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## **Religious crossings and conversions on the Muslim–Christian frontier in Georgia and Kyrgyzstan**

**Mathijs Pelkmans**

### *Abstract*

In the former Soviet Union, religious landscapes have been in constant flux since the collapse of communism. The renewed relevance of religion in the public sphere has been accompanied by conspicuous and locally controversial conversion processes. This article compares cases of conversion on the Muslim–Christian frontier in Kyrgyzstan and in Georgia. It argues that the notions of boundary and frontier are essential to construct a more dynamic model for understanding ‘spiritual’ movement in social contexts that are rapidly changing. This approach in turn sheds light on the roles and the nature of social and cultural boundaries in the contemporary world.

Keywords: boundaries; conversion; movement; Orthodox Christianity; Pentecostalism; post-socialism

### **Pioneers on the frontier**

With his full beard and black cassock Father Meriani was a striking presence in the town of Khulo, located in the hinterland of Georgia’s Autonomous Republic of Ajaria. During our conversations in 2001 he often talked about the newly built church and the Christian lyceum, of which he was the director, as important steps in realizing a future in which the Muslim inhabitants of Ajaria would return to their ‘native’ faith – Orthodox Christianity. Meriani was aware that this envisioned process was fraught with difficulties. Four years previously his Bishop had assigned Meriani to Khulo, in part

because his wife hailed from the town.<sup>1</sup> His congregation had grown steadily, but he had also faced stiff opposition from a part of the population. Local Muslim leaders had led several (unsuccessful) campaigns to close down the lyceum, and his family had been the target of vicious gossip. To illustrate the obstacles, Father Meriani told me what had happened to the grave of his stillborn son. He and his wife had buried their child in his wife's family's graveyard and had placed a small wooden cross on the grave. One week later the cross had disappeared. Meriani suspected that some of his in-laws had been the culprits, but he simply put a new (now metal) cross on the grave, and this time no one messed with it. Meriani spoke with some pride about the grave being the only Christian grave, and visibly so, in an otherwise Muslim graveyard.

Despite such difficulties – and most converts told me about their own personal hardships – by 2001 a sizable minority of the town's inhabitants had converted to Orthodox Christianity.<sup>2</sup> This growth posed its own problems, and Father Meriani expressed concern that the expansion of his church was not necessarily accompanied with a deepening of Christian knowledge. Some new Christians seemed to be more interested in the image of Georgian Orthodoxy than in its spiritual ideas or doctrinal knowledge. In conversion narratives the Georgian nation figured particularly prominently, such as in the case of an elderly man who, when baptized, expressed his exaltation of finally being 'baptized Georgian'. Such notions were understandable given that Islam had been associated with an Ottoman past which had been vilified in official discourse since the beginnings of Soviet rule, while the link between the Georgian nation and Christian faith had become the bedrock of nationalist ideology in the post-Soviet era. The Church's stance on this issue was ambivalent. Father Meriani, for example, never hesitated to prompt the link between the Church and the nation, but simultaneously stressed the deep and uncorrupted spirituality of Orthodox Christianity. This ambivalence appeared to reflect a pragmatic approach: perhaps these first converts did not convert for spiritual reasons but in making the first step they paved the way for their children to become true Christians.

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Several thousand kilometers to the East in the Kyrgyz Republic, pastor Kadyrjan<sup>3</sup> similarly held grand visions for *his* congregation. After ‘coming to faith’ in the Pentecostal ‘Full Gospel Church of Jesus Christ’ (CJC) in 1996, he had become a very active church member. Three years later Kadyrjan was called by God to establish his own congregation; he and his family moved to Jalal-Abad, the provincial capital of a province (*oblast*) with the same name, and known in Kyrgyzstan for being ‘very Muslim’. The family experienced a difficult first year, but in 2003 the congregation had over 200 tithe-paying members, and Kadyrjan had overseen the ‘planting’ of five new congregations in the province.

