Languages of Islam and Christianity in Post-Soviet Russia: institutional discourses, community strategies and missionary rhetoric

Sibgatullina, G.

Chapter 9

Conclusions

The argument of this thesis revolved around the question of how language – in particular, its religious variant – relates to social and political identities. In this book I have tried to show how institutions, communities and individual religious entrepreneurs in Russia design, shape and promote Islamic Russian and Christian Tatar, and sanction their use for the respective religious communities. By producing texts in these types of languages, which are used in specific contexts, societal actors utilize the power of language to symbolize identities; by creating a Christian variant of Tatar or an Islamic version of Russian, they assertively challenge the conventional notion, according to which the use of Russian and Tatar is inherently restricted to the realm of Christianity and Islam, respectively.

Religious texts and the very act of translation are not politically neutral. Rather, as the chapters in this thesis have shown, societal actors employ a religious language to claim political power and to advance their position and role in Russian society. By contrasting linguistic practices in six case studies on Russia's Islam and Orthodox Christianity (including Chapter 8, which also discusses other Christian denominations), this thesis provides further insights into the question of whether the two major religions follow similar patterns of instrumentalizing linguistic elements for social and political purposes. Against the background of unequal power relations between Islam and Christianity, and in the light of their different positions vis-à-vis the state, do the two religions in Russia have similar goals when they enter the linguistic realm of the other – when Christians use a "Muslim" vernacular and when Muslims claim that Russian is also a language of Islam in Russia? And do they face the same challenges?

9.1 Convergence in the "traditionalism" box

The thesis has zoomed in on official Orthodox Christian (Chapter 2) and Islamic elites (Chapter 3), and on state-registered Bible translation organizations (Chapter 8); together (though from different sides of the religious spectrum) they all shape what I have referred to as the mainstream discourse on religion. However, most of the case studies looked at users of religious language that find themselves at the margins of their

respective religious domains. These were in-between communities of Christian Tatars (Chapter 7) and ethnic Russian Muslims (Chapter 4), and religious entrepreneurs who do not fit into the conventional power structures (Polosin and Sysoev in Chapters 5 and 6 respectively). What unites them all is that despite differences in their proximity to the state and their opportunities for outreach, all the players discussed in this thesis are being pressed into the ideological framework of "traditionalism". This framework, as discussed in Chapter 2, is introduced and backed by the Russian state. The presidential administration has successfully imposed a powerful and at the same time blurry narrative of moderate conservatism. It is explicit in its anti-Western, anti-liberal direction and in its promotion of so-called "traditional values"; this focus on "traditionalism" eliminates religious organizations and communities that cannot demonstrate a long historical presence in Russia, and that cannot claim to have made a positive contribution to Russia's development and culture in accordance with the state's current political course. Only if religions pass the test, with the state and the ROC as the major referees, will they be accepted in the traditionalism framework; from that point on, they can develop a certain ideological diversity.

We have seen that references to Russia's past are recurrent in all the case studies, as the actors strive to be seen as part of Russia's historical identity in order to gain access to power and resources. Both Muslims and Christians engage in the search for historical models and offer their new interpretations as conforming to Russia's established interests in past and present. This can include arguments that challenge Russia's established historiography, as long as this revisionism comes in the name of Russia's common good. For instance, DUM RF's leadership has challenged the point of view – prominent in Soviet historiography and repeated in contemporary Russia's history schoolbooks – that the Mongols only exerted a negative and regressive impact on Russia. DUM RF Mufti Ravil' Gainutdin and his deputy Damir Mukhetdinov assertively argue that Muscovy advanced its statehood and power *thanks to* the Tatar Golden Horde, which shielded Russia from pernicious influences coming from the medieval West; on the basis of this historical model, the Tatars of today's Russia can claim to be continuing a positive and age-old cooperation between Russians and Muslims, although now with reversed roles.

