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Chapter Four

Does Being Kyrgyz Mean Being a Muslim?

Emergence of New Ethno-Religious Identities in Kyrgyzstan

David Radford

The collapse of the Soviet Union that led to the emergence of newly independent states engendered a host of challenges for their governments. In the midst of rapid changes that took place in all areas of political and socio-economic life of their societies, the leadership of these states was presented with a thorny issue of formation of the new national identities for the young republics. Of particular interest to this chapter is the developments related to the revitalization of religion in the post-Soviet Central Asia. Sunni Islam has been a major religion of the peoples of this region. Suppressed during the Soviet time, Islam returned to the post-independence republics in a process variously labeled as "Islamic revival," "re-Islamization," and "Islamic renaissance." The renewal of Muslim awareness and identity in Central Asia is unsurprising. After all, both the Soviet and post-Soviet governments and religious authorities in Central Asia have reinforced a strong association between religion and ethnicity and many Central Asian Muslims continue to view their Muslimness as indispensible to and integral with their ethnic identity. What has been overlooked is the growth of Christianity, especially in its Protestant form, among indigenous Muslim communities. This chapter examines the trend of religious conversion to Protestant Christianity in Kyrgyzstan and attempts to explain the change of faith that challenges core issues of family, community, and national and religious identity in this newly independent republic in Central Asia. It considers the intersections between religion and ethnic identity within the national identity constructs highlighting how normative and historical constructs are challenged by religious innovation and conversion.

Conversion to Christianity has understandably brought with it a number of challenges, one of the most important being that of identity. While challenging traditional understanding of Kyrgyz ethnic identity as one deeply associated with being Muslim, Kyrgyz Christians seek to affirm both their new religious faith and their sense of Kyrgyz identity. Embracing the Christian faith strikes at the very heart of Kyrgyz ethnic identity and challenges normative identity constructs that "to be Kyrgyz is to be Muslim." In this chapter I explore how Kyrgyz Christians have challenged this understanding by reconstructing their sense of ethnic identity—of what it means to be Kyrgyz—beyond a strictly Muslim framework. In this process Kyrgyz Christians have sought to locate their new Christian religious identity within, rather than on the margins, of familial and ethnic identity, in this way challenging the normative understanding of Kyrgyz identity.

Nationalism and Identity Construction in Central Asia seeks to locate the varied ways in which nationalisms and identities are being transformed in Central Asia. This chapter follows this theme by highlighting the ways in which new and old dimensions of identity are instrumental in forging innovative manifestations of Central Asian identity. Understanding the dynamics of this newly forming identity creation enables us to grasp some of the ways in which these broader processes of change are taking place. In this case study of Kyrgyz Christians, new dimensions of identity construction are taking place as Kyrgyz Christians build upon traditional aspects of Kyrgyz identity while blending them with non-traditional aspects. Although the dimensions and dynamics of these changes revolve around religion, they are not derived from the presumed and rarely questioned association between Kyrgyz ethnicity and Islam. This chapter further outlines some of the ways that Kyrgyz Christians have discursively constructed, and then lived out, this new "Kyrgyz Christian" religio-ethnic identity. It also considers the role that various actors have played in driving this discourse and the strategies employed to promote and defend this new identity innovation in the Kyrgyz community. These changes have not gone without opposition, and reactions to this process of giving new meaning to the basis for religious identity for Kyrgyz are also investigated.

The following discussion shows how Kyrgyz Christians have navigated and negotiated their way through a "crisis in ethnic identity" explored primarily using interview data collected through in-depth interviews in Kyrgyzstan during a period of field research between 2004–2008. Included in the exploration is a summary of the difficulties that Kyrgyz Christians have faced from the wider Kyrgyz community in this "religious switching," and the way Kyrgyz Christians have responded to these by reconstructing Kyrgyzness, that is, Kyrgyz identity, through a number of different "discourse strategies." Of interest is the way these discourse strategies reflect the process of the instrumentalization of religion (Islam) and Kyrgyz culture, history, language, and tradition by Central Asian government authorities and public officials in Kyrgyzstan, as they seek to build a national identity of Kyrgyzstan through a state-led nation-building process. In the context of this chapter, instrumentalization of religion (culture, history, etc.) refers to the utilization of selected aspects of faith (cultural tradition, historical narrative, and others) through its various discursive representations for accomplishing distinctive political goals.

