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Peyrouse, S.

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Religious Diversity in Post-Soviet Central Asia

SÉBASTIAN PEYROUSE

During perestroika, after a moment's hesitation, President Gorbachev decided to depart from the antireligious policies of the Soviet regime and to liberalize religion. With the independence of the republics of Central Asia in 1991 believers and those in power had to re-determine the relation between religion and state, individual and national identity. Since then these newly independent States have to manage Islam, as the majority religion, in the context of an increasing religious diversity which mainly consists of Christian denominations. Each pres-

Perestroika, followed by independence, offered Central Asian republics of the Soviet Union religious freedom. Several Christian—especially Protestant—organizations developed missionary projects and established new churches. Representatives of “local” religions, Islam as well as, Russian Orthodoxy, have allied to put pressure on governments in order to curb proselytizing and restrict religious conversion. While it is difficult to ignore the claims put forward by the main religious communities, most governments tolerate the growth of religious diversity, albeit at varying degrees.

Religion, nevertheless, was offered new opportunities by perestroika and independence. Muslims were able to reorganize the networks of mosques, shrines and religious schools that had been suppressed from the 1920s onwards. In the span of a few years, not only did Islam get a wider visibility, both in urban and in rural areas, but so did Christianity, the second largest religion in Central Asia. Many Christian—Orthodox, but also Catholic and Protestant (Lutheran, Baptist, Adventist, Pentecostal, Jehovah witnesses etc.)—prayer houses and churches were reopened or newly built.

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ident in the area has demonstrated to the population—and foreign countries—the desire to grant religion sufficient space in public life. New images of liberal religious policies are all the more necessary because four of the five presidents that are heir to the former Soviet republics were actually *apparatchiks* of the former Communist Party. All of them went on pilgrimage to Mecca. The presidents of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, Niazov and Karimov, even encouraged, just after independence, the presence of foreign Muslim missionaries in their respective republics. Moreover, Karimov came into office by taking his oath on the Quran.

However, at the same time, new legislation in the republics forbids attempts to incite religious antagonism. No constitutional or legislative specificity links up with any religion or denomination. None of the constitutions include references to “Quran,” “Islam,” “Muslim” or “Christian” and “Christianity.” Each state champions, in principle, the separation of state and religion. This secularism appears to be aimed at avoiding favouring Islam and ostracizing religious minorities, in particular, Christian.

In spite of the display of religious freedom, political authorities are, in fact, trying to control religious movements in order to prevent them from getting actively involved in politics. After the Soviet attempt to divorce religion from the society, the present authorities fear that religious inclinations of the population could evolve, in the framework of the state-nation building, toward a politicization of certain religious—and especially Muslim—movements. Consequently, all governments have very firmly opposed political Muslim movements, which are accordingly branded “extremist.” Any movement that challenges secularism is prohibited and generally labelled as being “Wahhabi.” Moreover, each of the post-Soviet presidents promotes the ideal of the peaceful coexistence of Muslims and Christians in Central Asia. In official parlance, possible differentiation within society does not follow from religious variation but rather from divergent regional and nationalistic schemes.

Religious revival is clearly manifest in the activities of particular Christian—especially Protestant—movements, which were prohibited during the Soviet Regime, such as the Charismatic and Presbyterian Churches, and Jehovah's Witness which are now involved in active proselytization. The local population has become the target of such Christian missionary movements; and the missionaries believe that their call appeals to the public because the latter tend to practice a tolerant and traditional type of Islam, often without any theological grounding.

Christian proselytizing

The emergence of new and active proselytizing religious groups has caused great unease among the two main religious communities of Central Asia, Muslim and Orthodox. Their responses were essentially aimed at Protestant movements and, in a lesser measure, the Catholic Church. The quick expansion of foreign Christian missions and the conversions of locals to various Protestant denominations aroused some hostile reactions from the Muslim clergy who deem that the native population must remain de facto Muslim. They declare their respect for Christianity, but oppose Christian groups whose proselytizing activities are too potent. In 1994, the mufti of Tajikistan affirmed his respect for biblical texts; but he added that it is intolerable that a Muslim apostatizes and converts to another religion.¹ The press in Central Asia frequently features Muslim representatives who are hostile towards “these too smiling guests whose essential goal is to divide the Muslim people.”² Resentment against Protestant missionary movements is present not only in countries like Tajikistan and Uzbekistan where Islamic movements are energetic, but also in Kyrgyzstan where the Christian missionaries are more active. Petitions were signed in Kyrgyz mosques, expressing opposition to, not only new, religious movements like the Moon movement, but to all Protestant denominations. Such protests are reported at the official level: in Uzbekistan, the president of the Council for Religious Affairs declared in 1994: “All these things are alien to our people and of course annoy the Moslems. If we do not take some decisive measures, a lot of blood might flow.”³ Many Muslim representatives, therefore, propose a strict distinction between autochthonous groups who are considered as Muslim and Europeans who can be Christian. Several violent altercations have already occurred in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and especially in Tajikistan, where protestant Churches and even the Orthodox Church were bombed in Dushanbe.

