specific forms in the Soviet Union, whose narrow religious and ethno-territorial policies encouraged the fusion of ethnic and religious categories. In a way, the recent surge of ethnic imagery and the disappearance of Soviet ideology have made these connections even more important.

The continued importance of the ethno-religious connection is one of the reasons why many (secular) Muslim Kyrgyz resent the influx of Protestant missions and why the conversion of Kyrgyz people is so much feared: they pose a threat to familiar patterns of belonging and non-belonging. These fears have started to resonate in national politics. Whereas in the early 1990s evangelical missionaries were welcomed as agents of Western values, in recent years the government has made attempts to limit the activities of missionaries and to undermine the basis of the most successful churches. National media outlets have also grown increasingly negative about the missionary 'invasion', portraying evangelical churches as 'totalitarian cults' using hypnosis and psychological manipulation to brainwash their members.[24] The most frequently expressed fear by reporters and state officials is that these churches may destabilize the nation by introducing foreign religions based on ideas alien to Kyrgyz culture.[25]

Received notions become increasingly dear to people only when they lose their self-evident nature. In line with this I suggest that the increased stress on the ethno-religious connection reflects its vulnerability and that the relative success of evangelical Christians (as well as of scripturalist Muslims) is related to the effects of the Soviet pairing of ethnic and religious labels. Though on the surface this pairing secured the position of Islam in Soviet Kyrgyzstan, it simultaneously undermined its viability in the post-Soviet context. In particular, the conflation of religious and ethno-national categories ignored and partly excluded other aspects of religious life (such as belief, morality, aesthetics) as well as different personal motivations (devotion, existential questions) which became increasingly important in destabilized post-Soviet contexts. Phrased differently, the very success of the amalgamation of Muslimness with Kyrgyzness partly carried its own demise as it made the constituting parts seem shallow to people who started reconsidering them in the 1990s. While notions of Muslimness and Kyrgyzness were previously positioned against an atheist ideology and a Russian 'other', these negative frames of reference became less relevant after the collapse of the Soviet Union. For many, this raised the troubling question of what else was involved in their Muslimness beyond Kyrgyzness.

This lack of clarity concerning the position of Islam is one of the reasons why evangelical Christianity managed to make significant inroads in Kyrgyzstan. Evangelical Christians challenged people's religious affiliation by stressing differences between religion, culture, and faith. Like the Soviets they aimed to stress differences between 'form' and 'content', while simultaneously advancing stereotypic views of 'real' Islam. In the context of post-Soviet decline and existential uncertainty the evangelical emphasis on individuality – on salvation through an individual relation with Christ – proved attractive. Evangelical logics dictated that people would be able to see this message of

salvation once they had overcome the 'ethnic barrier'. But despite their proclaimed intention to disconnect faith from religion and culture, and despite the emphasis on individuality and private faith, evangelicals ended up strengthening these cultural connections in new ways. While foreign missionaries viewed Kyrgyz cultural displays as effective means (the form) of transmitting biblical messages (the content), the case of Tamaz clearly indicated that 'form' and 'content' did not remain conveniently separated. His insistence on viewing the Kyrgyz as a lost tribe of Israel demonstrated the importance of finding Kyrgyz authenticity in Christianity, thus blending 'form' and 'content' in the idea of a chosen nation. In spirit, this historical narrative resonated with Soviet ideas of culture and ethnicity as primordial features, but also reflected the need to respond to accusations of national betrayal befalling Kyrgyz who abandoned Islam. As such, the incursions of evangelical Christianity underline that actually practised religion is deeply social and tightly entwined with ideas of belonging, even if the proposed combinations between ethnicity, culture, and religion are entirely novel.

NOTES

This article is based on fieldwork in Kyrgyzstan between August 2003 and September 2004, carried out in the context of the project 'Religion and Civil Society after Socialism' at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle, Germany. Earlier versions of this article benefited from the stimulating comments of Chris Hann, Julie McBrien, Johan Rasanayagam, Lale Yalçin-Heckmann, and four anonymous referees for *JRAI*.

[1] I employ the terms 'Uzbek' and 'Kyrgyz' in the way that they are used locally. This means that the terms refer to official ethno-national categorizations as inscribed in passports and other documents, which are locally seen as based on biological descent.

[2] The term 'evangelical' denotes a range of Protestant denominations that emphasize the authority of the Bible and the importance of evangelization. I prefer the term 'evangelical' over 'Protestant' because it underscores differences with mainstream Protestant groups that are less engaged in missionary activities.

[3] The term 'folklore' is generally used to indicate 'traditional customs, tales, sayings, or art forms preserved among a people' (*Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*). In this article, however, 'folklore' indicates selective appropriations of cultural forms for representative purposes. A statement by Miller about the role of folklore in the Soviet Union is particularly relevant: 'Folklore ... had a purpose – the destruction of the old way of life and the building of communism' (1990: 13). This assertion is applicable not only to communists but, as we will see, to evangelical Christians as well.

[4] Estimating the number of Kyrgyz Christians is not a straightforward matter. For example, should one include children of Kyrgyz Christians, or Kyrgyz who were baptized but no longer attend church? Though important for understanding the impact of evangelical Christianity in Kyrgyzstan, I did not include them in this estimate.

[5] Such missionaries often call themselves 'tent-makers', a term which refers to the missionary activities of the apostle Paul, who combined his religious service with the profession of making tents (Acts 18: 1-5).