RELIGION, ETHNICITY, AND NATIONALISM IN THE CENTRAL ASIAN CONTEXT

Religious conversion fundamentally addresses issues of identity and the case of Kyrgyz conversion to Protestant Christianity touches on issues related to the topic of religion, identity, and nationalism in post-Soviet Central Asian states. It is important that any interpretation of religious conversion and the meaning associated with this process for the individuals and their identity should be understood in light of the social, religious, and necessarily cultural context, in which it takes place. One important aspect of identity in this context is that of ethnicity and the role that religion plays in ethnic identity.[1] The "converting choice" that Kyrgyz Christians have made strikes at the heart of both individual and community identity and impinges on both ethnicity and religion, and the construction of identity. For most indigenous Central Asians, to be Central Asian—be it Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Tajik, or Kazakh—is to be Muslim.[2] As one Uzbek put it, "Anyone who knows that he is an Uzbek knows that he is a Muslim. The main basis for being an Uzbek is to be a Muslim. There is no O'zbekchilik [Uzbekness] without Musulkmanchilik [Muslimness]."[3] Muslim religion and ethnicity have been deeply entwined in Central Asian identity.[4] However, while there are differences across the region, with Uzbekistan often considered to have a greater degree of religiousness than other places in Central Asia, what it means "to be Muslim" has been largely, though not entirely, understood to be a marker of ethnicity and national traditions rather than a reflection of an individual person's adherence to Islamic religious belief and practice.[5] It is not surprising, therefore, that during the Soviet period many Central Asians found little difficulty between simultaneously holding seemingly contradictory identities—being a Muslim, an atheist, or a communist, as well as being a Kyrgyz, Kazakh, or Uzbek. One Kazakh stated, "I am an atheist but also a Muslim because all Kazakhs are Muslims and I cannot deny my forefathers."[6]

The construction of Central Asian identities has a long history, particularly in relationship to the way it was employed by the Tsarist and later Soviet Union authorities, the emerging construction of national identity that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the birth of newly independent states.[7] During the Tsarist and Soviet periods the designation of "Muslim" in Central Asia came to be recognized as an ethnic identifier for those indigenous communities from the region as much to distinguish these communities from non-indigenous communities (such as the Russian community) as it was for administration purposes. In the post-Soviet period Islam and ethnicity has been instrumentalized by the political elites as part of the nation building process to create a sense of unity and encourage harmony among ethnically diverse populations, cementing it by appeals to a common Islamic tradition. Islam and ethnicity have also been used as a way to buttress political legitimacy and national and Islamic credentials of the ruling elites.[8] For the titular, majority ethnic peoples, such as the Kyrgyz in Kyrgyzstan, extra effort was exerted into reiterating ethnicity, religion (primarily as cultural heritage), history, folk heroes, and language in the formation of national identity.[9]

Thus, as the experiences of post-Soviet Central Asian states convincingly demonstrate, identity is a social construct in which the content and meaning is frequently contested and open to change, adaptation, and interpretation.[10] While, as it has already been mentioned, there is a strong connection between religion and ethnic identity,[11] there are also other ways to define one's identity outside of religious labels such as through kinship, tribe, clan, language, and region,[12] or outside of traditional religious labels.[13] The ideological and psychological vacuum created in the context of rapid and widespread changes as a result of the sudden collapse of the Soviet Union and resulting emergence of newly independent states was not only an opportunity for elites to construct national identities, it was also an opportunity for individuals, non-governmental entities, and groups that operate outside of the religious and political confines of the governing regime to do likewise. It is in this context that dominant or normative religious sources of ethnic or national identity may find themselves in competition with contested sources of religious imagination including new religious denominations that may potentially be seen as a threat to ethnic identity.[14]

RESIGNIFICATION OF THE SOURCES OF IDENTITY: DEFINING KYRGYZNESS OUTSIDE OF THE TRADITIONAL RELIGIOUS LABELS

The changes that took place around the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991 resulted in an array of religious opportunities, some new and some old, that were suddenly available for all Kyrgyzstan citizens regardless of ethnicity or religion. The following years witnessed a flourishing religious market,[15] which has seen a rise in public religious observance and commitment to both orthodox (Sunni) and "traditional," or "popular," forms of Islam.[16] Along with these largely peaceful and apolitical forms of Islamic revival, Central Asia has experienced the growth of political and radical Islamic movements. Still, other competing expressions of the Islamic faith have been promoted by foreign Islamic groups including those coming from the Middle East, Turkey, and Pakistan.[17] Increasingly Kyrgyzstan has also witnessed the growth of numerous Protestant Christian and non-Christian denominations and sects. These included groups as varied as the Baptists, Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Baha'is, and the Hare Krishnas[18] largely arriving from the United States, Western Europe, and South Korea.[19]

One of the results of these increasing proselytizing activities, taking place as they did in an environment of rapid change and a transforming marketplace of religious ideas, was that it opened up the possibility for Kyrgyz conversion to Protestant Christianity. Exact numbers of Kyrgyz Christians are not available. Estimates vary between ten thousand and one hundred thousand[20] in less than two decades. This larger figure does appear exaggerated and estimates closer to twenty thousand, out of a total Kyrgyz (ethnic) population of about 3.6 million, seem more realistic.[21] Given the radical nature of this event within the Kyrgyz community, it is not unexpected that Kyrgyz Christians would seek to re-define, to find new meaning to what was occurring both within their lives personally and for this new religious movement within the Kyrgyz community. In particular, a resignification outside of traditional religious labels has taken place concerning the sources and core meaning of Kyrgyz identity.