In a similar way, Sysoev's community of Christian Tatars in Moscow have also argued that as far back as the seventh century, Turks on what today is Russian soil embraced Christianity, with the conversion of Bulghar Khan Kubrat as the most prominent example. This link is not only a way to enroot Christian Tatars historically, but also to reject the argument that Orthodox Tatar communities in the Volga region

were simply the result of violent Russification policies. The further back into the past the actors go, the scanter their evidence becomes. While it was not the task of this thesis to test such claims, it is not difficult to understand that this discourse relies on almost unlimited flexibility in manipulating historical arguments and creating cultural fictions.

When they accept inclusion in the "traditionalism" framework, religious actors enter a realm of terms and concepts that are vague enough to allow political manoeuvring, on a single condition – they must still be convincing in their claim to provide support to the country's social and political stability. Even actors who nominally oppose the state, and whom one would therefore expect to resist the pressure to fit into the official framework, in the end also play by the rules, as we saw with the example of Polosin. Ethnic Russian Muslims, whose conversion to Islam suggests opposition to both the conventional ethnicity-religion pairs and the dominant role of the ROC, in fact just offer another way to "make Islam Russian", which is not so very different from the official Muftis, who operate in the traditionalism box.

It is the state that defines the rules of the game; it can expand or – as happens more often – curb the space in which religious actors are allowed to operate. The possible scope within which "traditionality" could be defined is in constant flux, and the players have to make guesses and take risks to match it. As Marlène Laruelle summarizes it:

> "[The] doctrinal products are elaborated by different groups of ideological entrepreneurs who have room to act, to determine their preferences, and to cultivate their own networks. Their fragile entrepreneurship must work in permanent negotiation and tension with competing groups and the presidential administration itself. Just as the oligarchs' empire is not secure and remains dependent on individual loyalty, the empire of these ideological entrepreneurs is also unstable and can be challenged and dismembered".[1]

This means that even large institutions of influence, such as the ROC, which has cultivated a long-term relationship with the state, remain vulnerable and prone to changes of the country's political course; and this is even more true for the smaller and fragmented Islamic organizations and communities, especially since they constantly have to clean "their Islam" from associations with radicalism and terror. Pressed into the "traditionalism" box, both Islam and Orthodox Christianity find themselves next to each other, under similar constraints and with hopes of gaining similar benefits. In this narrow space, what we observe is a convergence of these two religions.

[1] Laruelle, "Putin's Regime and the Ideological Market: A Difficult Balancing Game".

At the nominal level, the big faith organizations are already forced to cooperate and develop an interreligious "dialogue" – however shallow and declarative-natured this dialogue in fact is – in order to sustain religious peace in the country; but more importantly, these religions are also coming closer to each other at much deeper and more fundamental levels. They are developing similar views on Russia's domestic and foreign politics, similar doctrinal lines of defence against the challenges of modernity (including a "traditionalist" definition of human rights),[2] and both of them interpret and protect societal moral norms along the same conservative lines. This is what Alfrid Bustanov and Michael Kemper referred to as the "convergence" taking place between the two major confessions, and this phenomenon affects not only the state-promoted religious institution but goes far beyond them.[3]

My thesis contributes to the study of this Russian convergence between Islam and Christianity (which, while perhaps not unique, is astounding, especially given the image of Russia as an Orthodox country) by elaborating a framework for the linguistic mechanisms that result from this process. Taken together, the text corpus of my work – sacred texts, prayers, preaching and religious doctrines, as well as life narratives of converts – mirrors these transformations precisely; religious language is fluid and flexible enough to adapt to the changing environment and function as a reliable reference point for analysing the power play between Islam and Christianity in Russia.

9.2 Language as a mirror

The case studies have shown that language – as a system of communication and a set of symbols – helps us to understand the political and ideological convergence of religious institutions and communities pressed into the "traditionalism" box.

With the naked eye, we see how Russia's Islamic elites almost unrestrictedly borrow, use and re-contextualize Orthodox religious vocabulary when they employ it for conveying Islamic messages. It is obvious that their primary audience is the Russian state, rather than the Muslim community. By using a terminology familiar to non-Muslims, Islamic actors (whether Muslim by birth like Mufti Gainutdin or Russian converts like Polosin) signal their embeddedness in the mainstream discourse, and consequently their loyalty to and support for the political regime. However, this strategy of "translating" Islam we find not only in speeches that address the country's political elites or Russia's society at large; it also appears prominently in texts that one would think are produced only for inner consumption: religious literature, prayers and

[2] Agadjanian, "Liberal Individual and Christian Culture"; Stöckl, *The Russian Orthodox Church and Human Rights*.
[3] Bustanov and Kemper, "Russia's Islam and Orthodoxy beyond the Institutions".