Some of these new congregations were growing steadily, but the one that frequently occupied Kadyrjan’s mind was a congregation in the nearby mining-town Kok-Jangak. When Kadyrjan had first started activities there in 2001 he had cooperated with some locally residing Russian Pentecostals. After having attracted a sizable crowd of sixty to eighty Russian and Kyrgyz attendants for a few months, the congregation imploded amidst internal bickering. Kadyrjan made a second attempt in autumn 2002, when he sent a female Kyrgyz church member to live as a missionary and church leader in the town. This time the prospects seemed promising and for about a year the church services and prayer meetings were well attended, mostly by Kyrgyz women. But by spring 2004 interest had dwindled once again, and Kadyrjan was worried that his efforts would once again fail to produce the desired result.

Membership fluctuations in Kok-Jangak were certainly more extreme than in Jalal-Abad where there was a larger stable core of church members. Nevertheless, even in Jalal-Abad many conversions to Pentecostalism were of a temporary nature. According to Kadyrjan, ‘If you counted all those who converted in my church, it would add up to something like 800 believers’. But there were only 200 to 250 who still participated in church life. Some of the others had moved to different Christian churches, but the majority had – for a variety of reasons – abandoned Christianity altogether. Given these frequent ‘temporary conversions’ it was understandable that more textually oriented evangelicals looked down upon the CJC. From their perspective, the emphasis on healing and emotion as well as the perceived thinness of biblical knowledge in Kadyrjan’s Pentecostal Church was bound

to produce ‘unstable converts’. But Kadyrjan saw this differently. From his point of view not everyone could be saved, and there were many forces which pulled people back. It was his task to fight these forces and he drew on the Holy Spirit to combat them, for example in Kok-Jangak. Kadyrjan and the local missionary had decided that their most immediate task was to lift the ‘satanic fog’ that shrouded the mining town. Once a week a group of church members climbed the tallest nearby hill from where they collectively prayed for the fate of the town. If only enough believers would join in faithful prayer the satanic fog would dissolve and a vibrant church would finally take root.

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Father Meriani and pastor Kadyrjan were men with a vision and a mission. Their mission was to establish viable churches in Muslim settings and to guide local inhabitants to the ‘true faith’. They both tended to speak with confidence and conviction, useful traits for men working in hostile territory. Although their goals were spiritual in nature, the obstacles they encountered were rooted in everyday life. Nothing was fixed on the frontier, and the forces of ‘evil’ were omnipresent.

Juxtaposing these two examples prompts the question of comparability. Despite having conducted extensive research on missionary encounters and conversion in these two settings, I have thus far avoided linking them together systematically, mainly because the differences appeared too overwhelming.<sup>4</sup> In doctrine and practice, Georgian Orthodox Christianity with its emphasis on tradition, ritual and communion is very different from charismatic Pentecostalism with its emphasis on individual faith and the power of prayer. The social contexts in which these religious actors operated were only to some extent similar. While both were predominantly Muslim settings, in Ajaria new Christians were joining the majority faith of their imagined nation, while converts in Kyrgyzstan were often seen as betraying not only Islam but also their Kyrgyz nationality. The institutional organization of the Churches was also different. Father Meriani operated in a national, hierarchically ordered, ecclesiastical structure (the Georgian Apostolic Autocephalous Orthodox Church). Pastor Kadyrjan was a more independent religious entrepreneur, though linked to a large, vibrant, and fast-growing Pentecostal Church with numerous links to churches worldwide (see Pelkmans 2009b). Given these

differences, it is hardly surprising that conversion experiences varied between these two cases, as will be documented below.

Nevertheless, we are dealing with two post-Soviet environments in which conversion away from Islam became significant phenomena after 1990, a fact which should allow for careful comparison. Similarities can also be found at more intimate levels, as the opening stories illustrated. Both religious leaders could be characterized as true frontiersmen, as religious and cultural brokers who not only attempted to facilitate a one-directional passage from one religious formation to the other, but also tried to transform the wider socio-religious landscape in which they operated.