The introduction of Protestant Christianity into the Kyrgyz community is quite remarkable due to the fact that until the period around independence there were few known Kyrgyz Christians and virtually no known Kyrgyz Church.[22] Those Kyrgyz who identified with Protestant Christianity risked rejection from the Kyrgyz community. Kyrgyz Christians have had to respond to a number of accusations from the Kyrgyz community, which highlight the differentness associated with conversion to Christianity. These accusations can be summed up in several re-occurring statements: "You have 'betrayed,' your faith, your family, your community, and your ancestors"; "You were born Muslim"; and, "You have become Russian." These accusations highlight the perception that Christianity is alien to or in some way not belonging to Kyrgyz identity. These various terms were used as synonyms to describe a person who has committed treason, one who has violated Kyrgyz identity and brought shame on the community. The label "Russian" for a Kyrgyz Christian is not simply about being "Russified," one who accepts Russian ways of life and thinking. It is a term that implies one has forsaken one's core identity. In other words, Christianity is viewed as a foreign (Russian) religion and Jesus as a foreign (Russian) God. It is the case that it is often at the point of crisis, such as when identity and belonging is questioned or threatened or when one is accused of joining or being the "other" that issues of identity come to the fore in personal reflection or group reaction. This is the situation with those Kyrgyz Christians interviewed by the author who, in response to real or perceived opposition—which largely came from close and distant relatives, the local community, and Muslim religious authorities—utilized a number of different discourse strategies to counteract these accusations. As will be discussed these discourse strategies have included affirmation, critique, and reinterpretation of Kyrgyzness, or *Kyrgyzchylyk*.

The conversion of the Kyrgyz to Protestant Christianity falls right into the heart of the issues already discussed in relation to the construction of ethnic identity. It is important to understand not just why or how the Kyrgyz make their choice to convert, but how they then construct or reconstruct their sense of Kyrgyz identity in light of the prevailing understanding and promotion of the idea that "to be Kyrgyz is to be Muslim." While it may be a truism to say that in the Central Asian scenario, "to be Kyrgyz is to be Muslim," Kyrgyz Christians, in choosing a religious identity at odds with wider Kyrgyz society, challenge this understanding. For instance, in the case of Kyrgyz Christians, when a person no longer considers him/herself to be Muslim, but identifies him- or herself as being Christian do they cease being Kyrgyz because they no longer identify themselves as Muslim? These questions are not new—the accusation that "Christianity is a foreign religion" or the "religion of the West" has been made, from Asia to Africa, over centuries. For societies that place a high value on family, community, and their ancestors, religious conversion has significant repercussions that require navigating and negotiating multiple identities[23] and adapting them to their local context. The Kyrgyz situation highlights these very issues and, as will be discussed further, the converting choice for Kyrgyz Christians has involved adaptation within their local context. In this way, the Kyrgyz Christians have constructed their identity. These Kyrgyz consider themselves to be Christians but still feel deeply "Kyrgyz" and look for ways to affirm that identity.

DISCOURSE STRATEGIES UTILIZED BY KYRGYZ CHRISTIANS TO RECONSTRUCT ETHNIC IDENTITY

Muslim Religious Symbols and Kyrgyz Behavior

One way that Kyrgyz Christians have addressed the challenge of the Kyrgyz-Muslim identity dialectic is by interacting directly with Muslim religious symbols and Kyrgyz behavior. Specifically, some Kyrgyz Christians build on biblical representations in the Qur'an. They claim to actually be "true Muslims," and challenge the authentic Muslimness of the Kyrgyz. As a form of apologetic, common prophets (*pegambar*) and stories within the Qur'an and the Bible are utilized to build bridges of communication, to move a discussion from the Qur'an to the Bible. By finding continuity with some religious language and meaning, Kyrgyz Christians seek to reduce the distance created by conversion and use terminology that has some resonance with the Kyrgyz worldview. As one Kyrgyz Christian told the author, "[My grandmother] also knew about Jesus. Her grandparents had told her about the prophets. . . . Maybe she would have not received him if she heard something like *Esus Kristos* in Russian but when she heard Jesus the prophet, *Isa Pegambar* [in the Kyrgyz language], she was able to receive it because it was something that she had heard before."

Kyrgyz Christians react to the challenge that a Kyrgyz is supposed to be a Muslim by also appealing to what they refer to as "the true meaning of Muslim." They suggest that those Kyrgyz who call themselves Muslim do not know what the real meaning of a "Muslim" is. These Kyrgyz Christians claim that if Kyrgyz Muslims knew what the real meaning of "Muslim" was they would realize two things. First, they would understand that they are really not Muslims, and therefore should not judge or accuse Kyrgyz Christians of betraying their community. And second, Kyrgyz Christians are in fact "true Muslims" and can more rightly be called Kyrgyz than most Kyrgyz, if indeed a Kyrgyz is supposed to be a Muslim. One Kyrgyz Christian commented:

> People don't understand what the word Muslim means. . . . a Muslim means one who is subject to God. And being subject to God means that you don't drink, you don't smoke, and you don't do bad things. When people say that "you have betrayed your religion" . . . I respond by saying, "If you are a Muslim, what are you doing? You are not subject to God. You are doing bad things [drinking vodka, smoking, lying, etc.]. I am a true Muslim because I am doing all the commandments of God and I am subject to God."

