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Towards a Connection between Religion and Nationality in Central Asia

Sébastien Peyrouse, Post-doctoral Fellow, French Institute for Central Asian Studies (Institut Français d'Etudes sur l'Asie Centrale, IFEAC), Tashkent, Uzbekistan, sebpeyrouse@yahoo.com

This report presents findings of a research project conducted for a Ph.D. on Christian movements and believers in Central Asia from 1945 through the present. It is a result of a two-year stay (1998-2000) in the five republics of Central Asia with the support of IFEAC, where I currently pursue research on politics and religion in Central Asia after independence. This research is based on library work (in Paris, Nanterre, Strasbourg, Oxford, Moscow, and throughout Central Asia, especially in Tashkent, Dushanbe, Ashgabat, Bishkek, Almaty and Öskemen [Ust'-Kamenogorsk]), plus surveys and interviews. I also extensively used Russian-language Soviet and post-Soviet newspapers, such as *Kazakhstanskaia pravda*, *Kommunist Tadzhikistana*,

Pravda vostoka, *Sovetskaia Kirgiziia*, and periodicals covering religious issues, such as *Bratskii vestnik*, *Zhurnal moskovskoi patriarkhii*, *Svet pravoslaviia v Kazakhstane*, *Vedi*, *Zhizn' very*, and *Slovo zhizni*. A number of important documents came from church libraries or were given to me by priests, pastors, and believers. I interviewed state officials in charge of religious affairs, representatives and believers of all Christian denominations present in the area, from the Orthodox Church to the Catholic Church, and the numerous Protestant denominations.

In Central Asia Christianity was not only persecuted by the atheist regime, but it was also a minority religion in a Muslim area. After

independence the national character of a minority faith appeared more obviously within the framework of the Muslim majority and of the new nation-state building. This did not prevent numerous movements from successful missionary work. Many missions, especially Protestant ones, are now active among the Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, and Uzbeks. What is the link between nationality and religion, and how did the Russian Orthodox Church appropriate the concept of nationality after 1991? Are Orthodoxy and Islam trying to bipolarize the religious spectrum in Central Asia in the name of the link between nationality and religion?

The Soviet pattern — that is, a faith fighting for its own existence in an atheist regime — has given way in the post-Soviet period to a Central Asian specificity: Christianity as a minority faith which appears as a symbol of European identity in a Muslim land. European emigration significantly increased from the times of perestroika and independence, considerably diminishing the number of Christians, and arousing the Christian clergy's anxiety. Minorities have expressed their fear evoked by the indigenization of power, and ethnic nationalism has become a key element in the religious revival. This "ethnic-religious" combination constitutes one of the responses to the Central Asian situation. From the titular group's point of view Islam may be viewed as a just return of religion which used to be persecuted by a foreign regime, and which would be essential in the context of nation-building.

The Titular Nationality-Islam Connection

The rapid rise of foreign Christian missions and the conversions of members of the titular nationality (e.g., Uzbeks in Uzbekistan) have caused some hostile reactions from the Muslim clergy who consider themselves "at home" in Central Asia. If Muslims claim to respect Christianity, pressures have grown against the religious movements whose proselytism amidst Muslims is too obvious. This hostility is expressed in countries such as Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, but also the other republics less influenced by Islam such as Kyrgyzstan, where Christian missionary activity is especially potent: petitions against the activities of these movements were signed in Kyrgyz mosques. In Uzbekistan, the Muslim clergy's pressures have born fruit: the political authorities have reviewed legislation on religion.

The Russian-Orthodox Connection

The Muslim refusal of Protestant or even Catholic proselytism is supported by the Orthodox Church, which tries to justify its position towards Islam and its predominance over the other Christian movements. It asserts an intrinsic tie connecting every Russian to Eastern Orthodox Christianity. The terms "Russian" and "Orthodoxy" would then be strictly bound together. The Orthodox Church tries to crystallize to its advantage the Russian population's status of political and cultural minority. The prayer house enables people to meet "compatriots," while the liturgy uses multiple specific cultural aspects.