In this article I reflect on such similarities as well as on the manifold differences in order to shed light on conversion dynamics. I will do so by bringing together ideas and concepts that have been at the center of debate in what can respectively be called the ‘anthropology of borders’ and the ‘anthropology of conversion’. Both fields of investigation are essentially about difference and how difference is maintained, negotiated, or utilized, as well as about how people cross the boundaries between different categories. If in the anthropology of borders these categories tend to refer to adjoining territories – or to ‘ethnic groups’ in the Fredrick Barth-inspired branch of such debates – it is equally possible to apply border discussions to religious categories. Seen from the reverse perspective, insights gained in the study of conversion dynamics can be fruitfully employed to shed light on the role of nature of borders and boundaries in contemporary life.

### **Conceptualizing conversion (in post-Soviet contexts)**

Since the early 1990s religious landscapes across the former Soviet Union have been in flux. Seventy years of militant secularism had ended and religion attained renewed public significance. This was true for locally-rooted faiths, such as Sunni Islam in the Republic of Kyrgyzstan, and Orthodox Christianity in the Republic of Georgia. But the ‘de-privatization’ (Casanova 1994) of autochthonous religions was accompanied by frictions and unexpected new developments. The social fields in which religious activities re-appeared were different from those in which Soviet leaders had started to repress

religious expression in the 1920s. The effects of economic development, Soviet style modernization, urbanization, forced and voluntary migration, and Soviet nationality policies meant that religion could and did not simply ‘revive’.<sup>5</sup> Religion was playing new roles on personal, familial, and societal levels. Moreover, large numbers of people throughout the former Soviet Union felt excluded from these ‘de-privatized’ autochthonous religions and/or felt attracted to ‘new’ religious movements that did not have local historical roots. As recent anthropological studies suggest, significant processes of conversion are occurring across post-Soviet Eurasia (e.g. Wanner 2006; Vallikivi 2009; Vate 2009; Lankauskas 2002; Pelkmans 2009a).

But what does religious conversion entail, and how does the Soviet legacy reveal itself in processes of conversion? A discussion of the concept and its complexities is useful at this point. One of the earliest social scientific definitions characterizes conversion as a ‘definite crossing of religious [boundaries] in which an old spiritual home was left for a new one once and for all’ (Nock 1933).<sup>6</sup> This definition, which to some extent mirrors the popular Western understanding of the term, draws heavily on the ideal-typical Biblical ‘Pauline model’, in which conversion is imagined as a sudden rupture and all-embracing personal transformation, thereby imputing stable qualities to ‘pre-‘ and ‘post-‘ religious adherences.<sup>7</sup> This model contains many problematic assumptions. Indeed, we may ask if it is at all appropriate to speak of spiritual homes or religions? For example, to what extent did people who lived through a period of state-atheism *have* a ‘spiritual home’? Likewise, why would we need to assume that the crossing of the boundary is *definite*? What about conversions that produced only partial change or were temporary as in the Kyrgyz case? Moreover, to what extent can we isolate – or should we prioritize – the *spiritual* aspect of the journey, given that conversion processes are influenced by a larger interplay of identity politics, discourses of morality, and economic concerns? The link between nationality and faith in the Georgian case springs to mind.

Such difficulties are not limited to post-Soviet settings. Some influential anthropologists have argued more generally that the term conversion obscures more than it reveals, and therefore might better be abandoned. Thus, the Comaroffs ask, rhetorically: ‘how well does [the concept of conversion] grasp the highly variable, usually gradual, often implicit, and demonstrably “syncretic”

manner in which the social identities, cultural styles, and ritual practices of African peoples were transformed by the evangelical encounter' (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: 250). In contrast, other anthropologists have argued that in a world in which religion, religious practice, or at least religious affiliation is increasingly politically relevant, the term has renewed currency. As David Gellner notes: 'Religious change is conventionally only labeled conversion when it occurs across boundaries. Thus, as boundaries have become sharper between "religions", so the issue of conversion has grown in political significance' (2005: 755).

Both positions have value. The skepticism of the first view rightly warns against making assumptions about the content or shape of conversion and is a reminder that too much effort has been wasted on trying to define what conversion *is*. On the other hand, when religion re-asserts itself in public life such as in the former Soviet Union, 'personal' religious shifts may acquire social and political significance as well, which in turn adds importance to the concept of conversion. The logical way out of this conundrum is to treat 'conversion' not as an objective fact and even less as an analytical tool, but as a sensitizing concept that serves to tie together a number of related processes. In fact, the definitions of conversion presented above – those of Nock (1933), Gellner (2005) and even the Comaroffs' (1991) non-definition – indicate which elements should be at the center of analysis.