Some Kyrgyz Christians therefore claim that if "Muslim[-]ness" is how a Kyrgyz should be identified, then they have more right to be called a Kyrgyz than their Muslim Kyrgyz accusers. In this discourse strategy, rather than rejecting outright the assumption that "to be Kyrgyz is to be Muslim" Kyrgyz Christians appropriate the expression and redefine the meaning behind the words. The Kyrgyz Christian quoted above believes that they are submitted to God and that this is exemplified by their upright moral behavior. In that sense Kyrgyz Christians understand that they have upheld the religious and/or moral imperative implied in Kyrgyz identity, in Kyrgyzness.

History as Content and History as Discourse

Another way that Kyrgyz Christians have answered their critics has to do with history. In this case history has to do with continuity with the traditions, values, significant events, and the ancestors. The following represents comments from two people interviewed:

> Islam came centuries ago but before Islam came we were Kyrgyz. . . . We worshipped the sun, we worshiped mountains, we worshiped some things from nature and we were Kyrgyz. And then Islam came... But there are so many Kyrgyz who are not Muslims and this does not . . . make them any less Kyrgyz. . .
>
> I told the mullah, I wasn't born as an Arab. I wasn't born English. I was born Kyrgyz. And I was in Kyrgyzstan in the mountains. That's why God is for me here. If God created me Kyrgyz then he understands Kyrgyz. It's no use for me to memorize words in Arabic. There is no need for me to grow beard. I can't grow beard, that's how God created me. If God created me like that I should stay like this.

While there is acknowledgement that Islam has had a place in Kyrgyz history, the emphasis is on its relatively recent engagement with the Kyrgyz people. "Centuries ago" before Kyrgyz were Muslims, they were still Kyrgyz, but they were shamans with some affinity to Mongolia. It is also noteworthy that the association is made between Islam and Arab people, culture and language as a point of differentiation from Kyrgyz people. The association implies that Islam was a foreign intrusion into the Kyrgyz and not originally or essentially a part of who the Kyrgyz were as a people. The implication is that if Kyrgyz were not always Muslims but were nevertheless Kyrgyz, then it is possible for Kyrgyz Christians to still be Kyrgyz even though they are not Muslim. The references made to the Kyrgyz Christians' birth, to the mountains (the symbolic geographical representation of the Kyrgyz homeland), and to their lack of being able to grow a beard, are references to their Kyrgyz identity. The logic for these Kyrgyz Christians is as follows. If God created them Kyrgyz, then God should be able to understand them when they pray in Kyrgyz. They should not have to pray in Arabic (or in English for that matter) or memorize a language that was not their own. The association that has been made is that Islam is deeply connected to Arab [non-Kyrgyz] culture and ways, rather than to Kyrgyz culture and ways.

Kyrgyz Christians also hold that history shows that Kyrgyz ancestors were in fact Christians before they were Muslims! Kyrgyz Christians have found ways to affirm the fact that their ancestors were also Christians and that Christianity is intimately linked with the Kyrgyz people. If their ancestors were Christians then they can be Christians today as well. Kyrgyz Christians find similarity between Kyrgyz traditions and Biblical traditions, they find Biblical meaning in important Kyrgyz symbols, and they find Christian words in the Kyrgyz language. One Kyrgyz Christian commented, "I actually started to study the history of the Christian church [in Kyrgyzstan]. And what I found out was that the first Christian missionaries . . . came here a lot earlier than Islam came with the Arabs and I realized that being Muslim is not being a part of . . . the original [Kyrgyz] history. . . . In fact Christianity was here before Islam came, so it [Islam] cannot be a part of our heritage, it cannot be a part of our identity as a Kyrgyz nation, as a Kyrgyz ethnicity."

There is documentary evidence that a strong Nestorian Christian church existed within the present geographical area of Kyrgyzstan (up to about the fourteenth century), as well as in other regions of Central Asia.[24] Local historical ruins and sites that have Christian origins are held as proof of the pre-Islamic Christian history in the region. A discovery of an ancient Christian monastery in the northern Issyk-Kol region of Kyrgyzstan, which some claim to be the burial place of the Apostle St. Matthew, is further seen as evidence of those historical roots.[25] For some Kyrgyz Christians this shows continuity not discontinuity with the ancestors. Christianity is not seen as a new faith but the faith of the ancestors re-birthed, as it were, in the Kyrgyz community.

