

**Title:**

**‘God created me Kyrgyz’ – Challenging normative constructs of ethnic identity in post-socialist Kyrgyzstan<sup>1</sup>**

**Author:**

**David Radford**

**Lecturer, International Relations**

**Flinders University**

**david.radford@flinders.edu.au**

***Introduction***

The collapse of the Soviet Union led to the dismantling of its constituent republics and their sudden independence. Rapid changes took place in all areas of society - economic, social, political and religious. It is now well documented that one major social phenomenon was the sudden interest in and revitalisation of religion. This paper is focused on some of the religious changes that have taken place in Kyrgyzstan, Central Asia, with reference to the influx of new religious movements and in particular, the not insignificant growth of Protestant Christianity among ethnic Kyrgyz. Conversion to Christianity has brought with it many challenges, one of the most important being that of identity. The normative understanding of Kyrgyz identity is that to be Kyrgyz is to be Muslim. I explore how Kyrgyz Christians have challenged this understanding by reconstructing their sense of ethnic identity. Kyrgyz Christians affirm their new religious faith and their sense of Kyrgyz identity in the context of a post-socialist Kyrgyzstan seeking to strengthen its own nascent nation-building national identity.

---

<sup>1</sup> ‘This paper was presented at the 10th Biennial Conference of the Australasian Association for Communist and Post-Communist Studies (AACaPS) in Canberra, 3-4 February 2011. It has been peer reviewed via a double referee process and appears on the Conference Proceedings Website by the permission of the author who retains copyright’.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the independence of Kyrgyzstan as political nation state in 1991 resulted in what has come to be called a developing 'religious marketplace'. Old and new forms of religious expression were suddenly available for the Kyrgyz, indeed all Kyrgyzstan citizens, whatever their nationality. In this situation, upwards of 20,000 Kyrgyz have embraced the Protestant Christian faith. Adopting Christianity touches the heart of Kyrgyz ethnic identity and challenges normative identity constructions - to be Kyrgyz is to be Muslim. However, through a process of reconstructing identity Kyrgyz Christians have found ways to identify and find continuity between their new religious faith and Kyrgyz traditional values, history and community, beyond a strictly Muslim framework. A qualitative methodology was utilised involving in-depth interviews with forty nine Kyrgyz Christian believers from different backgrounds (ages, gender, location, length of Christian allegiance). An analysis of these interviews forms the basis for this paper.

### ***Challenges to Kyrgyz Christians from the Kyrgyz community***

One of the main factors in stimulating identity reconstruction for Kyrgyz Christians has been the challenges and accusations from the non-Christian Kyrgyz community which highlight the differentness, the 'deviance' associated with conversion to Christianity. These responses can be summed up in 4 statements<sup>2</sup>:

1. You have 'betrayed', 'sold out', your faith, your family, your community, and your ancestors; you have become a 'kafir' – (33/49<sup>3</sup>, 67.4%). These various terms were used as synonyms to describe a person who has committed form of treason , one who has violated Kyrgyz identity and brought shame on the community (16/49, 32.7%).
2. You were born Muslim – 'To be Kyrgyz is to be Muslim.' This was referred to directly or indirectly in nearly all the interviews as part of the community's response to Kyrgyz Christians.

---

<sup>2</sup> Through a process utilising NVIVO and thematic analysis of the interview data.

<sup>3</sup> These figures show that 33 out of the total of 49 respondents raised this issue.

3. You have become Russian, converted to Russian religion, and are following the Russian God (45/49, 91.8%) - Christianity is a foreign religion and Jesus is a foreign God) .

Well...the only thing I knew is [Christianity is] not mine. It is something...that belongs to Russians, Russian God and Russian religion. And I am Kyrgyz and I am supposed to be a Muslim...<sup>4</sup> [male, 32 years, married, translator].

4. You have become 'Baptist'. This word is used as a derogatory term and is associated with Christians. The rumours were that 'Baptists' were a weird cult/sect like group engaged in brainwashing, immoral sexual relations, and cannibalism (killing and eating babies) (16/49, 32.7%).