1. Conversion is about religious categories (or spiritual homes). But since the content, coherence, and relevance of 'religious categories' are not fixed, changes in the meaning of these categories need to be thoroughly analyzed.
2. Conversion is about movement – about people who are moving or changing spiritually. But since change is relative, it can also be about stasis in a changing world.
3. Conversion is about crossing boundaries. But since these boundaries are not always existent prior to conversion, it can also be about creating boundaries.

Each of these elements will be examined more closely in the sections below. Here it suffices to say that we need an approach that looks at religious conversion as spiritual as well as social change or movement – movement that crosses and thereby creates and/or dissolves symbolic and social



boundaries. The rigidity or porosity of these boundaries depends on the particular conversion context, and this context changes as a consequence of the occurrence of conversion. Therefore the cultural, social and symbolic content of conversion, the trajectories, and the implications will vary between different settings, as this article will show.

### **Fragile homes – the backdrop to conversion**

The first point, about ‘spiritual homes’ (that are left for new ones), is clearly problematic in the case of the former Soviet Union. Although one has to be careful with sweeping generalizations, Soviet rule did result in lower levels of doctrinal knowledge and involvement in institutionalized religious life among most people. Taking up this point, cultural theorists such as Epstein (1994) and Borenstein (1999) depicted the post-Soviet religious landscape as consisting of an undifferentiated mass of new ‘believers’ (*veruiushchii*) who were free to pick and choose from diverse religious traditions. The point is well taken, but low levels of doctrinal knowledge do not necessarily create ‘undifferentiated masses’ – for example because (nominal) religious affiliation often continued to be grafted onto or mixed with ideas about ethnicity, nationality, and culture. Such links were very salient in the cases of Georgia and Kyrgyzstan. Therefore, even if involvement in institutionalized religious life had been low, conversion to Christianity was not uncontroversial. The introductory stories of pastor Kadyrjan and Father Meriani illustrated some of these difficulties, but more historical background is needed to grasp the motivations, considerations, and experiences of converts to Christianity.

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The territory that now makes up Georgia’s Autonomous Republic of Ajaria had been part of the Ottoman Empire between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries, during which its previously Christian inhabitants converted to Islam. Not much is known about this pre-modern conversion to Islam, except that it was a drawn out process which was only completed by the 1850s, and in which political alliances, wars, economic incentives, and the lure of ‘The Porte’ Istanbul played important roles. Although the inhabitants of Ajaria spoke a Georgian dialect, by the end of the nineteenth century

Ottoman Turkish had become the main public language. Well into the 20th century, these Ajarians failed to identify with the (Christian) Georgian imagined nation. However, this situation started to change during Soviet rule when Ajarians were classified as Georgians. Ajarians did initially not identify with this classification, but over the course of seventy years the cultural politics of the Soviet Union managed to alter the way Ajarians saw themselves, with the younger generations and especially the Soviet middle class increasingly identifying with the Georgian nation (see Pelkmans 2006 for an extensive discussion). This process of national identification was facilitated by the banishment of religion from the public sphere, because this allowed inhabitants to ‘act’ Georgian in public and Muslim at home.

This situation changed again in the 1990s. Georgian nationality became tightly connected to Orthodox Christianity, while new possibilities of religious expression meant that religious affiliation - whether Muslim or Christian – was increasingly acted out in public. To be simultaneously Muslim and Georgian became problematic. In this new situation the Orthodox Church started a campaign to ‘bring Ajarians back to their native Georgian faith’. Although not leading to the swift mass baptism hoped for by the church, a steady process of conversion has taken place, with tens of thousands of Muslim converts to Christianity in a Autonomous Republic with approximately 300,000 inhabitants.