Kyrgyz Cultural Traditions, Language, and Symbols

Another way in which Kyrgyz Christians address the issue of the supposedly Muslim identity of the Kyrgyz is by pointing to Kyrgyz cultural traditions, language, and symbols that show that the Kyrgyz are actually culturally close to the Christian faith. Old Testament traditions found in Kyrgyz cultural values and traditions are cited as examples of the historic connection between the Kyrgyz and Christianity. Phrases and terms in the Kyrgyz language are directly appropriated and interpreted through a new Christian framework. These expressions show for Kyrgyz Christians that there must have been Christian origins among their forbears for these phrases to be embedded in the Kyrgyz language. One Kyrgyz Christian found similarity between Old Testament traditions and Kyrgyz traditions:

> For example, when Jacob wrestled with God, God touched his hip and he became lame. And it's written that the children of Israel don't eat the tendon of the hip [of a sheep]. And for a long time Kyrgyz also pulled off the tendon of the hip . . . I think that Christianity belongs to Kyrgyz . . . Kyrgyz knew about Christ a long time ago.
>
> [Also] [w]hen I was little when my mother scolded me and she used to say, "Why are you sitting in a respected place? Are you *Mashaiak*? [Then] sit in a different [less prominent] place." And Kyrgyz when they love their children they say in Kyrgyz "*ailanain, kagilain*," which means, "may I be crucified for you." . . . *Mashaiak* means Christ, Saviour. *Mashaiak* means the most powerful and highest one. That means God, Christ. . . .

Kyrgyz cultural symbols are also reinterpreted as having biblical origins or at least as having strong biblical meaning and association. One example of this re-interpretation concerns the *boz ui* (yurt), which is the traditional nomadic home for the Kyrgyz. It is made up of large numbers of sheep skins spread over a wooden frame with an opening at the top to let smoke from cooking escape, and to allow sunlight to come in. The wooden lattice (*tunduk*), which comes together over the top of the *boz ui*, is also represented as the main symbol on the Kyrgyz flag. One Kyrgyz Christian explained the similarity between Christianity and Kyrgyz traditions by citing the example of the *boz ui*:

> Even if we take the *boz ui*, God commanded to put the sign of the blood at the entrance of the [Israelite] homes to protect the people from His judgment. . . . We still keep this [tradition] because the wood of the entrance of the *boz ui* is supposed to be painted with red. The *tunduk* had three woods [criss-crossed in a lattice design] and symbolizes the cross. And also it symbolizes the Trinity—God [the Father], Son and the Holy Spirit. It symbolizes the three in one God. And light comes through the Trinity. Our women are supposed to wake up early to open the roof in the morning to receive blessing.

Not only does this Kyrgyz Christian find parallels between the *boz ui* and the events of the Bible, he also then goes on to interpret and explain New Testament theology, the Trinity, using those very same symbols. New Testament ideas are utilized as interpretative instruments in explaining and justifying their conversion, as a Kyrgyz, to the Christian faith. This emphasizes the way Kyrgyz Christians have utilized the introduced "conversion artefacts"[26] as interpretative lenses to make sense of their conversion in light of ethnic identity. The indigenizing process and in turn, the re-construction of ethnic identity takes place when members of the existing community take introduced non-indigenous artifacts and fuse them into an identity construction that "feels their own" and makes explanatory sense. By locating their Christian faith within the symbolic representations of their culture and community, Kyrgyz Christians are finding their new religious identity rooted in their Kyrgyzness. As one Kyrgyz Christian put it, "We do not come to new faith; our old faith came back to us."

Religion Is a Matter of Choice Not Birth

Other Kyrgyz Christians have also responded to those who accuse them by claiming that religious identity should be viewed as fundamentally a matter of choice occurring after birth. One Kyrgyz Christian commented, "I would never say that Kyrgyz should be Muslim. . . . Because religion is something that people have to choose. . . . I think that is why many Kyrgyz have become believers, it's because they had a choice. They had a choice to believe in Christ or to be a Muslim. And that is a big difference." This view suggests that religious identity is a response people make in life and to their environment, not as something constituted or dependent on one's national community or ethnicity. Islamic religion, according to this view, is something that people have created and constructed. People choose to believe in religion, and at some point in history Kyrgyz ancestors chose to accept Islam as a religion and incorporated it into Kyrgyz identity. Kyrgyz Christians now claim the same right to choose a different religious identity challenging any essentialist claims that Kyrgyz are born Muslims. Challenging tradition and normative ideas of the inherent (primordial) nature of religious identity in assumed ethnic identity, Kyrgyz Christians claim the right to choose, and to choose something different from what most of their community hold. Akin to Peyrouse's argument[27] that in post-Soviet Central Asia there has been an "individualization of Islam" or of religion generally, and of the prevalence of "subjective identities,"[28] Kyrgyz Christians seek alternative "non-Muslim" identities, albeit constructed from both indigenous and external "artifacts." Other Kyrgyz have taken this further and insist on a pre-Islamic, pre-Christian identity associated with the more ancient Kyrgyz shamanistic/animistic beliefs and practices of Tangrism.[29]