Each one of these accusations highlights the perception that Christianity is foreign or not belonging to Kyrgyz identity. The label 'Russian' for a Kyrgyz Christian is not simply about being 'Russified', one who accepts Russian ways and thinking, it is a term that implies one has forsaken one's core identity. In response, Kyrgyz Christians offer seven discourses to counteract these threats and accusations. These discourses include an affirmation, a critique and a reinterpretation of Kyrgyzness revealing the strategic role that religious conversion plays in the process of identity reconstruction.

## 1. Muslim religious symbols and Kyrgyz behaviour

The first way that Kyrgyz Christians address the challenge of the Kyrgyz-Muslim identity dialectic is to interact directly with Muslim religious symbols and Kyrgyz behaviour (15/49, 30.6%). Specifically Kyrgyz Christians build on biblical representations in the Qur'an, claim to be 'true Muslims', and challenge the authentic Muslimness of the Kyrgyz. As a form of

---

<sup>4</sup> One Kyrgyz Christian recently (October, 2010) informed me about the expression, "the Russian God" suggesting that it was more relevant twenty to fifty years ago. However, now, with the advent and growth of Kyrgyz Christians, Muslims now are able to distinguish between "the Russian God" and the "the God of the sects", which is the God of Protestants. Commenting further, he suggests that Kyrgyz Muslims are more favourable to the first, and antagonistic to towards the latter.

apologetic, common prophets (*pegambar*) and stories within the Qur'an and the Bible are utilised 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.

[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*<sup>5</sup> she was able to receive because it was something that she had heard before [male, 37 years, married, Christian professional].

Respondents react to the challenge that a Kyrgyz is supposed to be a Muslim by 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 'Muslim' is. If they did know what the real meaning of 'Muslim' is they would realise two things: firstly, that they themselves are really not Muslims, and therefore should not judge or accuse Kyrgyz Christians of betraying their community; and secondly, that 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.

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' [female, 42 years, married, teacher]

---

<sup>5</sup> Pelkmans (2007) has pointed out that these 'discursive techniques' utilising Quranic terms by Kyrgyz Christians, has resulted in accusations of deception by some voices in the national media. They claim that missionaries are deliberately using Islamic vocabulary to 'hide Christianity in Islamic guise' in an attempt to trick Kyrgyz into conversion.

Kyrgyz Christians claim that if ‘Muslimness’ is how a Kyrgyz should be identified then they have more right to be called a Kyrgyz than their Kyrgyz accusers. In this discourse 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 believes that they have been submitted to God and this is exemplified by their upright moral behaviour. In that sense Kyrgyz Christians understand that they have upheld the religious and/or moral imperative implied in Kyrgyz identity, in Kyrgyzness.

## 2. History as content and history as discourse

A second way that Kyrgyz Christians have answered their critics has to do with *history* (13/49, 26.5%). History has to do with continuity with the traditions, values, significant events, and the ancestors.

Islam came centuries ago *but before Islam we were Kyrgyz*...We [the Kyrgyz] were existing before Islam, so if some person said that Kyrgyz means Islam, Muslim, you mean that before Islam there were no Kyrgyz?...this does not make sense. We worshiped the sun, we worshiped mountains, we worshiped some things from nature and we were Kyrgyz. And then Islam came...because for centuries and centuries we were in Islam...But there are so many Kyrgyz that are not Muslims and this does not...make them not Kyrgyz...[male, 32 years, married, translator].

History apparently offers a challenging critique and justification to Kyrgyz identity for Kyrgyz Christians. 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 – this was closer to their spiritual/religious roots .

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.

Interviewer: People have said *baike* (older brother) has betrayed his people though he is a Kyrgyz himself. What does it mean for you to be a Kyrgyz?

Respondent: 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 [male, 49 years, married, social worker]

No one can accuse this respondent of being anything else other than a Kyrgyz. The references to his birth, to the mountains (the symbolic geographical representation of the Kyrgyz homeland), and to his lack of being able to grow a beard, are references to his Kyrgyz identity. If God created him Kyrgyz then God should be able to understand him when he prays in Kyrgyz, he should not have to pray in Arabic (or in English for that matter) or memorize a language that was not his own. The association that has been made is that Islam is deeply connected to Arab culture and ways, not to Kyrgyz culture and ways.