The link between nationality and religion in Kazakhstan is emphasized by the notion of canonical territory, which according to Orthodoxy concerns all of post-Soviet space. In the name of a supposed precedence over all other churches today present in this area, Orthodoxy claims the right of preeminence, not only over the religious affairs of Russians, but over those of all citizens. In this perspective, a Christian living in any area colonized by Russia would have to be Orthodox. There would be only two exceptions: first, people of non-Slavic origin whose history and culture are bound to another religion (e.g., Uzbeks, Tajiks, Georgians), and second, people whose nationality is culturally bound to a church situated beyond the former USSR borders (e.g., Catholic Poles, Protestant Germans).

The simple presence of some Russian soldiers, Cossack garrisons or Old Believers since the beginning of the 18th century, in particular in the northern Kazakh Steppe, would be enough to support the idea that Central Asia belongs to the Russian world and is intrinsically bound to Orthodoxy. The two Orthodox journals published in Kazakhstan, *Vedi* and *Svet pravoslaviia v Kazakhstane*, highlight pre-Soviet Russian history while erasing the Soviet period, which has lost its legitimacy. In this perspective the Russian presence in Kazakhstan is a legacy from the Russian empire and not from Soviet rule.

The Russian Orthodox Church also highlights its link to the Russian nation, while preserving a moderate and accommodating discourse on the new states' political reality, where challenging political frontiers or expressing any kind of irredentism is strictly banned. The Church has to distance itself from the most nationalistic and Cossack movements and has refused to be associated with any kind of unofficial political action. The archbishop of Astana

and Almaty has made several statements in interviews and articles weakening the link between religion and nation. The Church especially focuses on the notion of civic patriotism based on territory of residence. Nevertheless, the Orthodox Church cannot solve the contradiction stemming from its claim of a "canonical" territory that implies the existence of a specific link through which Kazakhstan would be, on a religious plane, dependent on Moscow.

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In the name of national stability, which would be threatened by proselytism and so-called "foreign denominations," Orthodoxy tries to polarize the religious spectrum around the Orthodoxy-Islam duo in order to minimize the influence of Protestantism and so-called non-traditional denominations. Orthodoxy and Islam each refuse to engage in proselytism among nationalities traditionally belonging to the other religion. "In Central Asia and in Russia, there is a natural distribution of the sphere of influence between the two main religions, Orthodoxy and Islam, and no one will destroy this harmony" (Botasheva and Lebedev 1996). The Orthodox hierarchy emphasizes its mutual understanding with Islam and asserts that "Islam is closer to Orthodoxy than other Christian confessions" (Peyrouse 2003: 288). Some embarrassing elements of Orthodox history in Central Asia are then forgotten, as for example the existence of a "Kyrgyz" (i.e., Kazakh) anti-Muslim "mission" in the Kazakh steppes in 1881. The Church also participates in several symbolic events in Kazakhstan, such as commemorations of Abay Qūnanbaev or Shoqan Uālikhanov [Valikhanov].

If Orthodoxy advocates Russians' rights in Central Asia, it also strives to preserve its good favor with local regimes. When the Russian nationality refers to Orthodox history, this notion of Orthodoxy is not, according to the Archbishop of Astana and Almaty, transnational but on the contrary comes within the scope of the territorial entity in which a Christian lives. Orthodoxy in Central Asia claims to be "autochthonous" (e.g., *Svet pravoslaviia v Kazakhstane* 1999). Despite its subordination to the Moscow Patriarchate, it refuses to get involved in the Russian Federation and rejects all supra-state political thought so as not to appear a foreign element in Central Asia.

The effort to bipolarize the religious spectrum in Central Asia has met with uneven success, but it is at times strongly supported by local governments. President Niyazov of Turkmenistan has divided the religious spectrum into two distinct wholes which cannot interfere with each other in terms of flux of believers and conversions. Thus, a Turkmen believer is supposed to be Muslim and a European believer — Orthodox. The other republics, especially Uzbekistan, are also evolving in this direction despite the persistence of an official policy of a more diversified religious spectrum.