The Muslim and Russian Orthodox alliance

The Russian Orthodox Church has lost many of its believers to new Protestant denominations. Consequently, the Orthodox Church strongly questions the legitimacy of what it considers as "foreign" and "non-traditional" Churches. The link between nationality/locality and Russian Orthodoxy is accentuated by the notion of canonical territory, a notion which concerns, according to Orthodoxy, the entire Post-Soviet space: because of the historical precedence over all other Churches today present in former Soviet Union, Orthodoxy has the right of pre-eminence on the entire region. Claiming that national stability is threatened by the proselytization of so-called foreign denominations, Orthodox authorities try to polarize the religious spectrum around an Orthodoxy-Islam axis. "In Central Asia and in Russia, there is a natural distribution of influence between the two main religions, Orthodoxy and Islam, and no one will destroy this harmony."⁴ The Orthodox hierarchy in Central Asia continues to stress its mutual understanding with Islam and asserts that "Islam is closer to Orthodoxy than all other Christian denominations."⁵

Even though the Orthodox Church does not regret the downfall of the Soviet regime, it regularly complains that the former Soviet republics "...today blindly copy the West and the freedom of expression and authorize everything and everybody." Newspapers and especially the local Orthodox journals,⁶ regularly criticize the missionary movements, "whose discourses are alien both to Orthodox and Muslims."⁷ The Orthodox Church is thus endeavouring to counter the current evolution of Central Asia—which is more criticized for its "Occidentalism" than for its indigenization—in the name of the protection of the national and indigenous specificity. In each republic, the Orthodox and Muslim hierarchies have allied to put pressure on the government in order to counter the Western missionary activities.

Official responses

The Muslim and Orthodox responses to proselytizing Protestant groups have a significant influence on the political authorities and have led several republics to question the principle of religious liberty. In Turkmenistan, a new law was passed in 1995 that requires the religious communities to gather 500 signatures in order to obtain the compulsory registration. Considering the small number of representatives of national minorities, except Russians (the majority of Poles and Germans have left the country), most Christian movements fail to meet these conditions, even in the capital Achkhabad, and have been, thus, forced underground. President Niazov has divided the religious spectrum into two distinct units: a Turkmen is supposed to be a Muslim while a European an Orthodox. An Orthodox is not allowed to convert a Turkmen to Christianity and a Muslim should not convert a Russian (European) to Islam. A virulent religious activism may cause the government to take radical measures: some preachers have been sent to jail, several churches have been closed, and the Adventists' church in Achkhabad was demolished in 1999. Protestant movements undergo permanent administrative and police pressures, in contrast to the Russian Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church. The latter has in Achkhabad a Vatican diplomatic representation that is mainly frequented by expatriates.

In Uzbekistan, new legislation passed in 1998 requires religious communities to apply for a new registration and to collect 100 signatures. This new policy implies a policy of suppression of Christian communities located outside Tashkent and large cities, except for the Orthodox, the main Protestant and Catholic communities. However, important minority communities are still present on the Uzbek territory: although proselytization is forbidden, Protestant denominations remain present and active. Some believers who engaged in missionary work have been jailed for several years. In Kazakhstan, legislation on religion has been drafted, but none has been confirmed. In 1998 a concordat was signed between the Kazakh State and the Vatican that grants the Catholic Church official status. Meanwhile, it then ignores pressures that several Protestant movements undergo, despite the formal equality of all confessions before the law.

Religious disagreement is much more apparent within the Christian realm than between Islam and Christianity. Among the five States in the area, Kazakhstan—and to a lesser degree Kyrgyzstan—has given several Churches equal status and does not recognize any special rights of Orthodoxy, as is the case in some Slavic and Caucasian republics.



PHOTO BY SEBASTIAN PEYROUSE, 2004

Mosque in Achkhabad

The political authorities do not fear Christianity as such, but rather the religious pluralism it implies, as well as some of its numerous active missionary movements. Besides, Islamic movements face similar difficulties: in 1997, the president of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov, declared that Muslim fundamentalists "destroy the stability, the civil and ethnic harmony, discredit the democracy, the secular state, and the multinational and multi-confessional society."⁸ Several campaigns have led to multiple extra-judicial measures that range from the disappearance of suspected militants to the exclusion from universities of students. Such measures have occurred in all five republics, but with a particular vigour in Uzbekistan, which is considered as a meeting place of Islamic militancy. Although Islam is always presented as the "national" and "natural" religion of autochthonous populations, Muslims do not enjoy more rights than adherents of any Christian denomination.

The appearance of new religious movements along with the renewal of religious activities contributes to the notion of religious revival in Central Asia, as elsewhere in the former Soviet Union. However, this phenomenon should be viewed cautiously because the fall of communism has not given rise to a proliferation of mass religious movements. On the one hand, despite all the measures taken against religion during the Soviet regime, the state never managed to entirely eliminate religion. Islam and Christianity have widely persisted in more or less official or clandestine ways. On the other hand, the present political establishment has discouraged the proliferation of religious movements, in particular those judged to be too activist and "foreign," fearing that an increased religious diversity may destabilize the new states of Central Asia.

Notes

1. F. Šarīfzād, "Islam – ne politiki," *Nauka i religija*, no.11 (1994): 32.
2. E. Luzanova, "Religious Renaissance or Political Game?" *Central Asian Post*, March 23, 1998.
3. *News Network International*, June 14, 1994.
4. *Slovo žizni*, March 16, 1993, 4.
5. The Archbishop of Ural'sk, interview by Antonij Gureev, "Cerkov' že nažu ā vīzu cvetušej," *Vedi* 17, no. 3 (1998): 2-8.
6. Svet pravoslāvīā v Kazahstane, *Vedi* (in Kazakhstan), *Slovo žizni* (in Uzbekistan).
7. E. Luzanova, "Religious Renaissance or Political Game?"
8. I. Karimov, *Uzbekistan on the Threshold of the XXIst Century* (Tachkent, Uzbekistan: 1997), 39.

Sebastien Peyrouse is a post-doctoral fellow at the French Institute for Central Asia Studies (IFEAC), Tashkent, Uzbekistan, and author of *Des chrétiens entre athéisme et islam: Regards sur la question religieuse en Asie centrale soviétique et post-soviétique*, Paris, Maisonneuve et Larose, 2003.
E-mail:sebpeyrouse@yahoo.com