One Is Born a Kyrgyz

Kyrgyz Christians, in another discourse strategy, claim that Kyrgyzness is mainly related to one's birth. One's primary ethnic identity is that which links a person by blood to the people who have the same biological origins as oneself. These can be summed up in key phrases from those who were interviewed: "Certainly, I am a Kyrgyz . . . because I am born a Kyrgyz. I cannot be different," ". . . and I will die a Kyrgyz," "Some people say as long as you are born as Kyrgyz you are Muslim. But I do not agree with this. I say, I was not born as a Muslim I was born as a Kyrgyz." To be identified as being in the "in-Kyrgyz" group is to be born into a Kyrgyz family. The inference is that once you are born into a Kyrgyz family you cannot be unborn out of it. There is some sense here in which identity has to do with essentialist qualities—one does not choose one's parents and one's ancestry. What a blood or birth connection means depends on a social context but that one was born is not constructed, it is a fact.

Divine Election—"God Created Me Kyrgyz"

Some Kyrgyz Christians claim divine election to justify their Kyrgyz status, "God created me Kyrgyz." Soviet education and ideology did much to remove religious capital in Kyrgyz society. Religious institutions, religious authority, and religious rites were severely weakened through political and social controls. Many Kyrgyz assumed a communist-secular outlook—a Darwinian scientific explanation for the evolution of life, and a religiously disinterested predisposition. While this apparent lack of interest in the religion did not mean that all things religious were completely removed from Kyrgyz thinking, post-Socialist religious revitalization has re-introduced the sense of the divine and transcendental from the peripheral into a more prominent place in the world view for a growing number of Kyrgyz. This is certainly the case for Kyrgyz Christians. A twenty-five-year-old married man, who works with a non-government organization in the south of Kyrgyzstan, had some clear ideas about what it means for him to be Kyrgyz.

> The first important thing is God created me as a Kyrgyz. . . . My being is Kyrgyz and I was created as a Kyrgyz. . . . Every nation was given by God a special characteristic, and there are special characteristics given by God to Kyrgyz. . . . I am proud because Kyrgyz is a nation created by God and I am among them. And Kyrgyz are ancient people. I am proud because Kyrgyz have a long history.

What is important for this respondent is that he believes that he is created by God to be Kyrgyz. He has divine sanction as an individual to be Kyrgyz. It is not just that this respondent believes that he has been created by God as an individual, but that his people, the Kyrgyz people, have also been created by God as a community, "a nation," of which he is a member. Conversion to Christianity has reinforced a sense of the divine, of personal religiosity, and in turn strengthened his sense of pride in his ethnic identity. The religious factor implies that identity is not simply a "secular" or "this-worldly" phenomenon made up of features such as race, blood, language, customs, traditions, and ideas, but also involves supra-natural "artifacts"—the idea of the divine, of a God, who is personally and actively involved.

It is here that Kyrgyz Christians part ways with traditional constructions of Kyrgyz identity. For, while Kyrgyz Muslims would recognize the idea of the divine in Kyrgyz identity, it is restricted to the view that "to be Kyrgyz is to be Muslim." This implies that one is born Muslim as well as Kyrgyz, at least in the common or accepted understanding of the community. Kyrgyz Christians acknowledge the hand of God in Kyrgyz nationhood, as a community, but they challenge the idea that religion as represented by particular human traditions, institutions, religious identities, beliefs, or practices, or that it is something that one is born with.

The Metaphysical, Internationalist, or Global Identity—the "De-ethnicization" of God

A final discourse strategy reveals how Kyrgyz Christians have looked at reconstructing identity by focusing on the global nature of Christian identity.

This perspective plays down the distinctiveness of Kyrgyz ethnicity in relation to the commonality of all peoples, all ethnicities, and all "nations." Christ is not an ethnic God or a foreign God. He does not belong to Kyrgyz alone, or to Russians, but to all peoples. Here, the refrain is not about the "Russian God" or the "Kyrgyz God," common in many of the narratives, but about a form of the "de-ethnicized of God." "For me it doesn't matter if a person is Kyrgyz or American because we are all God's children." Religious conversion provides a re-orientation of identity that transcends issues of ethnic identity. Yes, they are Kyrgyz in the flesh, as one respondent put it, but their essential identity goes beyond ethnicity. Religious conversion appeals to a higher authority as the basis for constructing identity. The authority for this "transcendent identity" is said to come from the Bible, which has become the new source or reference point for interpreting identity. "There is no difference for me. . . . The Word of God says . . . God created everyone [all ethnicities] . . . God is the God of all peoples . . . we all come from one Father . . . Jesus should be the faith of all mankind." In this construct, the sense of divine calling is now taken a step further. They are Kyrgyz, but more than Kyrgyz, they are God's children. Further, it is not only the Kyrgyz, but all humanity, all ethnicities who "are one nation in God." While this apparent "de-ethnicization" seems in contradiction to the previous discourses, which seem to emphasize commonality or affinity with Kyrgyz culture/ethnicity, it is important to recognize that though some effort has been made to reduce direct association between Kyrgyz Christian faith and Russian ethnicity, this does not preclude an identity construct that finds a level of affinity with a global religious identity such as "world Christianity."