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In Kyrgyzstan, Islam had been and continued to be the dominant religion. Even if the Kyrgyz wove many shamanic and other cultural elements into their religious practices and beliefs (see Privratsky 2001; Abramzon 1971), Islam had become an indispensable part of social and cultural life well before the incorporation of contemporary Kyrgyzstan into the Tsarist Empire. Religious sentiments played a major role in several uprisings against the Russian colonizers (Brower 2003) and when German missionaries attempted to evangelize the Kyrgyz in the early twentieth century, their attempts utterly failed (Pelkmans 2009a). Soviet militant secularism, especially during the anti-religious campaigns (most notably those of the 1930s and the 1950s) dismantled existing religious institutions and persecuted Muslim leaders who were unwilling to co-operate closely with the Soviet security agencies.

Few Kyrgyz, however, became committed atheists and even Kyrgyz communist party officials continued to engage secretly in religious rituals (especially circumcision and funeral rites) (Ro'i 2000). Although the *visible* public relevance of Islam had declined, it remained an important point of reference for collective identification (see also McBrien and Pelkmans 2008). The fact that Kyrgyz identity was asserted in opposition to the Russian 'bigger brother' secured the importance of the category Muslim, even if as a cultural rather than a religious marker.

These trends had ambiguous effects on the position of Islam in the post-Soviet period. Islam continued to be an important marker of nationality in Kyrgyzstan after independence. The government actively used Islamic symbolism in its nation building efforts, stressing that it was part of the cultural heritage of the Kyrgyz. But this emphasis on the cultural aspects of Islam meant that the spiritual content was largely ignored. For Christian missionaries this offered opportunities while also posing obstacles. The associations of Christianity with Russianness posed a problem for foreign and local church leaders who responded by trying to disentangle the links between religion and culture. Pastor Kadyrjan, for example, would repeatedly tell his congregation that Jesus had not died for one nation, but for all humanity. Church members met such answers with approval, but this did not prevent many Muslim Kyrgyz from seeing these new Christians as traitors. On the other hand, missionaries and local church leaders were able to offer new religious answers in situations of hardship. Part of the attraction of Pentecostal churches is that they challenge the 'corrupt' world in which they operate. Moreover, by explaining poverty and illness in terms of a corrupt world under the spell of Satan, they also provide very concrete answers to problems related to the social and economic dislocations of the postsoviet and Muslim space. In addition, they are able to draw on a transnational imagery in which wealth, affluence, and a general better life is associated with North America and Europe, that is, the regions from which most missionaries arrived and are generally seen as the 'homeland' of Christianity. Their success is demonstrated by numbers. About 25,000 ethnic Kyrgyz converted to evangelical (including Pentecostal) Christianity, in addition to numerous Russians, Koreans, and Tatars living in Kyrgyzstan.

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The destabilization of Muslim contexts proved a fertile ground for conversion movements. Soviet secularism failed to produce atheists, but by pushing religion into the domestic sphere and by partly destroying and partly co-opting religious institutions, it had seriously weakened the influence of Islam in the public sphere. These processes meant that religion was increasingly equated with ‘local culture’. In Kyrgyzstan the connections between culture and religion were newly employed by secular authorities, but this also produced discontent among those who were looking for more than a sacralized form of national ideology, especially when the enthusiasm about independence waned with the continuing economic crisis and political instability. In Georgia’s Autonomous Republic of Ajaria these links between culture and nationality produced different tensions. Islam was likewise associated with ‘a culture’, but with the ‘wrong one’ and became a symbol of backwardness instead. The Georgian nation continued to have allure for a significant part of Ajaria’s population, and the increasing centrality of Christianity in the national imagination made the combination of Muslim Georgians seem as an oxymoron.

Phrased differently, the lack of a stable original spiritual home did not mean that no (social, ethnic, cultural) boundaries were crossed. In fact such boundaries were created or at least re-invigorated as a result of conversion. The re-enchantment of social life in Kyrgyzstan and Ajaria entailed a process in which ‘old’ and ‘new’ spiritual homes were gaining new meaning and content. To clarify this further we need to look at the various moves and twists of converts, focusing on their conversion experiences.

