PROSELYTISM IN KYRGYZSTAN

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In independent Kyrgyzstan the rich and multisided spiritual life of its peoples, including religious confessions, is flourishing as never before. Having firmly resolved to build a democratic society our republic was one of the first in the CIS to pass the most democratic law on the freedom of conscience. It has no rivals in legislations of both newly independent and developed democratic states.

Its constitution registers the freedom of conscience and a secular state as its legal basis. Art 16.11 states: "Each person is guaranteed the freedom of conscience, religion, and religious or atheist activities. Each person has the right to freely profess any religion or do not profess any; to choose, have and disseminate his religious or atheistic convictions." Art 8.3 says: "Religion and the cults are separated from the state," while Art 15.2 registers: "None can be discriminated against, the rights and freedoms of no person can be infringed upon for the reasons of birth, sex, race, nationality, language, religion, political or religious convictions or for any other reasons of personal or public nature."

Social and political changes in the republic are unfolding at a fast pace; difficulties and contradictions apart they have already radically changed both the relations between the state and confessions and the religious situation in the country.

Today, new religious organizations (unheard of in the republic prior to 1991) are present on its religious scene along with the traditional confessions (Islam and Christian Orthodoxy, the latter having 44 churches and parishes of the Russian Orthodox Church, including a nunnery and two Christian Orthodox structures outside the ROC absent prior to 1991, too). Today there are 3 Catholic communities; 2 Jewish ones, 1 Buddhist community; 216 Protestant communities (including 20 missions of foreign confessions, 11 educational centers, 7 centers, foundations and associations); and also 12 Bahai communities. About one thousand foreign missionaries are working in the republic—there were none before 1991.

There is a Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Kyrgyzstan (SAMK) in the republic with 9 kazyats (territorial structures), 1,600 mosques, 25 Muslim centers, foundations and associations; 3 missions of foreign Islamic confessions, 7 Islamic institutes, 41 madrasahs and 1 Koranic class.[1]

All these organizations can be divided into the following groups:

1. Old religions, new for Kyrgyzstan and its population, more often than not without local ethnic and confessional routes. They came from abroad in the last decade and are coordinated from foreign religious centers. There are, for example, numerous protestant groups and movements of American, South Korean and other origins, and certain Islamic trends.
2. Religious movements of the last 100 years (the so-called "new century" religions) based on occultism and mysticism; they do not correlate with any of the known world religions (Falungung, Sun Myung Moon Unification Church, Sri Chinmoy Cult, International Society for Krishna Consciousness, Maharishi University of Management, Satanism, New Age Movement). Often headed by one leader they insist on their religious autonomy and formulate alternative programs of human and social development. They came from abroad and are administered by foreign religious centers.
3. The so-called "new religious movements" or groups that appeared or became structuralized in the former Soviet republics that are close to the above-mentioned religious groups: Great White Brotherhood and Blue Lotus.

Their presence has radically changed the old confessional picture; what is more, they have considerably complicated the confessional and ethnic relations in the republic.

There are several reasons behind these unwelcome developments. Here are a few of them. First, the collapse of the old Soviet ideological and axiological system and the resultant ideological vacuum. Second, increased national self-awareness, a quest for ethnic identity of which religion has been and remains the main element. Third, and probably most important, cardinal social, political and economic changes. The inevitable losses of the transition period, economic stratification into very rich and very poor urged part of the local people to return to the utopian, illusory equality, quasi-struggle against richness and excesses, to false egalitarianism that deprive people and society of any distinctive image. They did it very much in conformity with Soviet mentality rather than seeking spheres where they could apply their strength and knowledge for the sake of personal prosperity. Finally, fourth, Kyrgyzstan is

[1] See: O.Sh. Mamaiusupov, *Voprosy (problemy) religii na perekhodnom periode,* Bishkek, 2003, 353 pp.