*khuṭba*s, Friday sermons. Thereby, these Islamic leaders draw Islam closer to Orthodox Christianity not only at the level of politics, but also at the much more profound level of symbols and notions.

A similar process is also witnessed in the Kräshen language: Tatar is brought closer to Orthodoxy, and hence also to Russian culture, through the replacement of "foreign" (Arabic/Persian) Islamic terminology by Russian loanwords. This strategy was first explicitly formulated and introduced by imperial Orthodox missionaries of the nineteenth century, but today it is maintained by the community members themselves – notwithstanding the obvious fact that the Russian loanwords are equally "alien" to the linguistic structures of the Tatar language, which of course continues to overlap with most of the Kräshen grammar and lexicon.

My study demonstrated that religious language can be a unifying but also a divisive force. Members of various religious groups want to recognize who belongs to "us" and who to "them" – this is the core of identity-building in any community, with belief and idiom as central markers. To quote from Brubaker, religion and language have always been "basic principles of vision and division of the social world", since they categorize the world by "distinct, bounded and self-reproducing communities"; and claims are made in the name of both for recognition, resources and reproduction.[4] This power to distinguish in- and out-groups is naturally amplified in a *religious variant of a language*.

9.2.1 Religious language as a marker of in-group identity

For all the case studies discussed in this book, religious language is important first and foremost as a marker of identity, making it possible to distinguish between the good "us" and the bad "them". This division is inherent to the very nature of the "traditionalism" paradigm, which imposes binary labels: "traditional" versus "foreign", "loyal" against "dangerous", "local" in contrast to "imported".

The absence of Arabic words, which are perceived as "foreign", unites the linguistic practices discussed in several case studies in this thesis. For the "turbaned" Islamic elites as well as for Russian converts, this is a way to construct themselves in opposition to the "Wahhabi", "Salafi" Islam labels, the adherents of which are believed to be more prone to pepper their Russian with Islamic terminology. In a broader sense, it is also an attempt to construct Russia's Islam in opposition to the Islam of Arabs, in particular. Russia's Islam is constructed as different, unique (*samobytnyi*), but

[4] Brubaker, "Language, Religion and the Politics of Difference", p. 16.

nonetheless an equally valuable kind of Islam. Obviously it is impossible to make a complete break with the Arab world, also in the light of Russia's foreign policy, which uses Russia's Islam as an instrument for bonding, just as the ROC is part of Russia's diplomacy to Orthodox countries.[5] Respect for the Arabic language will also remain important for the Muftiates in order not to catapult themselves out of the global *umma*. The Arabic language is maintained in prayers as a "sacred" language, where it is safely detached from the "terrestrial" ethnic cultures and identities.

Similarly, the Kräshens also "purify" their language from Islamic terms. Here too the replacement of Tatar/Arabic terms by Slavic concepts is a conscious political choice; there would have been alternative scenarios, for example to continue with the existent and religious lexicon, as Orthodox Churches in the Middle East do in their Arabic texts, or to simply go back to the Greek terminology that once formed the stock on which Church Slavonic was also developed. However, turning to replacement of the familiar lexicon by new coinages and other loanwords enables the Kräshen communities to connect to the ROC; this affiliation consequently empowers Kräshen leaders in their political struggle for recognition as an ethnic group independent from Muslim Tatars. With their linguistic choices, these Kräshens consciously challenge the majority of Tatars, for whom the linguistic marker of in-group identity is constructed through a negative relation to the Russian language.

My study of New Testament translations (Chapter 8) demonstrated that the Tatars perceive one group of loanwords – Arabic and Persian – as tokens of "sameness", whereas borrowings from Russian are purged and rejected. The context – namely the very fact that this "familiar" Islamic vocabulary is used to introduce religions that fall entirely beyond the "traditionalism" paradigm – seems to be a secondary issue.