### **Moving spiritually and socially**

After having discussed the relative incoherence of spiritual homes, the next issue is to discuss the trajectories and routes of those who converted. As conversion is about change or movement – of people moving spiritually – it is useful to compare it to other types of movement, such as those we find in migration. Resemblances can be found not least because conversion rarely entails only a spiritual shift; it often also involves moves or turns in the social situated-ness of converts, as well as

shifts in the way they perceive their social and cultural surrounding. This implies that converts are not moving as fixed entities but as subjects who change while ‘traveling’. To borrow Tim Ingold’s analogy, living things tend to move less like solid objects such as automobiles or airplanes but more like flexible trees in the wind or as clouds: it is movement ‘that builds up in front and dissipates behind’,<sup>8</sup> meanwhile leaving traces on the social and cultural fabric of the environments in which this movement occurs.

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Malkhaz claimed to have been predisposed towards religion from childhood onwards, but because he grew up in Kholo he had only known about Islam. The turning point came when he was thirteen years old in 1989: ‘A man came to our school to talk about Christianity. It came as a shock to learn about another religion and after that I started to read about [Christianity]’. Initially Malkhaz was mostly impressed with the images of Georgian Christian history: the old churches and monasteries, the heydays of the Christian Georgian kingdom and its continuing legacy in literature and architecture. ‘I wasn’t even thinking about being baptized at the time, but something in my heart pulled me to Christianity. I slowly came to understand that it is the true faith’. After entering university in Batumi in 1994 he found himself among Christian friends who invited him to attend church. It was then only a small step, he explained, to decide being baptized.

When Malkhaz told his parents about his baptism they were outraged. According to Malkhaz, his father had previously hardly paid attention to Islam, but after his son converted this changed: ‘For him it was all about the neighbors and how they would see our family’, Malkhaz said, thereby downplaying the sincerity of his father’s reported new mosque attendance. For several years Malkhaz had not been welcome at his parental home, but in the two years after he had returned to Khulo – where he was now teaching at the Christian lyceum – he had visited them a couple of times. ‘There is still a distance between us. We don’t really talk, but at least the hostilities have ended’, he said. And when his sister was baptized in 1999 his parents more or less accepted it, perhaps because conversion was becoming a more widespread, and seemingly inevitable, phenomenon in the region.

Like Malkhaz, the majority of new Christians were from families who used to belong to the Soviet middle class – teachers, medical personnel, mid-level bureaucrats – families who had invested in education and envisioned administrative or service-sector careers for their children. They had moved up the social ladder during the Soviet period and in doing so they had partly distanced themselves from their rural (Muslim) backgrounds. As their careers and their aspirations had been closely intertwined with the state structures, they also tended to be the ones who identified most intensely with the Georgian nation. After the Soviet collapse, and the factual bankruptcy of the welfare state, they had suddenly experienced a decline in their economic and social status. Seen from this perspective, conversions to Orthodox Christianity could be understood, at least partly, as attempts to secure their middle class position, while re-asserting their loyalty to a Georgian nation now imagined along Christian lines.

Of these new Christians many were convinced that they formed the avant-garde of a much larger process of change. As one woman told me: ‘At the moment the Christian community may still be small, but you will see that in ten or twenty years the majority will be Christian’.<sup>9</sup> Of course, these new Christians realized that their baptism had produced tensions in their direct social surrounding. This prompted them to justify their actions. Rather than using the term ‘conversion’ they preferred to say that they had returned to their native faith. Otari, for example, stressed that he was more of a traditionalist than his Muslim wife: ‘you see, my family arrived 150 years ago from [the Christian region] Ozurgeti to Khulo, and all I am doing is reviving that history, my family’s traditions’. Malkhaz, who was introduced above, similarly argued that he was not trying to break away from his roots: ‘the thing is, I love this region and its people. I want to keep the good parts and just get rid off the bad and foreign elements. But unfortunately there are many people here who are trying to [accomplish] the opposite’. Obviously those other people did not agree on the normative value and the label ‘foreign’ that Malkhaz attached to Islam.

Apart from casting their own actions in a positive light, another recurring feature in these narratives were attempts to downplay the ‘difference’ of the non-converted. This was obvious from Malkhaz’s intimation that his father only went to the mosque to keep up appearances. Along similar

lines Vakhtang, a middle-aged man, commented: ‘Many Muslims aren’t real Muslims. They have a Georgian soul and the Georgian soul is Christian.’ Both discursive moves tried to smooth out the disruptive effect of conversion, even if from a position of perceived superiority.