[6] http://www.wccpc.org/our_mission_work_files/MarkPalmer.doc, last accessed 28 November 2005.

[7] An indication of this increased interest is that the widely circulated *International Journal of Frontier Missions* devoted seven issues to Islam between 1994 and 2005, but none in the ten years prior to 1994.

[8] http://www.wccpc.org/our_mission_work_files/MarkPalmer.doc, last accessed 28 November 2005. The range of missionary activity varies greatly among the Central Asian republics. Relatively few missionaries work in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, where missionary activity is prohibited. The largest concentration of missionaries is in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

[9] Of these organizations only YWAM is internationally known. Central Asian Partnership has an all-American staff linked to the Southern Baptists. Aslan Alliance is registered as a Kyrgyz NGO, though most associates are Americans linked to various denominations. Logos is a German organization with a Mennonite background.

[10] An overview of the ongoing discussions can be retrieved from the *International Journal of Frontier Missions*. During the 1990s, especially, many articles discussed the 'imperialist' legacy and designed new ways to dissociate evangelical efforts from its colonial and imperialistic connotations.

[11] Negative portrayals of missionaries and converts (as well as newly pious Muslims) are intimately linked to secular fears of 'the religious'. See McBrien and Pelkmans (forthcoming 2008) for a discussion of how these fears are rooted in Soviet conceptions of culture and religion and their invocation in the post-Soviet period.

[12] The involved stereotyping was, for example, evident in the words of a German missionary who confided in me: 'You can't disconnect Islam from the *sharia*. If [Muslims] have it their way they would be cutting off hands again'.

[13] Slezkine (2000) describes the precarious relation between 'national form' and 'socialist content' during the Soviet period, pointing at the inherent tendency of 'national form' to take predominance. Elsewhere (Pelkmans 2006: 58-70) I analyse how in Soviet Georgia attempts to employ culture for advancing socialist ideals over time developed into a celebration of essentialist notions of ethnicity.

[14] See Wanner (2004) for a similar argument. She shows that in Ukraine the 'mission field' is characterized by numerous alliances and rifts that cross-cut an imagined division between foreign missionaries and local evangelical believers.

[15] To guarantee anonymity, I have replaced the names of my interlocutors with pseudonyms.

[16] The doctrine of eternal security, though existing in various forms, basically adopts the idea 'once saved, always saved'. Tamaz had adopted this stance but clashed with the leaders of the Baptist church, who argued that people who stray from God's path can lose their salvation.

[17] Since 'Church in Bishkek' was a confusing name in everyday communication, members would generally refer to the church by mentioning the name of the street.

[18] The account is based on two interview sessions in August 2003. Because my focus is on key phrases and narrative structures rather than rhetorical techniques (repetitions, silences, changes in intonation) aimed at converting, I have condensed Mirgul's account considerably.

[19] In Kyrgyzstan Muslims say '*omen*' and make an accompanying gesture of the hands along the face when ending a prayer, a meal, or, for example, passing a graveyard. Evangelical Christians translated the term conveniently as 'amen'.

[20] Coleman (2002: 96) notices a similar uniformity in conversion stories in her study of Russian evangelicals.

[21] It should be stressed that though the majority of the population in Kyrgyzstan are Muslim, they regularly consume large quantities of alcohol at most social events. These practices are generally not perceived as incompatible with a Muslim affiliation, except among a growing minority of newly pious Muslims (McBrien 2006). Evangelical churches generally discouraged the consumption of alcohol and many banned it altogether.

[22] The 'lost tribe' myth has parallels in many corners of the earth. Colonizers and missionaries implemented the myth in the Pacific and Amazonia to understand or remake indigenous histories. While the myth has often served to obscure indigenous histories and limit local agency, in some cases it proved instrumental in the construction of cultural identity (Friedman 1992: 196; Kirsch 1997).

[23] The booklet was written in 2002 and the Kyrgyz translation appeared in 2004. It was not officially published but circulated widely in Kyrgyz evangelical circles.

[24] The (translated) titles of the following articles, taken from a major Kyrgyz newspaper, speak for themselves: 'Beware the foreign preachers' (*Vechernii Bishkek*, 8 September 2000), 'Psychological terror or dark totalitarian sect' (*Vechernii Bishkek*, 10 November 2000), 'Spiritual narcotics' (*Vechernii Bishkek*, 19 March 2002).

[25] For example, an analyst at the State Committee of Religious Affairs declares that new religious movements negatively impact ethnic relations because they destabilize the 'way of life, traditions and mentality of [the] nations and nationalities of Kyrgyzstan' (Murzakhalilov 2004: 86).

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De la « culture » comme outil et comme obstacle : rencontres missionnaires dans le Kirghizstan post-soviétique

Résumé

Le nombre relativement important de musulmans convertis au christianisme évangélique dans le Kirghizstan post-soviétique est exceptionnel dans le monde musulman et ébranle la croyance locale que l'islam est indissociable de l'identité nationale kirghize. L'auteur affirme qu'une partie du succès des missionnaires provient de la synergie inattendue entre l'héritage culturel communiste et la nouvelle approche évangélique. Les communistes aussi bien que les chrétiens évangéliques ont tenté de faire progresser leurs idéaux en dissociant religion et culture. Bien que ces efforts donnent des résultats tangibles, ils ont aussi eu la conséquence involontaire de folkloriser et d'objectiver la « culture », en retraçant ainsi les frontières ethniques qu'ils avaient cherché à abolir.

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