part of a large, complex and varied world with a multitude of formal and informal movements. Some of them are exploiting people's religious feelings to stress that their confession is the only correct one and to reject all others; they also use their confession as an instrument of securing their own aims. Kyrgyzstan has concentrated the trends typical of all newly independent Central Asian states: the north is Christianizing while the south is becoming more Muslim. The freedom of speech and conscience in our republic allows all sorts of confessions to thrive on its territory: in the north Protestant missions are coming to the fore, while in the south, in the Ferghana Valley Mid-Eastern missions are operating.[2]

Proselytism figures prominently in the context in which thousands of religious organizations are functioning—in fact, rejection of new confessions and unpleasant incidents are unavoidable. Relatives and neighbors painfully respond to the readiness with which people they know embrace new faiths; society as a whole negatively responds to this as well. The media, analysts and experts agree that proselytism and the problems created by the illegal Hizb ut-Tahrir party are the main destabilizing political and social factors in Central Asia, including Kyrgyzstan.

Indeed, the conflicts in the village of Ak-Tiuz (Kemin District), the village of Tash-Tobo (Alamedin District), the village of Myrzak (Uzgen District), in the Archa-Beshik quarter of Bishkek and elsewhere caused ethnic and religious strife that potentially could have destabilized the country. It is very dangerous to oppose one religion to another and to poison the minds of young people with an aggressive rejection of the faiths of their forefathers.[3]

Sociological studies conducted by the Independent Institute of Social and National Problems (Russia) demonstrated that religious resurrection in the Russian Federation intensifies religious contradictions (between Islam and Christianity, in particular) and religious intolerance is mounting. In fact, it is much more prominent among the 16-18 year olds than among older groups.[4]

The *Glossary.ru Social Sciences Dictionary* describes proselytism as a blind dedication to the recently acquired teaching, conviction, faith or dogma, while the *Brokhause & Efron Smaller Encyclopedic Dictionary* interprets the term as an ardent desire to convert all to one's newly acquired faith; The *Dahl's Interpreting Dictionary of the Living Great Russian Language* offers a similar interpretation.

If somebody is forced to embrace Christianity under the threat of death like this happened under Charlemagne this could be called proselytism. The same term applies to a situation when starving people are encouraged to adopt Christianity at the price of a free meal—this is proselytism. In the 19th century, there were "rice Christians" in China; starving people flocked in their thousands to Christian missionaries who baptized them in exchange for a bowl of rice. The newly converted then disappeared never to return, yet in the missionaries' reports they were described as proselytes. When subordinates are forced to adopt a new religion to please their superiors this smacks of proselytism. This was what happened under Kievan Prince Vladimir: chronicles say that many people adopted Christianity to please their sovereign. When followers of other than the dominating religions are deprived of their rights so that to force them to adopt Christianity this can be called proselytism prominent in many "Christian" states in the 19th century. In Germany, Karl Marx's parents adopted Christianity because the career of a lawyer was opened only to Christians; in Russia, Jews adopted Christianity to avoid conscription and be free to live outside the Pale. Thousands of Yakuts in the north of Siberia adopted Christianity to please their superiors.[5]

The very natural desire of all confessions to acquire the largest possible number of followers is the driving force of proselytism; religious organizations compete for domination. This rivalry frequently develops into an opposition among the followers and adds urgency to the already acute religious contradictions.

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[2] See: A. Tabyshalieva, "Vzgliad na religiouznuiu situatsiu v Kyrgyzstane," *Tsentral'naia Azia,* No. 11, 1997.

[3] See: D. Soodanbek, "Ostorozhno: religiozniy raskol," *Respublika,* No. 32, 26 November, 2002.

[4] See: A.A. Nurullaev, *Problemy garmonizatsii khristiansko-musul'manskikh otnosheniy v SNG* [http://www. freenet. bishkek. su/jornal/n4/ JRNAL411.htm].

[5] See: Ia. Krotov, *Dnevnik literatora 1997 goda. Prizrak prozelitizma* [http://www.krotov.org /yakov/dnevnik/1997/ 19970620.html].

More likely than not the so-called missionaries preach in a very aggressive manner; they try to convince potential followers of their cultural, political and economic superiority and even offer false information about their religions. They tear people away from their own religions and cultural traditions while it is only genuine religion that enriches national culture. This has been obvious throughout entire human history.