Kyrgyz Christian identity becomes simultaneously both a local and global construct. While one cannot discount the potential genuine reflexiveness on the part of Kyrgyz Christians who make this "globalist or de-ethnicization" identity shift, I suggest that it is also a reflection of the globalization process associated with the causes and effects of the sudden independence of new Central Asian states such as Kyrgyzstan, and the openness to new and "foreign" ideas, ways, and influence—political, economic, technological, and religious. In the spiritual and societal vacuum there is a felt need to belong to and identify with something far bigger than Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia. It may also be a reflection of the role and influence that foreign missionaries have had on the Kyrgyz Christian movement.[30]

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

National identities fostered by the Soviet Union were transformed into remodeled "post-Soviet" national identity formations in the newly independent states, such as Kyrgyzstan. A major difference was that religion as a category of identity increasingly played a greater role in this national identity formation. The reinforcement and promotion of Kyrgyz ethnic identity in Kyrgyzstan during and post-independence has directly affected the role that religion has played in this process. In the case of Kyrgyz Christianity, new religious frameworks have been incorporated into a heightened sense of nationalism, but with the attempt to exclude, change, or reconstruct the religious factor as an essentialist element in the sense of ethnic or national identity. The example of Kyrgyz Christianity discussed in this chapter is the result of extensive research that included in-depth interviews with forty-nine Kyrgyz Christians. Based on a thematic analysis of these interviews a number of key discourse strategies were identified, which reveal the different ways in which Kyrgyz Christians have utilized cultural and social material to interpret and express their new religious faith and in so doing attempt to re-construct ethnic identity. These discourse strategies involved a number of different elements. These have included the utilization of Muslim religious symbols and Kyrgyz behavior; the application of history as content and history as discourse; the re-imagination of Kyrgyz cultural traditions, language, and symbols; the viewing of religion as a matter of personal choice not birth; an understanding that one is born a Kyrgyz not a Muslim; a belief in divine election—"God made me Kyrgyz"; and the incorporation of a metaphysical, internationalist, or global identity.

Recognizing their important role in nation building and quest for national stability, the questions of formation of national and ethnic identities have been the subject of lively academic debates informed by competing theoretical perspectives. As discussed in greater detail in the introduction to this volume, the two primary theories that form the basis for much of these debates are primordialism and constructivism. Primordialism suggests that ethnic identity is primarily rooted in factors such as "biological descent, kinship, language, locality, religion and other 'immutable' cultural traits" such as family, race, and blood.[31] It is these factors that drive ethnic identity and have an unchanging, essentialist quality. Constructivism is a more modern approach. It suggests that ethnic identity, like most other forms of identity, is constructed by individuals and groups in a social context using various "building materials," social conditions, and social context.[32] The construction of identities uses building materials from history, geography, biology, productive, and reproductive institutions, collective memory, as well as personal fantasies, power apparatuses, and religious revelations. But individuals, social groups, and societies process all these materials and rearrange their meaning according to social determinations and cultural projects that are rooted in their social structure, and in their space/time framework.[33]

While I would agree with Castells that individuals and social groups use multiple "building materials" in constructing their identities, I also concur with Smith who speaks of national identity as "a product of both 'natural' continuity and conscious manipulation."[34] The same process can be found in the ways that Kyrgyz Christians have re-constructed their understanding of Kyrgyz ethnic identity. The case of Kyrgyz Christianity highlights the process of ethnic identity construction as an example of an ongoing dynamic process that includes primordial elements together with the conscious and unconscious "manipulation" of cultural and social artifacts.

This chapter also argues that the end product of a new identity construction is often a form of hybridity—a combination in various identity formulations that incorporates and blends, and at times rejects, various aspects of the identity building blocks. In the case of Kyrgyz Christians, these building blocks incorporate traditional Kyrgyz artifacts as well as those introduced through Protestant Christianity and/or directly or indirectly by foreign missionaries. Therefore, any national and ethnic identity that is constructed by individuals and groups can be *re-constructed* at any given time when the circumstances are "ripe" with "materials" that may be old, may be new. As Parekh states, ". . . if identities are the products of history, they can [also] be remade by history."[35]