Kyrgyz Christians also hold that history shows that *Kyrgyz ancestors were in fact Christians before they were Muslims* (14/49, 28.6%)<sup>6</sup>! 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. The argument is this: if Christian legacy is in Kyrgyz culture then it must have come through the influence of their Christian ancestors. If their ancestors were

---

<sup>6</sup> Not all respondents said this. Two to three respondents said that it either was a foreign religion or that Christianity only came recently to Kyrgyzstan in the 1990s.

Christians then they can be Christians today as well. They 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.

The good news about Jesus did not only come to us today. It came to Central Asia before Islam and history can prove it. It is why I think that we do not come to new faith our old faith came back to us. Maybe we even became [Christian] believers before Americans [were] [male, 37 years, married, Christian professional].

There existed a well documented strong Nestorian Christian church within Kyrgyzstan (up to about the 14<sup>th</sup> Century), as well as in other regions of Central Asian . Local historical ruins and sites that have Christian origins are held as proof of pre-Islamic Christian history in the region. One young Christian man in his early 20's spoke to the author: 'If it is true that our ancestors were Christians,' he said excitedly, 'then it is fine for me to be one too.' 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.

### **3. Kyrgyz cultural traditions, language and symbols**

A third way that Kyrgyz Christians address the issue of the supposedly Muslim identity of the Kyrgyz is to point to Kyrgyz cultural traditions, language and symbols that show that the Kyrgyz are actually close to the Christian faith and biblical tradition (12/49, 24.5%).

Many traditions from Old Testament are being practiced by Kyrgyz people...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 long a 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. When I was little when my mother scolded me 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, Savior. *Mashaiak* means the most powerful and highest one. That means God, Christ [male, 56 years, married, Christian professional].

Old Testament traditions found in Kyrgyz cultural values and traditions were cited as examples of the historic connection between the Kyrgyz and Christianity. Kyrgyz phrases such as *mashaiak* and *kagilain* (11/49, 22.4%) have been directly appropriated and interpreted through a new Christian framework and show, for Kyrgyz Christians, that there must have been Christian origins among their forbears for these phrases to be embedded in the Kyrgyz language.

There are a growing number of Kyrgyz Christians who now refer to themselves as *mashayakche* (literally 'one who follows the Messiah') or as *eshengen* (literally 'believers' or 'people of faith in' [Christ]). They intentionally do not use the Russian word for 'Christians', *Kristianski*, but rather self-describing themselves with terms that are congruous with the Kyrgyz language, culture and tradition and which seek to disassociate Kyrgyz Christians from Russian ethnicity. They do not see themselves as having left the Kyrgyz community but rather within it they are 'believers'.

For a long time I worked in one company and ... I couldn't share that I am a Christian or *mashaiakche*. The head of the company is a Muslim and he is becoming a very strong Muslim. Recently he asked me, and I said, 'Yes I am *mashaiakche*.' And if you translate it into Russian it is 'Christian'. But it is not Christianity that you think - it is not Catholic or [Russian] Orthodox. But it is Christianity by the name of Christ... And he is the prophet who was anointed by God and I believe in this prophet. And that's why I call myself *mashaiakche*. Because the word *mashaiakche* is not a foreign word for Kyrgyz, it means the Holy One. And it comes from our ancestors and this is the faith I believe [male, 33 years, married, businessman].

For this respondent the term *mashaiakche* has deep significance and he sees it as a means of maintaining social relationships within the Kyrgyz community even though it is not a normative Kyrgyz identity construct.

As well as Kyrgyz traditions and language there are Kyrgyz cultural symbols that are reinterpreted as having biblical origins or at least have strong biblical meaning and association. One example of this re-interpretation concerns the *boz-ui* or 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, the *tunduk*, which comes together over the top of the *boz-ui*, is also represented as the main symbol on the Kyrgyz flag.<sup>7</sup>



A view of the *tunduk* from inside the *boz ui* before the sheepskin outer covering is added.



The *boz ui* – the yurt



The Kyrgyzstan National flag

<sup>7</sup> Surrounding the *tunduk* in the national flag are 40 flames that represent the 40 Kyrgyz clans.

