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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION: POST-SOVIET SPACE AND THE UNEXPECTED TURNS OF RELIGIOUS LIFE

Mathijs Pelkmans

This book is about the unexpected twists and turns of religious life after seventy years of militant secularism in the former Soviet Union. Throughout this region, the new arrival and increased activity of foreign religious groups has caused a commotion. The Russian Orthodox Church, for example, has repeatedly made vilifying statements about the activities of new religious movements on Russian soil. The employed images – of ‘hordes of missionaries’ who belong to ‘totalitarian sects’ and ‘buy people with so-called humanitarian aid’¹ – highlight the fear these religious movements instil in representatives of what are locally termed ‘traditional religions’ (*traditsionnye religii*). These reactions cannot be simply dismissed as paranoia; they also reflect dramatic changes in the religious landscape across the region. To give a few examples from the chapters in this volume: the largest evangelical church of Europe is now located in Ukraine (Wanner, Chapter 9); Kyrgyzstan has one of the highest densities of Christian missionaries in the Muslim world (Pelkmans, Chapter 8); and Baptist and Pentecostal churches are successful among indigenous groups of Siberia who had previously withstood the pressures of the Orthodox Church and had continued to practice shamanic rituals even after decades of Soviet rule (Vallikivi, Chapter 4; Vaté, Chapter 3).

Although missionary activity and the occurrence of conversion have been vigorously discussed in national arenas throughout the region, social scientists have been remarkably silent on the subject. This book rectifies this obvious gap. In doing so it also sheds new light on the dislocations wrought by postsocialist change. In eight ethnographic accounts the authors analyse missionary encounters and conversion dynamics in different parts of the former Soviet Union. They show how conversion is rooted in the disruptive qualities of the new capitalist era, and document its often unsettling effects at the individual and social level.

The sense of disorientation produced by the fall of the Soviet state and the evaporation of communist ideology is perhaps most powerfully evoked by the title

of Yurchak's recent book, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More* (2006). Many of the services previously provided (or subsidized) by the state – healthcare, education, transport and provision for old age – suddenly became the concern of individuals whose salaries, due to hyperinflation, had been reduced to little more than pocket money. While a small group of well-positioned people benefited extravagantly from this 'post-Soviet chaos' (Nazpary 2002), the large majority was left scrambling for survival. Under these conditions, the messages of hope and the sense of community offered by new religious movements proved highly attractive.

A focus on conversion addresses the unexpected features of this new relevance of religion, thereby challenging the problematic notion that religious life after socialism can be characterized as a *revival* of repressed religious traditions. Religion served new needs and was linked to new imaginaries. Moreover, only certain religions gained ground. As elsewhere in the contemporary world, the religious forms that thrived were 'passionate religious movements' (Berger 1999: 2), concerned less with tradition and ritual and more with truth, charisma and visions of the future. These movements were quick to jump on what they perceived to be the ripe fields of atheist rule; their plain and concrete answers to terrestrial problems often proved more attractive than Orthodox Christianity and mainstream Sunni Islam (in their various local forms). The ascendance of these 'new' religions was also clearly related to asymmetries in the new 'spiritual marketplace'. While following the currents of Western influence and thriving on the ideology and mechanisms of the 'free market', they are often also motivated by a critique of the 'corruption' produced by this capitalist dynamic.

By examining conversion in the former Soviet Union, this collection enters longstanding anthropological debates about similar processes in (post)colonial societies. As some of those studies suggest, conversion in the post-Soviet world is linked to dreams of modernity (cf. Hefner 1993; van der Veer 1996), and highlights the tensions between globalization and communality (cf. Englund 2003; Marshall-Fratani 1998). At the same time, the militant secularism of the Soviet state and its (unintended) success in inscribing ethno-religious distinctions assured that missionary encounters and the dynamics of conversion have taken on different characteristics in the diverse landscape of post-Soviet Eurasia from those in (post)colonial societies.