9.2.2 A marker of ethnic identity

Roger Brubaker, in his analysis of language and religion as instruments of differentiation, argues that "language conflict has lost some of its intensity and transformative potential in recent decades, as the high noon of language-based […] conflicts appears to have passed".[6]

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[5] A. Malashenko, "The Islam Factor in Russia's Foreign Policy", *Russia in Global Affairs*, 8 August 2007 <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/n_9133> (Accessed on 18 July 2018); R. Crews, "A Patriotic Islam? Russia's Muslims under Putin", *World Politics Review*, March 8 2016 <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/18150/a-patriotic-islam-russia-s-muslims-under-putin> (Accessed on 18 July 2018).

[6] Brubaker, "Language, Religion and the Politics of Difference", p. 13.

What we are observing in Russia, however, is different: rather than fading away, language conflict is transforming, as part of a broader field of tension between the major nationalities and the major religions. In fact, the centuries-old tension between the dominant Russian language and Russia's minority languages has substantially moved into the realm of the discourse on religion. Religion and language as markers of a distinct ethnic identity are often difficult to separate from each other; rather, there are default religion-language-ethnicity triangles: an ethnic Russian is supposed to be an Orthodox Christian speaker of Russian, whereas an ethnic Tatar is expected to be Muslim and, if not able to speak it fluently, then at least able to understand the Tatar language. In the name of social stability, the official religious establishments, and also the state, support the status quo and do not openly promote crossing these boundaries. In fact, in a time of political centralization that takes away prerogatives from Russia's "ethnic republics" (as seen in the Introduction in the case of Tatar language education in Tatarstan), the political representation of minorities makes way for religious representations, bolstering the authority of the spiritual administrations. The degree to which either Russians or Tatars actually practise their religions is irrelevant in this scenario.

In cases where the religion/ethnicity pair deviates from the conventional norms, it is the language that is emphasized and overly "ethnicized", as if to compensate for the problematic ambiguity of the unconventional religious affiliation. Chapters 4 and 7 provided examples to support this claim. Russian converts to Islam (Chapter 4) jealously guard the "purity" of Russian and claim to be its "most noble" speakers; they use the same exclusivist, anti-Muslim, anti-migration narratives that dominate the mainstream discourse and share with the state the fear of "ethnic" Islam. Perhaps it is a far stretch, but this phenomenon appears to constitute a curious case of Islamophobia among Muslims.

As shown in Chapter 7, Kräshens, who also continue to "deviate" in their language, face double marginalization. Among Tatars they are seen, in the best case, as a "special" and marginal part of their nation – but Tatar nationalists see them as betrayers of the Tatar nation and demand their "return" into the fold of Islam. And the ROC only recently acknowledged the Kräshens as part of its flock. Meanwhile, the Kräshen language has a lower symbolic status than Tatar, and continues to be listed as a dialect; against the background of the "battle" between Tatarstan and Moscow for the status of the Tatar language, the pressure on the community is only increasing.

In addition, evangelical missions use traditional "Islamic" Tatar for their translation of the New Testament, to produce religions that are Tatar in form, but Christian in content (Chapter 8).

9.2.3 A marker of national identity

As Edwin Bacon has observed, Russia is the case where nationalist leaders and elites promote religiously inflected nationalism, or what he calls "reasoned religio-nationalism".[7] This type of nationalism expounds and reinforces the relationship between religion and nation; the term "nation" here goes beyond ethnic Russian claims, to include a broad vision of a civic, multi-ethnic Russian nation. Thus, Russian religio-nationalism is an attempt to articulate and justify a connection between Russian Orthodoxy and Russian nationalism, "from an explicit nationalist and political position, rather than from a theo-political perspective".[8]