Unlike certain other Muslim countries, there is no discrimination against Christianity on the whole in post-Soviet Central Asia, as Orthodoxy and other denominations, such as Catholics or Lutherans, are fully recognized. Although discrimination exists against some specific denominations that are viewed as foreign movements (such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostals and even Baptists and Seventh Day Adventists), in practice, no Orthodox in Central Asia complains about flagrant inequality, which would give Christians a lower status. The religious differences are dominated by national identification. Central Asia in this sense remains closer to the rest of former Soviet space than to the Near and Middle East. There is no desire to eliminate Christian practices, whether Orthodox or non-Orthodox, but rather a more subtle discrimination against national (European) minorities through the violation of certain religious rights.¹

The religion-nationality connection is, of course, not unique to Central Asia and Orthodoxy. Nevertheless, it reveals various questions people raise while facing numerous changes in their society. At the same time it also shows a certain continuity in post-Soviet Central Asia, as this paradigm existed prior to independence. For Russians in Tsarist and Soviet Central Asia, Orthodoxy was a way to mark their identity in a Muslim environment. This link is being reinforced by the new social, economic, and national context, and by the new opportunity for individuals to practice their religious beliefs with fewer restrictions.

This work on Christianity is part of an ongoing research project at IFEAC on the mutual

¹ The Orthodox and Muslim hierarchies take remarkably similar positions in each of the Central Asian republics: all condemn Protestant proselytism. In the area of religious legislation, however, missionary Christian movements are much less restricted in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan than in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.

instrumentalization of politics and religion in post-Soviet Central Asia. One of its goals is to study how political discourse uses religious (Muslim, Christian, etc.) phenomena in the framework of nation-state building, and how political powers are attempting to display an image of religious pluralism and freedom. Our present research also examines how religion is viewed by the national minorities, especially in their politico-cultural claims. This question not only concerns minorities of Muslim origin, such as Caucasians or Central Asians living outside their eponymous state, but also the European-Slavic minorities. Since 2003 we have concentrated our work on the Russian minority living in Central Asia, especially in Kazakhstan. One of the objectives is to study how Russians are attempting to use the Orthodox Church in defense of their rights in this

republic and how the Church replies in the framework authorized by the political power.

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The Role of the Pilgrimage in Relations between Uzbekistan and the Uzbek Community of Saudi Arabia

Bayram Balci, Researcher, the Turkey and Caucasus Program, French Institute for Anatolian Studies (Institut Français d'Etudes Anatoliennes, IFEA), Beyoğlu-Istanbul, Turkey, balci@azeurotel.com

This report presents the results of my study of a Central Asian community — Uzbeks in today's terminology — who settled in Saudi Arabia in several successive waves starting from the early 1940s, and who are identified by Saudis as Turkistani or Bukhari, according to the regions of their origin. Given Uzbekistan's independence, Saudi Uzbeks today define themselves as Turkistani or Uzbek, depending on the situation.

The study was conducted during two two-week pilgrimages (*umra*) with Central Asian pilgrims and Saudi Uzbeks at the time of Ramadan in December 2000 and November 2001 in Jeddah, Mecca, and Medina. I also conducted several field visits among the Uzbek community in Turkey and in Uzbekistan, where I followed Saudi Uzbeks visiting their relatives. The findings of this study are based on regular contacts with 15 families who invited me to their homes, on interviews with more than 80 individuals during each pilgrimage, and on family archives, i.e., pictures, letters and videos. The research was supported by the Centre Français de Recherches sur le Moyen-Orient Contemporain (CERMOC, located in Beirut and Amman) and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation.

In this report I argue that the pilgrimage plays an important role in preserving Uzbek identity on the

ground. The Uzbek community (with Uyghurs, another Turkic community exiled in Saudi Arabia, not studied here) is one of only two national groups that have succeeded in achieving relative integration in Saudi Arabia without being completely assimilated. This is notable, since the kingdom makes it difficult for immigrants to preserve their identities.

Before Russian colonization in the 19th century, Central Asians had multiple identities — familial, tribal, regional, and religious. When needed, one would refer to one or all of his/her identities. According to scholars and old refugees in Mecca and Medina, in the early 1930s when Soviet control over the region of Central Asia grew stronger and more violent, the term "Uzbek," that already existed at the time had no real meaning for the exiles. Synonymous with "confederation of tribes," it was of secondary importance for the people who preferred to be identified as "Kokandi," "Namangani," "Marghilani," "Farghani," etc. The outsiders called them Turkistani or, more frequently, Bukhari, referring to the last local independent Emirate and then Socialist Republic of Bukhara (Shalinsky 1994).