Disruption

A central premise of this book is that missionary activity and conversion dynamics – as well as the controversies they provoke – should be seen in light of the dislocations wrought by postsocialist change and the advance of free-market capitalism. Generally speaking, the implosion of communism and the victory of neoliberal capitalism – as a powerful and seductive but surprisingly empty ideology with unsettling effects – have increased the attractiveness of religious movements offering concrete answers to complex problems (cf. Comaroff and

Comaroff 2000). But obviously, social and political dislocations do not necessarily induce conversion processes; vice versa, conversion experiences entail more than a response to difficult times. A brief description of an unsuccessful Christian mission to the Muslims of Central Asia in the early twentieth century serves to highlight some of the particularities that made conversion a common and controversial theme after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

In the early 1900s, when the Tsarist Empire showed its first signs of decay, sectarian Protestants made small but determined attempts to convert the Muslim population of Central Asia, an endeavour from which the Russian Orthodox Church, pressurized by the tsarist authorities, had largely shied away (Vladimir 2000; Geraci 2001; Crew 2006). Little is known about these missions, but the fate of one of them – the German Mennonite mission to contemporary Kyrgyzstan – is documented in internal publications of memoirs and correspondence (Janzen 1988; Reimer 1992; Friesen 2000). The origins of this mission stemmed from the conjuncture of Mennonite migrations to Central Asia and internal theological debates between community-oriented ‘church Mennonites’ and evangelical ‘Mennonite brethren’ (Friesen 2000). Rather than being permanently divided, these two groups continued to interact. Thus, when two Mennonite brethren who had completed bible school in Europe felt that ‘God directed our heart towards a special country – Russian Turkistan’, their final destination was the Talas valley, where church Mennonites had settled in the 1880s (Reimer 1992: 34). The missionaries’ strategy was to incite the evangelical zeal of these local Mennonites in order to make a concerted effort to convert the Muslim Kyrgyz.

In terms of organization the strategy was a success. No less than ten local Mennonites became directly involved in missionary activities, while the community as a whole provided construction material for a mission hospital and financed evangelization trips to Kyrgyz villages (*ibid.*: 35). But the ultimate goal of the missionaries proved far more difficult to achieve. The Kyrgyz flatly rejected or simply ignored the Christian message. At best they were amused by attempts to teach the Gospel, tolerating the visits of missionaries because of the offered medical aid (*ibid.*: 70). In their letters, the missionaries repeatedly expressed their despair about the enmity they encountered and wondered if they would ever see the fruit of their labours.

Seven years after having started their work, the missionaries reported the first two conversions: one Kyrgyz man who ‘had been a great thief’ and a Kazakh teacher who had left his region of birth to live in the Mennonite community (*ibid.*: 73). The missionaries presented these cases with modest optimism, hoping that these were signs that God was changing the hearts of the Muslims. But the indigenous response to these ‘successes’ was revealing: they pitied the converts for having become German (*ibid.*: 91). The Kyrgyz viewed the Germans as barbarians whose mission activities only reinforced their conviction that Christianity was something of Europeans. Over the next six years (1916 to 1922) no further cases of Kyrgyz converts to Christianity were reported. To the Kyrgyz the idea of converting to Christianity continued to be inconceivable. Seventy years later, after the communist experiment had ended, new German missionaries

made inquiries about the fate of the Mennonite mission. They were disappointed to learn that no one remembered the missionaries and that none of the few Kyrgyz ‘converts’ had left a sign that indicated lasting religious change. Rather than producing converts, these pre-Soviet Muslim–Christian encounters, like those in tsarist Georgia (Pelkmans 2002, 2006b) and Kazakhstan (Geraci 2001), had the effect of hardening conceptions of ethno-religious difference.

In their seminal work *Of Revelation and Revolution*, the Comaroffs document the ‘long conversation’ between British missionaries and Tswana and outline a process by which the latter were drawn into European discourses and practices, eventually finding themselves enmeshed in an overtly Christian order of signs and values (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991). Across post-Soviet Eurasia, by contrast, such conversations ended rather abruptly. In Kyrgyzstan, Mennonite mission activities died out in the 1920s, while the remaining Mennonite community grew more inward looking throughout the Soviet period (cf. Peyrouse 2004). But remarkably enough, when Mennonites resumed missionary activities in the Talas valley in the 1990s, their church attracted at least a hundred Kyrgyz members. Evangelical and Pentecostal churches working in other provinces were even more successful in converting Kyrgyz (Pelkmans 2006a, 2007; Chapter 8, this volume). In light of this, I am tempted to suggest that similar numbers of converts among Kyrgyz would not have occurred if the missionaries had been able to continue their activities in a world undisturbed by Soviet rule.

A brief note on another nineteenth century mission underscores the extraordinary difference between the two periods. In his study of the rather haphazard and ultimately unsuccessful Russian Orthodox mission to Kazakhstan, Geraci (2001: 275–6) argues that it would be unfair to judge this mission by the low numbers of Kazakhs it converted as it only existed for thirty-five years. Historical evidence proves him right: conversion is often a slow process that spans centuries. However, this observation also accentuates the extraordinary nature of religious shifts currently occurring in post-Soviet Eurasia. Besides producing larger numbers of converts in a short period, the new Christian missionaries have also caused more controversy, inviting the wrath of representatives of ‘traditional religions’ and triggering (often half-hearted) measures by secular authorities to counter the ‘evangelical threat.’