The case studies on Islamic Russian reveal that when Muslim leaders enter the "traditionalism" discourse, they have to come to terms with the inevitable link between the Russian language and Russian ethnic identity, as well as Russian nationalism. The actors try to turn this ambiguity in their favour, as we see in their use of the very terms "Russia's (*rossiiskii*) Islam" and "Russian (*russkii*) Islam". DUM RF leaders appeal to a national identity as going beyond regional ethnic identities; Mukhetdinov uses the word "*rossiiskii*" to explicitly disassociate Russian ethnic identity from Russia's civic identity. Although the word has an official flavour, it is a safe choice. In contrast, Russian converts have opted for the connotations of *russkii* linked to ethnic identity (as discussed above). Viacheslav Ali Polosin tried to manoeuvre between the two camps and reproduced the ambiguity of the term *russkii* as used in the state discourse, which "serves the authorities' line of not taking a definite stance on the national identity of Russia".[9]

However, there are also notable experiments that defy the common discourse paradigms. Resisting any attempts to link language with ethnic/national identities,

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[7] E. Bacon, "Reflexive and Reasoned Religious Nationalism: The Exploratory Case of Russia," *Politics and Religion* 11:2 (2018), 396-420. Here p. 400.

[8] Ibid., p. 403.

[9] M. Laruelle, "Misinterpreting Nationalism: Why Russkii is Not a Sign of Ethnonationalism", *Russia in Global Affairs*, 13 April 2016 <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/PONARS-Eurasia/Misinterpreting-Nationa-lism-Why-Russkii-is-Not-a-Sign-of-Ethnonationalism-18105> (Accessed on 18 July 2018). Also M. Laruelle, "Russia as an anti-liberal European civilisation", in *The New Russian Nationalism: Imperialism, Ethnicity and Authoritarianism 2000–2015*, ed. P. Kolstø and H. Blakkisrud (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 275-97. Here pp. 275-76.

Sysoev's concept of uranopolitism rejects all ethnic or national connotations of Orthodoxy, and thus of religious language in general (see Chapter 6). One could argue that Sysoev was pursuing practical goals: his exceptional stance helped him to legitimize his radical Orthodox mission among Tatars and other Muslim communities, as did his claim to be proud of his own Tatar ancestors. The radicalism of the *uranopolitism* vision, coupled with his own messianic charisma and his open ambition to become a saintly martyr, might have increased the appeal of his preaching of Orthodox Christianity among the communities where he preached in Tatarstan and Central Asia. However, in his books we find evidence that he was indeed convinced of the principle that one cannot serve two kings at the same time, and that one has to choose between the terrestrial and the heavenly kingdoms; *uranopolitism* is Sysoev's argument that religious language must convey only one identity – that is, religious belonging.

9.2.4 A marker of non-religious identity

In that sense, Sysoev is rather exceptional among all of the case studies. What we see more often is that players who evoke religion tend to refer to ideas and identities associated with that religion but not to theological dogma, making faith exchangeable and, by extension, irrelevant. In the Russian-speaking realm, any terminology of Islamic origin is perceived as "foreign" and should therefore be avoided, while for Tatars using the Tatar language, this same terminology bears positive associations and perhaps even high status, and is encouraged and promoted. This is also valid beyond the discourse on faith issues. The costs of these practices – possible distortions or loss of meaning, theological clashes – seem to be of little relevance. The actors who engage in translation do not elaborate on their linguistic choices in terms of theological accuracy. In fact, there are attempts to approximate Islam and Christianity at all levels, but not yet in the field of theology. Religion is thereby *de facto* defined as culture, not as faith.[10] Language primarily symbolizes "belonging" and only after this, if at all, "believing".

9.3 Toward a painful merger

Inside the "traditionalism" box, Christianity and Islam are being forced to bring about a *sblizhenie* – a mutual movement toward each other (although on the understanding that the ROC, with its gravity, will have to move less than the "light"

[10] O. Roy, "Beyond populism: the conservative right, the courts, the churches and the concept of a Christian Europe", in *Saving the People: How Populists Hijack Religion*, ed. N. Marzouki et al. (London: Hurst & Company, 2016), 185-201. Here p. 193.

and vulnerable representations of Islam). Yet the process is not without inherent conflicts; in fact, the tension inherent in the paradigms of "us versus them", Christianity versus Islam, which has characterized relations between Orthodoxy and Islam over centuries, is now placed into one joint box, and the limited space within that box might increase these tensions.