One respondent explains the similarity between Christianity and Kyrgyz traditions by citing the example of the *boz-ui*:

Even if we take the *boz ui* [yurt], 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* [top of the yurt] had three woods [crisscrossed 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. [male, 49 years, married, social worker]

Not only does this respondent 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 utilised as interpretative instruments in explaining and justifying their conversion, as a Kyrgyz, to the Christian faith. It highlights the way Kyrgyz Christians have utilised new or introduced ‘conversion artefacts’ as interpretative lenses to make sense of their conversion in light of ethnic identity. The indigenising process and in turn, the re-construction of ethnic identity takes place during religious conversion when members of the existing community take introduced non-indigenous artefacts 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. To re-quote one of the respondents, ‘We do not come to new faith our old faith came back to us.’

#### **4. Religion is a matter of choice not birth**

A fourth way that Kyrgyz Christians respond to those who accuse them is that religious identity is viewed as fundamentally *a matter of choice* occurring after birth (12/49, 24.5%).

Men are born as men, later he will decide what religion to choose [male, 36 years, married, occupation unknown].

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. [male, 23 years, unmarried, Christian professional - italics author's emphasis ]

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 Muslim.

## 5. Divine election – 'God created me Kyrgyz'

A fifth discourse claims divine election to justify their Kyrgyz status, 'God created me Kyrgyz' (9/49, 18%). This construction assumes of course that there is a 'divine', a God factor at work in society. 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 religious did not mean that the religious was completely removed from Kyrgyz thinking post-Socialist religious revitalisation has reintroduced the sense of the divine, the 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 Organisation 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. [italics authors]

The priority and pride for this respondent is 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 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 race, blood, language, customs, traditions, ideas etc but also involves supra-natural ‘artefacts’ – the idea of the divine, of a God, who is personally and actively involved.

It is at this point that Kyrgyz Christians begin to part ways with traditional constructions of Kyrgyz identity. For, while Kyrgyz Muslims would recognise 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<sup>8</sup> 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 is something that one is born with.

---

<sup>8</sup> See also McBrien (2006) who discusses discourses in Kyrgyz Muslim identity, and particularly, the differences between religious and non-religious discourses of ‘Muslimness.’

## 6. One is born a Kyrgyz

A sixth way is that Kyrgyz Christians claim that Kyrgyzness is mainly related to one's birth (8/49, 16.3%). One's primary ethnic identity is one that 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 different respondents: '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 that blood or birth connection *means* depends on a social context but that one was born is not constructed, it is a fact.

## 7. The metaphysical, internationalist or global identity - the de-ethnicitisation of God

The seventh way that Kyrgyz Christians have looked at reconstructing identity has been a discourse that focuses on the transcendental internationalist or global nature of Christian identity (15/49, 30.6%). This perspective plays down the distinctiveness of Kyrgyz ethnicity in relation to the commonality of all peoples, all ethnicities, all 'nations'. Christ is not an ethnic God or a foreign God – He doesn't belong to Kyrgyz alone, or to Russians, but of all peoples: 'For me it doesn't matter if a person is Kyrgyz or American because we are all God's children.' Religious conversion provides a reorientation 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.'

The 'internationalist' construct finds some interesting parallels with Soviet, Islamic and Turkic identity constructs. The Soviets attempted to create a pan-Soviet identity that brought together all Soviet peoples. The goal was the creation of a 'Soviet society' and the 'Soviet man' (*sovetskii narod*) that, while including all national groups, would transform them into one 'internationalist' albeit Soviet identity. It connected one nationality into a larger group that provided a sense of security, of meaning, and of social cohesion in the midst of a global world. Islam has the concept of the *ummah* - the world-wide community of all Muslims regardless of, and transcends, ethnicity and national identities. The Turkic identity construct is the desire to bring to together those ethnicities, now political states, that have a common linguistic heritage, rooted in the Turkic language – the common linguistic heritage of most of the Central Asia nations and Turkey. Each identity construct has a commonality – an identity that links individual ethnicities with a wider, global identity community. Kyrgyz Christians, have continued this global identity formation but have embedded it in a Christian, non-political framework. Similar to the Muslim *ummah*, Kyrgyz Christians see themselves as part of the world-wide community of Christian believers, made up of people from all ethnicities, and brought together by a belief in a universal God of all peoples.