Obviously, it is impossible to make a neat comparison between the religious encounters before, and those after, the Soviet era. For one, the ‘traditionalist’ Mennonites (like the Orthodox Christians) of the early twentieth century do not compare easily to the charismatic forms of Christianity that became so successful in the early 2000s. And although several similarities between both periods can be highlighted – the collapse of government structures, economic crisis, the thriving of millenarian sentiments – the landscape in which the missionaries operated was profoundly different. The postsocialist transitions of the 1990s followed seventy years of Soviet modernization which had eroded communal ties and had instilled new conceptions of selfhood, culture and religion. The crucial difference with the earlier epoch, it seems, is not so much societal disruption as such, but rather how these disruptions related to the prevailing modalities of life on which they acted.

Therefore, to understand why conversion assumed significant proportions at the turn of the twenty first century, it is insufficient to focus on the strategies used to convert and the motives underlying conversion alone. First of all, we need to analyse what made conversion a conceivable option. To answer this question, it is essential to review the impact of the Soviet modernist project on conceptualizations of religion and identity.

The Possibility of Religious Shifts

The cases of conversion discussed in this book are all, to an extent, the outcome of intentional acts. Although the converts involved may have had limited options or have made only haphazard decisions (e.g., Pelkmans, Chapter 8), these were nevertheless *conscious* choices. This element evokes one of the crucial paradoxes of conversion. Anthropologists see religion as tightly embedded in social contexts, and constitutive of social networks and cultural practices. But if specific religions tangle individuals into larger networks, then how is it possible that people shift their religious affiliation? The most obvious answer is that, because of the embedded character of religion, conversion occurs most frequently under conditions of societal distress, when social networks and institutional structures lose their strength or break down. That is, contemporary societies with high rates of conversion tend to be those in which grand projects of modernization have run into disarray or have been overtaken by the destabilizing effects of global capitalism (Pelkmans, Vaté and Falge 2005).

Across post-Soviet Eurasia, moreover, such disruptions followed decades of anti-religious policies. Initially, most scholars of religion focused their discussion largely on how successful or unsuccessful the Soviet regime was in creating an assertively atheistic society. While some stressed the decline of religious knowledge and the destruction of religious institutions (Greeley 1994; Bourdeaux 1995), others highlighted the tenaciousness of religion vis-à-vis Soviet repression (Husband 2000; Bennigsen and Wimbush 1985).² This narrow focus has reinforced the assumption that we are dealing with a process of continuity – or *interrupted* continuity – between contemporary religious forms and their presocialist referents.

However, rather than assuming or denying continuity, we need to acknowledge that Soviet rule did more than simply repress religions. It also influenced understandings of religion and modes of religiosity (see also Shahrani 1984; Saroyan 1997). While Soviet rule was unique in the way it combatted religious expression, it was at the same time firmly rooted in the Western project of modernity. And as in the West, one crucial byproduct of this modernist project was the objectification of religion. As such, it fostered the modern notion that religion constitutes a separate category to which individuals can define their stance. Furthermore, this process was directly related to the Soviet authorities' classificatory efforts by which ethno-national categories became not only imagined but penetrated the everyday life of Soviet citizens (see, e.g., Hirsch 2005).

Along similar lines, Asad has argued that ‘the centrality of self-constructive action is due to a specific epistemic structure’ (1996: 265), the modern project which made it possible for people to conceive of themselves as having an identity and of being able to select and integrate new elements in that identity.³ What needs attention, then, is the process by which people came to *have* a ‘religious identity’ and by which religion became objectified. The point I wish to highlight is that, even before conversion became a conspicuous phenomenon, such changes in popular conceptualizations of religion and its ties to personhood had created the basis for self-constructive action vis-à-vis religion.

The combination of identity politics and religious objectification in the Soviet Union had several unanticipated results. First, it reaffirmed, and inscribed in popular consciousness, ideas about the close connections between religious and ethno-national categories. That is, the understanding of religious affiliation was increasingly framed around ideas of cultural heritage, leading some observers to speak of the ‘folklorization’ of religion (Peyrouse 2004; Bellér-Hann 2002). This also meant that adherence to an ethno-national group automatically conjured up a specific religious tradition. Even when not professed, religion continued to be the real sense of difference. Thus, a Kazakh who was a member of the Communist Party and held an atheist world-view would still claim to be a Muslim as this indicated his cultural background.⁴ From a local perspective, the notion of ‘atheist Muslim’ was not perceived as an oxymoron. Another example is that among the non-Christian populations of Siberia and Central Asia, Jesus was often seen as the ‘Russian God’ (see the contributions to this volume).