Proselytism unscrupulously uses all means and methods to reach its goals: it imposes its faith through the media; organizes concerts at concert halls and stadiums; disseminates its literature; sets up publishing houses and newspapers; opens churches and prayer houses; pays for young people's education; offers wide-scale humanitarian aid, etc. There are latent forms of proselytism as well that take a form of professional training, foreign language lessons and medical treatment.

The ethnic makeup, way of life, traditions and mentality of over 80 nations and nationalities of Kyrgyzstan have been shaped by their religions (Islam among the Kyrgyz, Uzbeks, Uighurs, Dungans, Tajiks, Tartars, Kazakhs and others, and Christian Orthodoxy among the Russians, Ukrainians, and Belorussians). Religious contradictions negatively affect ethnic relationships and aggravate them.

The majority of the local population professes either Sunni Islam or Christian Orthodoxy, yet they know next to nothing about other world confessions, their philosophies, international laws and normative acts related to the freedom of conscience. Some of them treat those who follow other confessions and their missionaries with intolerance. The latter however sometimes are even aggressive to the extent that creates problems with the freedom of conscience.

Some of the missionaries go as far as abusing the tolerance demonstrated by the state and the nation as a whole. They violate people's constitutional rights and freedoms, try to lure new members by means of material aid, apply morally wrong methods to people in distress and even recur to psychological and neurolinguistic pressure. This is done in a subtle and hard to detect manner.

In the everyday context clashes between Kyrgyz Muslims and Kyrgyz Protestants are gaining momentum: in the villages Muslims try to deprive Protestants of land to till, water for their kitchen gardens and electricity. Burial of those who belong to other than Muslim confessions triggers more conflicts: they cannot be buried in Muslim cemeteries. Even if they are buried imams refuse to perform the necessary burial rites. This has become a common feature of everyday life.[6] In the village of Ak-Tiuz (Kemin District) one of the two opposing groups was resolved to drive the village Protestants, a new confession in Kyrgyzstan, away.[7]

Analysts are concerned with ethnic and religious conflicts and rightly so. Recently, leaders of a Protestant organization with a mixed ethnic membership tried to impose their problems on state structures; they interfered with what the SAMK was doing even though the law said: "religion and all its cults are separated from the state." They flooded all state instances, including the local OSCE office and the president, with complaints about the mufti whom they accused of having banned burials of the dead of other confessions in Muslim cemeteries.

The leaders of the same organization acting in the name of its members demanded that the president of Kyrgyzstan grant them asylum in the United States, Canada or in one of the members of the Council of Europe. They insisted that their freedom of conscience was regularly violated. It was a political move designed to raise the leaders' personal rating among the flock and to exploit religious feelings for their own personal gains.

Christian proselytes stir up enmity among the autochthonous ethnic groups. The situation is a complex one: on the one hand, there is freedom of conscience; on the other, the need to legally regulate what the religious organizations and missionaries are doing.

History of religion knows of many cases when society failed to correctly assess the situation thus causing tragedies. Today, we need new forms and mechanisms of an interaction between the state, society and new religious organizations designed to avert potential religious conflicts. We need new laws similar

[6] See: Z.I. Galieva, "Kyrgyzstan: mesto i rol' religii v sovremennom obshchestve," *Materialy kruglogo stola "Dialog kul'tur i religii—garantia mira i stabil'nosti,* Bishkek, 2002, pp. 14-20.

[7] See: L. Saralaeva, "Pravdoy na pravdu, veroy na nadezhdu…" *Delo No.,* No. 13, 13 April, 2002.

to those applied in the developed European states to keep within limits those religious organizations that may change the traditional family and clan relations and traditional religious preferences, and upset the religious balance in the republic.

Much depends on the people themselves who, on the whole, prefer peace and agreement among ethnic groups and confessions. This should be encouraged in all ways.

Society should strengthen mutual understanding and develop a dialog with the followers of new religions so that to be able to accept them as a part of the local scene. The new structures should emulate this example and try to avoid confrontation for the sake of religious and ethnic harmony.