## ***Conclusion***

The accusations of betrayal, of selling their faith, family, community and the ancestors have given impetus for Kyrgyz Christians to intentionally find ways to link their Christian faith with their understanding of Kyrgyzness, Kyrgyz identity. Kyrgyz Christians have done so by constructing a Kyrgyz identity which affirms their ethnic birthright. In doing so there is a tripartite emphasis on human/divine/cultural (indigenous and external) agency: 1. 'I was born Kyrgyz [it is in my blood]' 2. 'God made me Kyrgyz.' 3. 'We choose our religion [religion is

what I believe and I do, we are not born with it].’ Identity is then constructed utilising cultural forms, language, and meaning, together with newly introduced ‘tools’ - Protestant Christianity and its attendant manifestations.

The indigenising process and in turn, the re-construction of ethnic identity takes place during religious conversion when members of the existing community take introduced non-indigenous artefacts and ‘fuse’ them into an identity construction that ‘feels their own.’ 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. In the words of one respondent quoted earlier, ‘We do not come to new faith, our old faith came back to us.’

## References:

- Baumer, Christoph. *The Church of the East - an Illustrated History of Assyrian Christianity*. London: I.B.Tauris, 2006.
- Brubaker, Rogers. "Nationhood and the National Question in the Soviet Union and Post-Soviet Eurasia: An Institutional Account." *Theory and Society* 23, no. 1 (Feb.) (1994): 47-78.
- Dickens, Mark. "The Church of the East." 1999.
- England, John C. *The Hidden History of Christianity - the Churches of the East before 1500*. Delhi: ISPCK, 1996.
- Foltz, Richard C. *Religions of the Silk Road: Overland Trade and Cultural Exchange from Antiquity to the Fifteenth Century*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1999.
- Gillman, Ian, and Hans-Joachim Klimkeit. *Christians in Asia before 1500*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1999.
- Hassan, Riaz. *Faithlines - Muslim Conceptions of Islam and Society*. Karachi: Oxford, 2002.
- Klein, Wassilios. "Das Nestorianische Christentum an Den Handelswegen Durch Kyrgyzstan Bis Zum." *Silk Road Series III*, no. 14.Jh (2000).
- Lewis, David C. *After Atheism - Religion and Ethnicity in Russia and Central Asia*. Richmond: Curzon, 2000.
- McBrien, Julie. "Extreme Conversations: Secularism, Religious Pluralism, and the Rhetoric of Islamic Extremism in Southern Kyrgystan." In *The Postsocialist Religious Question: Faith and Power in Central Asia and East Central Europe* edited by Chris Hann. Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2006.
- Pelkmans, Mathijs. "Asymmetries on the Religious Market." In *The Postsocialist Religious Question - Faith and Power in Central Asia and East Central Europe*, edited by Chris Hann. Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2006.
- . "'Culture' as a Tool and an Obstacle: Missionary Encounters in Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 13, no. 4 (2007): 881-99.
- Peyrouse, Sebastian. "Christianity and Nationality in Soviet and Post-Soviet Central Asia: Mutual Intrusions and Instrumentalizations." *Nationalities Papers* 32, no. 3 (2004a): 651-74.
- Rashid, Ahmed. *The Resurgence of Central Asia: Islam or Nationalism*. Karachi: Oxford University, 1994.
- Shahrani, M. Nazif. "From Tribe to Umma: Comments on the Dynamics of Identity in Muslim Soviet Central Asia." *Central Asia Survey* 3, no. 3 (1984): 27-38.
- Vladmir, Archbishop. "Christianity and Islam in Central Asia." In *Islam and Central Asia*, edited by Roald Sagdeev and Susan Eisenhower. Washington D.C.: Center for Political and Strategic Studies, 2000.
- Werth, Paul W. "From 'Pagan' Muslims To 'Baptized Communists' - Religious Conversion and Ethnic Particularity in Russia's Eastern Provinces." *Society for Comparative Study of Society and Religion* (2000): 497-523.