Perhaps the best indication of the ethno-religious principle is the exception pointed out by Broz in his chapter about the Altai region. He argues that Altaians did not think of themselves as ‘having’ a religion until recently. Tellingly, this lack of ‘having’ a religion coincided with the idea that they were equally lacking culture. Broz’s analysis shows some similarities to Epstein’s (1995) and Borenstein’s (1999) depiction of the post-Soviet religious landscape as consisting of an undifferentiated mass of ‘believers’ (*veruiushchii*) who were free to pick and choose from diverse religious traditions. However, Broz also demonstrates how the recent surge of national ideology and the influx of missionaries produced more exclusive notions of religion to which Altaians increasingly needed to define their stance. The idea of roaming religious consumers is even more problematic in most other cases represented in this volume. As indicated, most people in the Soviet Union had accepted the idea that religions are bounded and concrete entities connected with specific ethnicities. It is because of this local salience of ethno-religious concepts that most contributors to this book are able and willing to speak about conversion – as a shift of religious affiliation – at all. Rather than ‘freely’ picking and choosing religious elements, the ethnicization of religion meant that conversion acts had social consequences that reached far beyond specifically theological concerns.

The interrelated processes of the ‘ethnicization’ and ‘folklorization’ of religion that developed during Soviet times are crucial for understanding the twists and turns of religious change after the implosion of communist ideology. In the early

1990s, one trend was the further appropriation of religion by national ideologies, promoted by new elites as a source of political legitimation and mobilization. Russian Orthodoxy, for example, ‘moved from its old imperial and meta-ethnic meaning to a more exclusive and ethnically bound one [which was] more publicly visible, and more politically instrumental’ (Agadjanian 2001: 481). In this volume, Wanner points out that in Ukraine a religious and national resurgence occurred simultaneously because political leaders positioned religion as a key attribute of nationality. Intensified incorporation of religion in national ideologies also characterized the situation in most Central Asian republics. In Uzbekistan, for example, the Karimov regime staged ideas about spiritual heritage that included Uzbek heroes, national monuments and folklore in order to promote a compliant and unthreatening form of ‘Uzbek Islam’ (Rasanayagam 2006).

National forms of religion were particularly attractive in the initial phases of post-Soviet independence. But the ‘nationalization’ of religion also produced discontent from within, and excluded those who fell outside the bounds of the (imagined) nation. In addition, ‘nationalized’ religions became increasingly vulnerable when newly independent states failed to deliver on promises of affluence, stability and security. With the deepening of economic inequality, the newly dispossessed (Nazpary 2002) became increasingly open to religious forms that provided plain and hopeful explanations of human suffering, and offered entrance into tightly knit moral communities.

These increasing tensions between national and religious categories produced various outcomes. Discontent with ‘official’ Muslim structures reinforced the attractiveness of decentralized Muslim networks that voiced frustration with the outcome of the postsocialist ‘transition’ and stressed textually-based interpretations of ‘true Islam’ (Rasanayagam 2006). However, as Rigi (1999) has argued, the demands of these new Muslim movements were not always compatible with the ideas of ‘post-Soviet’ people, especially those of urban women. The young Kazakh women he describes turned to religion to find recourse from the hardship and ‘immorality’ of post-Soviet urban life. But far from being welcomed, these ‘modern-looking’ women often faced hostile attitudes from newly pious Muslims. The tensions thus produced rendered these women’s original ‘Muslim identity’ increasingly problematic, creating a space in which well-funded evangelical missionaries could profit.

The indigenous people of Chukotka in north-eastern Siberia present an interesting variant on this theme. Vaté (Chapter 3, this volume) describes the process by which the Chukchi adjusted to Soviet life while covertly continuing to practice shamanic rituals. The renewed prominence of Orthodox Christianity after 1990 worsened the already inferior status of Chukchi as pagans (*iazychniki*) within a Russian-dominated public sphere. Discontent with this negative labelling, yet equally unwilling to accept a specifically Russian religion, Chukchi became increasingly responsive to Pentecostal Christianity. It offered a way to dispose of the inferior status of pagan without submitting to Russian-imposed values. Their conversion was in this respect an antiestablishment position strengthened by the appeal of international support and connections.