First of all, language itself is becoming a battleground. The ROC has been visibly anxious about the Mufti's strategy of using Orthodox terms.[11] As a counterpoint, the Tatarstani Muftiate DUM RT resists the Russification of Islam, and makes sure that at least Friday sermons remain in Tatar.

The shared history is becoming a second field of combat. It has been easy to define and unite against the enemy from the outside: the image of a pernicious West that attacks Russia's traditional values has been used as a rhetorical tool by both Orthodox Christian and Muslim leaders; and the latter project themselves as a bulwark against radical Islam from the Middle East. But it is much more difficult to deal with enemies from *within*. How to reconcile tensions between the two major religions that trace back to the much-celebrated shared history? Who is allowed to lay claim to historical events and personalities that empowered the one, but enslaved the other? One could turn a blind eye to the "problematic" episodes in history; this is what the Tatarstani leadership does when it promotes the monastery island of Sviiazhsk as a cultural sight without giving attention to the fact that Sviiazhsk played a crucial role in Muscovy's siege of Kazan in the mid-sixteenth century, thereby bringing about the fall of the Kazan Khanate. Another way to deal with the problem is to offer alternative interpretations of history, as does the community of baptized Tatars in Moscow, which indeed denies the very fact of any assimilation or Russification of Tatars by Russians.

The need to adjust to the traditionalism paradigm is also deepening the existing cracks within religious institutions and communities. DUM RF, although close to the Kremlin, is under criticism from various Muslim and non-Muslim sides, and has difficulty reaching out to the community of Muslims. The state-registered Islamic bureaucracies are losing ground to alternative communities. State-induced attempts to consolidate a joint official "traditionalist" Islam by defining its content only drive Russia's numerous DUMs further apart, as demonstrated by the episode of the 2016 Grozny *fatwā*, which tried to limit what "traditionalist Sunnism" is supposed to be (Chapter 5). Similarly, the ROC does not have much control over its fundamentalist wing, although one could argue that it benefits from its ultra-conservative camp to

[11] Silant'ev, "Pokhititeli rozhdestva".

enforce its authority in society. Similarly, Sysoev's popularity forced the ROC to give up its reluctance toward aggressive Orthodox mission; and the cases of Polosin and less prominent converts to Islam revealed the ROC's difficulties with its "renegades" and "apostates".

When they escalate, these tensions "within" the box can produce sudden outbursts of violence. It is plausible to argue that the politicization of the Kräshen language and Kräshen identity provided the ammunition for the unprecedented series of arson attacks on Kräshen churches in Tatarstan. Similarly, the marginalization of "non-traditional" forms of Islam can be seen as having backfired when prominent religious leaders in Tatarstan were attacked, seriously injuring the Mufti Il'dus Faizov and killing his deputy, Valiulla Iakupov, in 2012. And the assassin of Sysoev was reportedly a "radical" Muslim who opposed his mission.

In order to resolve these inner conflicts, faith bureaucracies need the state. It not only protects them from potential "foreign" enemies, thereby reducing the pressure of competition that stems from religious grassroots movements; it also strengthens them against the societal forces that question the authority of religious institutions in general. The state has an interest in using tools of control to administer "traditional" religions, which means that legal prosecution or exclusion from political favour may also be applied within the box. This means that the state, although constitutionally defined as secular, serves as the protector and administrator of religions.

The six case studies of this thesis have juxtaposed changes in religious terminology with shifting discursive claims on ethnic, religious and national identities. Using the languages of religion, Christians and Muslims who participate in shaping the discourse on religion in present-day Russia have been continuously pushing, redrawing, blurring and defending the boundaries between their respective religious communities. Given this reality, the thesis calls for religious texts, written and oral, to be viewed not only as passive sources that help us to understand religion. As the study has demonstrated, religious language also has the power to ignite social changes. A careful examination of this language and the ideas, values and attitudes associated with it, is crucial for unpacking complex social interactions.