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Aigul, a young woman living in Jalal-Abad, had first visited a Pentecostal church in 2001 when she visited a cousin in Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan’s capital) who happened to be a member of the CJC there:

I was so impressed – I even said the prayer of confession (*molitvo pokoianie*, R). But then I forgot about it and didn’t go to church for more than a year. That was when my problems started: I got pregnant; the child’s father left me; my mother chased me out of our house so I wouldn’t bring shame to the family. I wanted to die in those days.

It was then that Aigul decided to go to Kadyrjan’s church. She immediately felt at home. What struck her most was that everyone hugged each other after the service, even people who didn’t know each other’. Two years later Aigul was still an active church member and told me that God had helped her in every possible way. Unsurprisingly, her parents had disapproved strongly when they heard (from others) that their daughter had become a Christian, but since she no longer lived in their house there was little they could do besides criticizing her behavior. Instead, ‘they tried to bribe me. They offered to buy me an apartment if I promised to renounce (*otrekat’sia*) Jesus’. Aigul smiled when she mentioned it and added that God had given her a job. She was thus no longer in direct need of her parents’ assistance; anyway, her faith was not for sale.

If in Ajaria the first converts tended to be well-educated and of middle class background, the patterns were different for the Pentecostal church in Kyrgyzstan. In a survey I conducted among 130 church members in Jalal-Abad, the majority were recent rural-urban migrants to the city. Women in general were over-represented, in particular divorced, widowed and remarried women. These patterns may be explained by noting that migrants and divorced women tend to be poorly integrated into the social fabric of the city, and thus more inclined to join a movement that provides close-knit social ties and promises health and prosperity. As Aigul’s story illustrated, divorcees and migrants are also

removed from their original social surroundings and thus under less pressure to conform to social (and religious) expectations and obligations.

These issues recurred in conversion stories, in which the key patterns revolved around experiences of illness and poverty, the immorality of post-Soviet life, and how the new faith had enabled them to overcome these various personal crises. One middle-aged Kyrgyz woman living with her three children in Jalal-Abad, described her experiences as follows:

‘When my daughter fell sick I was at a complete loss. Without money or relatives I couldn’t even go to the hospital! Then Sajada *eje* [referring to an older female church member] told me about Jesus and brought me here. I began to pray for the recovery of my daughter and she recovered! Since then life has become much easier for me’.

Others stressed the friendliness and mutual support among believers, stressing that in contrast to their previous friends with other believers one could count on their good intentions. Here it is important to note that church members met at least twice a week, once during the weekly service and once during the obligatory home-church meetings during which they worshipped, studied the bible, and discussed the various difficulties of life.

The church’s negative attitude towards alcohol consumption and drug abuse, infidelity, and its patriarchal views of the ‘natural’ roles of men and women were also commented upon positively. These codes of moral behavior were not simply valued for the sake of doing the ‘right’ thing. Rather, the messages of ‘morality’ were important because they were seen as providing solutions to everyday problems. One Kyrgyz woman, for example, explained how she had used the church’s ideas about patriarchy to flatter her husband’s ego and to encourage him to be a more effective breadwinner. Resonating the experiences of several other male church members, one man commented on the church’s ban on drugs use by saying that he started to believe once his prayers were answered and he was relieved of his drug addiction. In short, this Pentecostal church with its high-intensity community life and emphasis on morality provided social security as well as a sense of purpose in an insecure world.



If conversion to Pentecostalism in Kyrgyzstan could be seen as a response to the immorality of the prevailing social environment, it should also be noted that this response was only effective within the confines of the new religious community. A Kyrgyz woman who had attended several services accepted to come to a 'home church' session, but felt repulsed by what she encountered. '[The church members] were all talking about their past. They had been drug addicts, or alcoholics, some had committed crimes or had been abused by their husbands. And I thought by myself: what am I doing here, this is only for rejects'. This sentiment resonated with what other non-converted Kyrgyz had expressed, in essence, that despite the emphasis on justness and morality only morally abject people would join the church. Such negative judgments can be understood as defense mechanisms to cope with the occurrence of conversion among members of one's own ethno-religious group, thereby highlighting that these moral discourses had a limited societal reach.