Whatever form(s) the hybridity of Kyrgyz identity has taken, it nevertheless is experienced and understood to reflect Kyrgyzness (*kyrgyzchylych*) for Kyrgyz Christians. This emphasizes the point that both ethnic and nationalist identity discourses have an important subjective element that Smith termed the "social psychological dimension."[36] Just because an identity is constructed or instrumentalized does not mean that it will find salience among the people who are the subject of the process. It finds salience when there is a sense in which the new identity construct invokes some feeling of personal and communal continuity—in the context under consideration it must also "feel" Kyrgyz to the person/communities concerned. While it appears that this is increasingly true for many Kyrgyz Christians, it is not necessarily felt the same way within the wider Muslim Kyrgyz community where there are varying, but increasing, levels of opposition and animosity towards Kyrgyz Christians.[37] In the communities of Muslim Kyrgyz, the utilization of Kyrgyz heritage in Kyrgyz Christianity is increasingly seen as being "even worse than becoming Russian [i.e., becoming an Orthodox Christian]."[38]

It is worth noting that the identity project, if one can call it that, of this cultural sub-group of Kyrgyz Christians, runs to some degree in parallel with that of developing Kyrgyz national identity especially as it relates to the instrumentalization of Kyrgyz culture, language, history, and traditions by governing elites. The appropriation and affirmation of particular aspects of ethnic identity in its various forms are utilized as a means to legitimize both sub-group and national group identities. In doing so these Kyrgyz Christians affirm the nation-building exercise and the tools by which this is done but appropriate them differently by re-interpreting and reconstructing these tools, holding as it were, contestation and affirmation in paradox. It also reminds us that in the world that we live in today there is scope for multiple formations of [ethnic] identities, understood and interpreted in multiple ways by different actors with the realization that identity "is always constructed and situated in a field and amid a flow of contending cultural discourses."[39]

Many Kyrgyz Christians would claim that they live out the "true meaning of what a Muslim means," as well as what it means "to be a Kyrgyz." If certain features of Kyrgyz identity are considered a given, and are contentious when removed from the commonly held association with Kyrgyzness (such as being "Muslim"), then being Muslim itself is reconstructed within a new framework as not adherence to particular doctrines or rituals, but to a high moral standard of living. In fact a number of Kyrgyz Christians hold that their adherence to moral behavior that epitomizes Kyrgyz values confirms the fact that they are actually the "true Kyrgyz" in the Kyrgyz community. This is perhaps an example of the desire to find meaning amidst the "moral malaise" that Kyrgyzstan suffered when the Soviet Union collapsed.[40] The all-encompassing, all-pervasive Soviet way of life dissolved rapidly and it was perhaps natural that in the resulting ideological and economic vacuum many Kyrgyz experienced new-found religious awakening. Of course, this religious awakening or revitalization was not exclusive to Protestant Christianity but included a wider interest in Islam as well. This was not simply about a concern with the deteriorating moral fabric of Kyrgyz society, with religion coming to the fore. It was also a concern with cultural legitimacy as individuals and the wider community searched for a greater sense of personal and national identity after independence.

Opposition to and accusations of betraying the Kyrgyz community have provoked Kyrgyz Christians to intentionally find ways to link their new Christian faith with their understanding of Kyrgyz identity. Kyrgyz Christians have done so by [re-]constructing a Kyrgyz identity, which affirms their ethnic birth-right. Identity is then constructed utilizing cultural forms, language, and meaning, together with newly introduced "tools"—such as those offered by Protestant Christianity. By locating their Christian faith within the symbolic representations of their culture and community, Kyrgyz Christians are locating their new religious identity rooted in their sense of Kyrgyzness and within the wider Kyrgyz community, thus challenging the normative Kyrgyz construct that "to be Kyrgyz is to be Muslim." This indeed may be the beginnings of what Peyrouse observed when he wrote of the changing religious scenario in Central Asia,

> Christianity . . . needs to be well planted among the natives [indigenous Central Asians]; otherwise it could eventually disappear as the religion of the former colonizers who have gone back home. Will there be a Central Asian Christianity [identity] which will no longer be linked to the colonial past of the area anymore and which will be able to become a native Christianity, as already the case in many Asian countries?[41]

Only time will tell.

NOTES

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13. Muruel Atkin, "Religious, National and Other Identities in Central Asia," in *Muslims in Central Asia*, ed. Jo-Ann Gross (Durham, NC: Duke University, 1992), 46–72; M. Nazif Shahrani, "From Tribe to Umma: Comments on the Dynamics of Identity in Muslim Soviet Central Asia," *Central Asia Survey* 3, no. 3 (1984): 27–38.
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25. Laurence Mitchell, *Kyrgyzstan* (Brant Travel Guides Ltd: Chalfont St. Peter, 2008).

26. Radford, "'God created me Kyrgyz.'"

27. Peyrouse, "Islam in Central Asia."

28. See also Omelicheva, "Islam in Kazakhstan."

29. Heyat, "Re-Islamisation in Kyrgyzstan."

30. Pelkmans, "Asymmetries on the Religious Market."

31. Cengiz Surucu, "Modernity, Nationalism, Resistance: Identity Politics in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan," *Central Asian Survey* 21, no, 4(2002): 386

32. Castells, *The Power of Identity*.

33. Castells, *The Power of Identity*, 7.

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