These cases illustrate the new attributes of individual identity that developed in response to Soviet secularism, and attained religious characteristics after the Soviet experiment ended. Ever since Geertz (1963), religious identities have been labelled as ‘primordial bonds’ that are rooted in the past as opposed to the ‘modern’ notion of civic identity. But the cases presented in this volume show that such dichotomies clash with post-Soviet realities. Ironically, whereas the ‘secular’ establishment mobilized notions of primordial ethno-religious identity in its attempt to foster obedient civility, new religious movements linked people to modernity while deterritorializing identity by recasting it as a morally empowering choice (see Wanner, Chapter 9; McBrien and Pelkmans 2008).

Fading Modernity and the Appeal of the Modern

The relation between conversion and modernity has been discussed at length in anthropological literature. One of the earliest and most influential theses on this topic was by Horton (1971, 1975a, 1975b), who explained conversion as a quest for meaning in the face of modernization, arguing that the broadening of social horizons produced by colonial and postcolonial conditions increased the attractiveness of the encompassing world-views offered by Christianity and Islam. Although criticized for its intellectualist bias and inattentiveness to power relations (see, e.g., Fisher 1973), many anthropologists of conversion in (post)colonial contexts nevertheless adopted Horton’s central thesis that conversion can be seen as a product of a transformation from microcosm to macrocosm. Hefner, for example, argues that Horton ‘quite properly draws our attention to how incorporation into a larger social order acts as a catalyst for both conversion and the reformulation of indigenous religion’ (1993: 21). Others have taken this perspective to challenge conventional modernization theories by demonstrating that modernity is not necessarily secular but can be ‘enchanted’ (Meyer 1996) and that ‘religion, especially in a colonial context, can serve as a vehicle for inducting subjects into modernity’ (Werth 2000: 514).

The relevance of such arguments resonates with the chapter by Vallikivi on the Nenets, a small reindeer herding group in the Russian north (Chapter 4). Vallikivi argues that their marginal status and exceptional isolation during Soviet times made the Nenets susceptible to exogenous spiritual ideas once capitalist change started to affect their communities in the 1990s. Rather than simply assuming that these changes catalyse conversion, Vallikivi examines the interactions between Russian Baptist missionaries and the Nenets. The Nenets valued these missionaries as go-betweens who provided access to economic markets and acted as transmitters of literacy. Aside from these utilitarian attractions, the Nenets and Baptists were linked by their shared ‘illegal past’, as both were outlawed during the Soviet period. Being separated from the state, the Baptists could more easily access the Nenets who saw in them good-willing agents rather than a threat to their reindeer and livelihood. The new bonds thus produced were salient in protracting interest in the spiritual messages of the Baptists.

But the exceptional history of the Nenets simultaneously shows why the type of explanation put forward by Horton does not easily transfer to other post-Soviet contexts. Apart from reindeer herders and some others, converts usually did not move from 'indigenous religions' to 'world religions'. Instead, they had been immersed in the Soviet ideological system and were (if only nominally) part of religious formations such as Islam, Catholicism and Orthodox Christianity. A further limitation of the microcosm to macrocosm thesis is that the political and economic changes of the 1990s can hardly be seen as a variant of modernization. In fact, these changes were often experienced in precisely the opposite way. Thus, Platz (2000) depicts postsocialist change as a trajectory towards 'demodernized society', while Verdery (1996) speaks of a 'transition to feudalism'. These intentionally provocative images highlight the fact that the societal trajectories after socialism were often not about broadening horizons, but instead about shrinking possibilities.

What then, is one to make of Peter van der Veer's (1996) provocative thesis that 'conversion to forms of Christianity in the contemporary period is not only a conversion to modern forms of these religions, but also to religious forms of modernity'?⁵ Life after socialism often entailed a widening gap between the dreams of modernity and the realities of life. However, as the dislocations produced by capitalist encroachment deepen, the *appeal* of the modern appears to strengthen (cf. Creed 2002). This last element surfaces in Lankauskas's chapter, which discusses the Pentecostal Word of Faith Church in Lithuania (Chapter 6). This Church presents the bible as a 'modern book' and its new premises as an 'ultra modern' building. At the same time, its moral codes reject the post-Soviet condition by criticizing drug abuse, alcoholism and corruption. This dual message points to the complex relationship between Pentecostal Christianity and modernity. While on the one hand employing images of the modern and successfully adopting new media, they also confront the amorality of capitalist change. Their strength is to be able to establish locally tight networks of faith within which people find refuge from insecurity and destitution in the outside world. In short, they thrive on the exact discrepancies between the rhetoric of modernization and the disruptive realities of post-Soviet everyday life by effectively channelling sentiments of hope and resentment in a morally laden worldview directed towards a brighter future.

Technologies of Religious Change

The disparities produced by the disarticulation of labour, capital and markets have created both the physical and ideological environment in which evangelical and Pentecostal Christianity thrive. As symbols of 'the West' and of 'modernity,' they are well positioned to cater to people's expectations, hopes and needs. Moreover, they are better entwined in global networks of finance than the Russian Orthodox Church or the 'nationalized' Islamic institutions.⁶ Undeterred by centralized bureaucratic clerical structures, the 'new' religious movements balance and prosper on the junction between forces of globalization and localization. They are embedded in wider transnational networks yet vigorously

adjust religious messages to local concerns and translate them into a locally contextualized vocabulary.⁷

In a discussion of conversion in Africa, Ranger argued that the common tendency to focus exclusively on missionaries, and to see missionaries and local Christians as opposing categories, fails to recognize the complexity of missionary encounters and of religious change (1987a: 182–3). Instead, he argued, ‘we should see mission churches as much less alien and independent churches as much less “African”’ (1987b: 31, quoted in Meyer 2004: 454–5).⁸ This is undoubtedly also true for post-Soviet Eurasia. Although some churches try to reproduce the exact structures and doctrines of their parent churches in the West, these tend to be less successful than those that are led by local pastors and attempt to ‘contextualize’ their religious messages (see Clark, Chapter 7).⁹ Moreover, while financial and institutional support is predominantly from Europe and the U.S., other links that connect evangelical activity across post-Soviet space are far more complex and multi-directional. In Ukraine, which was known as the Soviets Union’s ‘bible belt’, the most successful Church is led not by a Western missionary, but by an African preacher. The matter does not stop there, however. As Wanner indicates in this volume, Ukrainians have started to play a crucial role in mission work across post-Soviet space. Thus, Ukrainians trained in foreign-funded bible schools in Kiev show up in Vaté’s account of north-eastern Siberia as well as in Pelkmans’ chapter on Kyrgyzstan (Chapters 3 and 8). Within Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan has a special place in the evangelical imagination, being seen as a stepping stone to the rest of the Turkic-speaking Muslim world. Kyrgyz missionaries have travelled to the Altai where, as Broz notes (Chapter 2), they work alongside American and Korean missionaries.

These instances draw attention to the central importance of ‘outreach’ – on mobilizing believers to convert the unsaved – within evangelical and especially (neo)Pentecostal churches (see also Robbins 2004b: 124). It would be problematic to accept the title of the Russian-language booklet *Every Christian is a Missionary* (Maierz 1991)¹⁰ at face value, but its popularity among Kyrgyz Christians illustrates the emphasis on reproducing the missionary labour force. This activism is certainly an important factor contributing to the success of evangelical forms of Christianity as the various chapters testify.

To gain insight into the mechanisms by which these contacts translate into individual religious change, attention to detail is crucial. In his chapter, Clark describes small groups of believers who become personally involved in the lives of potential converts. As with Harding’s (1987) account of Baptist conversion in the U.S., the crucial mechanism by which conversion is produced in these groups is by talking. The dreams, experiences and dilemmas of potential converts are reinterpreted within the new Christian framework. Moreover, these settings are also important in overcoming tensions between converts and their families. Besides offering emotional, social, and economic support to converts, ‘experienced believers’ translate Christian messages into ‘culturally appropriate terms’ to provide new Christians with the vocabulary needed to deal with negative reactions. Interestingly, the word Christian is often replaced by ‘follower of Isa [Jesus]’, a practice which avoids some ethno-religious sensitivities and

lends credence to the ideal of forming a world community of faith that transcends cultural and ethnic differences.

Transcendent views of culture are not only promoted by Evangelicals. In his chapter, Enghelhardt shows some of the unexpected ways in which ‘cultural’ dilemmas and emotions converge in conversion to Orthodox Christianity among Estonians. He focuses on what he calls ‘right singing’ to highlight the importance of emotions in a spiritual quest that pertains to morality, while also linking the convert to the imaginary worlds of the Byzantium Empire. Obviously, the ‘elitist’ elements of this type of conversion make it unlikely that singing will attract large numbers of people, but by examining this small group we learn about the emotive, vocal and spiritual characteristics of ‘transition’ and the importance of translating these into narratives that resonate with intimate personal experiences.

Such ties between technologies, experiences and emotions reflect the tension between utilitarian and intellectual depictions of conversion. As Robbins (2004a) argues, these approaches can make room for one another as they explain different stages in conversion trajectories. The notion of ‘rice Christians’,¹¹ popular among secular Westerners who find it difficult to accept the powers of spirituality, assumes that the worldly motives that put the conversion process in motion also dominate its outcome (Robbins 2004a: 85; see also McBrien and Pelkmans 2008). But as Vallikivi points out (Chapter 4), we should not only focus on the original motives of contact but acknowledge that the motives may disappear from both discourse and memory, to make room for new forms of (collective) selfhood that have their own dynamism.

Discussing, not Defining, Conversion

Most authors in this volume use the term conversion with one of its most basic meanings – changing from one ‘religion’ to another – while being aware of the objections that have been levelled at such usage. The Comaroffs have argued that ‘the very use of “conversion” as a noun leads, unwittingly, to the reification of religious “belief”; to its abstraction from the total order of symbols and meanings that compose the taken-for-granted world of any people’ (1991: 251). A reification of belief would indeed be highly problematic, especially in the former Soviet Union where so many people grew up with only limited involvement in religious life, if any. That is, the contents and features of conversion acts need to be demonstrated rather than assumed. However, there are good reasons why the term should not be offhandedly dismissed. As David Gellner argues, ‘conventionally, religious change is only labelled “conversion” if it occurs across a boundary. Thus, as boundaries have become sharper between “religions”, so the issue of conversion has grown in political significance’ (2005: 755). As we have seen, such boundaries were reified by Soviet politics and became even more important in post-Soviet contexts. Moreover, while the Comaroffs speak of ‘the taken-for-granted world’ of people it should be stressed that Soviet cultural politics, like modernist projects elsewhere, left little taken for granted about the symbols and meanings by which people conceptualize ‘culture’ and ‘religion’.

This book shows that it is possible and desirable to use the term ‘conversion’ as a sensitizing concept whose features differ from context to context and need to be demonstrated, analysed and explained. Thus, although conversion should not be used as an analytic concept with universal features, it is nevertheless useful to discuss academic attempts to define conversion, as these indicate which assumptions need revision and which blind spots require attention. Classical definitions of conversion narrowly focused on a (partly mythical) ‘Pauline model’, which saw conversion as an all-embracing personal transformation.¹² This view infused stable and absolutist qualities to ‘pre-’ and ‘post-’ religious adherences, something which runs in the face of many conversion accounts. Sociologists of religion have made revisions to this classical model. They have outlined the ‘typical’ stages of conversion (Rambo and Farhadian 1999), the ‘typical’ convert (Snow and Machalek 1983), and debated whether the ‘central’ element of conversion is to be located in the shift between religious groups or in a shift in discursive articulation (Stromberg 1993; Wohlrab-Sahr 1999). Although these studies have provided much information, by trying to pin down the ‘core’ of conversion they have ignored the social and political embeddedness by which its features are defined (Hefner 1993).

This oversight also characterizes several articles in the recent volume *The Anthropology of Religious Conversion*, edited by Buckser and Glazier (2003). In this volume, Rambo argues that conversion rarely involves a complete transformation and that conversion trajectories attest to the fact that ‘most human beings change incrementally over time’ (2003: 214). Conversion is, in the words of another contributor, a project that is never finished (Coleman 2003: 15–27). In the introduction to the volume, moreover, Austin-Broos ‘softens’ our understandings of conversion by presenting it as a ‘passage’ rather than as an abrupt breach (2003: 1). However, there is a danger in insisting that conversion is an ‘unfinished project’ or ‘passage.’ It reinfuses understandings of conversion with an individualist bias that assumes that converts are atomistic actors operating in an anonymous and pluralistic religious marketplace. Such a view may (or may not) be useful for understanding religious shifts in cosmopolitan urban environments, but is particularly problematic in situations where religion is politicized or where religious affiliation is tightly connected to ideas about ethnicity and nationality.

At this point, it is useful to revisit one of the classical definitions of conversion. Nock described conversion as a ‘definite crossing of religious frontiers in which an old spiritual home was left for a new one once and for all’ (Nock 1933: 7). The problems with this definition are obvious: conversion is not necessarily definitive, while the ‘old’ and ‘new’ spiritual homes may lack solid foundations. However, in line with Gellner’s (2005) observation, it seems warranted to reserve the term conversion for acts that involve the crossing of conceptual, social and/or religious boundaries or frontiers. In other words, instead of trying to define the content of conversion, it is more fruitful to understand the ‘movement.’ Conversion is rarely an unfettered personal journey or passage to new realities. Rather, the act of conversion involves crossing boundaries while altering those boundaries in the process. The rigidity and porosity of these

boundaries depends on many factors. Therefore, the cultural, social and spiritual content of conversion and its implications will vary between different contexts.

This volume documents a wide range of contexts in which conversion assumes different characteristics. At one extreme is Engelhardt's account in which conversion is a process without a clear breaking point (Chapter 5). To his Estonian converts, the quest or journey seemed more important than arriving at a final 'spiritual home.' In a different context, Broz describes people who did not have an 'old spiritual home' but were actively trying to obtain 'religion' (Chapter 2). Though in this case the absence of concrete previous affiliations meant that conversion sparked little controversy, Broz also shows that new dilemmas emerged when people started to deal with the exclusivist features of 'world religions'. In other instances conversion is far more disruptive, especially so on the Christian–Muslim frontier in Central Asia. In his chapter, Pelkmans shows that 'context' is more than just a static background against which conversion takes place (Chapter 8). He shows that conversion to Pentecostalism did not necessarily imply a radical transformation of spiritual convictions. But although conversion was in this sense incomplete, the negative reactions of neighbours and relatives made it impossible that his informants could also socially balance 'half-way' between Muslim and Christian communities. The resulting dynamics of conversion and reconversion created not only special Christian niches in a Muslim environment, but also new dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. In this sense, conversion does not only involve the crossing of boundaries, but also the creation of boundaries by converting.

In its wide-ranging geographical and topical scope, this collection shows that conversion is a strategic theme for understanding wider transformations of social and religious life, and gaining insight into the ways individuals cope with these transformations. Linked to the disruptive qualities of state disintegration and of new economic disparities, these acts of conversion in turn produce new social formations and cleavages whose contours are only now beginning to show. By critically assessing the circumstances and dynamics of religious change, and by analysing the precise roles of missionaries, local religious institutions and the state in processes of conversion, the chapters advance anthropological knowledge about conversion, reaching beyond the postsocialist settings in which they are rooted.

Notes

1. Metropolitan Kirill of Smolensk and Kaliningrad at the 1996 world conference on missions (quoted in Witte 1999: 7–9).
2. Notions such as 'parallel Islam' (Bennigsen and Wimbush 1985) or the 'domestication of religion' (Dragadze 1993) have reinforced the idea that if religion was repressed on some levels, it persisted – in original form – in others.
3. Identity, as something that people *have*, is a product of the specific historical processes of the modern era and is closely tied to the formation of nation states (Verdery 1994: 37; van der Veer 1996: 19).
4. This tendency was reinforced by the common practice of Soviet authors of referring to the populations of Central Asia and the northern Caucasus as 'the Muslim part of the population' (Anderson 1994: 94).
5. This quote is taken from the back cover of van der Veer's (1996) book.

6. This applies particularly to the ‘official’ Muslim structures. In part a legacy of Soviet politics, these structures largely copy the administrative structures of the newly independent republics (Saroyan 1997).
7. As noted before, certain radical Muslim networks are equally effective in this sense. However, they mostly gain adherents from within (nominal) Muslim communities. The recent special issue of *Central Asia Survey* on ‘Post-Soviet Islam: Anthropological Perspectives’, edited by Johan Rasanayagam (2006), is the most recent collection of essays dealing with this topic (amongst others) in a post-Soviet context.
8. See also Wanner (2004). She shows that in Ukraine the ‘mission field’ is characterized by alliances and rifts that cross-cut an imagined division between foreign missionaries and local evangelical believers.
9. The clearest exceptions to this trend are the top-down and standardized religious messages of the Jehovah’s Witnesses. Unfortunately, their success in ex-Soviet Republics has been poorly documented.
10. The title given here is the direct translation of *Kazhdyi Khristianin – Missioner*, which is published by Logos, a German evangelical publisher. The work’s original title is *The World Christian Starter Kit*, and is a translation of Meyers (1986).
11. The term Rice Christians was first used in South and East Asian countries to refer to people who converted to Christianity out of the need to survive, but remained relatively disinterested in its spiritual message.
12. The ‘Pauline model’ of conversion refers to the biblical story of Saul, persecutor of Christians, who on his way to Damascus had a spiritual encounter with Jesus. After this encounter he took on the name Paul and started his missionary work (see Acts 9: 1–19).

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