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The above shows that one cannot simply look at the impact of conversion on a community. Both cases suggest that there was no stable baseline community, and that conversion needs to be understood, at least in part, as an effect of internal differentiations and of tensions within the social fabric, especially at the interstices of intersecting societal levels. While in Ajaria tensions were exacerbated by the realignment of religious and national identities that left Muslims in an awkward position, in Kyrgyzstan the social and economic dislocations following the collapse of the Soviet Union had marginalized sizable categories of people. In this context the promises of spiritual as well as social mobility offered by these different branches of Christianity proved attractive. Kadyrjan's Pentecostal church promised that through faithful prayer believers would be rewarded not only in the afterlife but would be able to conquer their everyday problems. Orthodox Christianity in Ajaria did not offer such concrete answers, but through its association with Georgian civilization, it did serve as a symbol of progress and a better future.

While there were important similarities in the conversion trajectories in Kyrgyzstan and Georgia, in important respects they were very different. In Ajaria new Christians described their experiences as

a long and drawn out process – a learning process – that slowly led to an understanding of Orthodoxy’s doctrinal truths, a process in which they re-found themselves as ‘true Georgians’. In Kyrgyzstan the conversion experience tended to be more abrupt, if not necessarily more permanent. Conversion stories there centered on moments of personal crisis – illness, addiction, abandonment – and the miraculous solution to these problems once the convert embraced Jesus Christ and became a believer. These differences reflected the emphasis on personal belief in the Pentecostal Church and the centrality of ritual and doctrine in the Orthodox Church. But equally important, the religious routes were also differently influenced by the social complications that arose in converting. In Ajaria as well as Kyrgyzstan, converts faced negative reactions from neighbors and relatives and had to deal with numerous complications in their daily life. However, if early converts were easily branded as traitors or ignored as outcasts, changes in the ‘conversion ratios’ produced different results in these settings. In Ajaria the occurrence of conversion became more acceptable as more and more Ajarians converted, whereas in Kyrgyzstan larger numbers of converts triggered more intensive re-actions from local Muslim leaders.<sup>10</sup> To understand such aspects we need to look at boundary maintenance and construction, and pay attention to the larger fields of power in which such activities are embedded.

### **Boundaries and frontiers**

Earlier in this article I quoted David Gellner’s (2005) statement that the term conversion tends to be reserved for those trajectories that cross religious boundaries and that thus in a world in which religion is increasingly politicized (and boundaries become more sensitive), the concept of conversion gains in relevance. The cases of conversion in this article testify to the importance of this statement, and suggest that conversion trajectories partly derive their shape from the porosity or rigidity of existing boundaries, or boundaries that are being produced through conversion.

The decision to convert may initially be a personal affair (even if informed by broader discourses), but the ‘content’, the ‘trajectories’, and the ‘effects’ of religious conversion resonate with the social fields in which these decisions were made. In Khulo and Jalal-Abad these personal decisions

unavoidably triggered negative reactions from relatives and neighbors. This meant that, at least in these settings, converts were not able to waver between religious communities. They either had to dissociate themselves further from their previous religious and social background, or recant their newly found belief.<sup>11</sup> As mentioned before, in Kyrgyzstan this meant that many conversions turned out to be of a temporary nature. One young man told me that in the end he had realized that after all, ‘Jesus is a God for the Russians’, while the stories of others revealed that the pressure leveled by their non-converted relatives, friends, or colleagues, proved to be stronger or more convincing than the attractions offered by Christian communities of believers. That is, new boundaries were being formed through these acts of conversion. As such, these cases of conversion mirror one of the central paradoxes of the globalizing world, namely that the partial blurring of religious boundaries (by crossing them) may well trigger re-inscriptions of religious distinctions.<sup>12</sup>

Both cases dealt with religious boundaries in the making with ethnic connotations. In Ajaria conversion to Orthodox Christianity could be seen as an attempt to realign religious affiliation with national identity. But if these new Christians had to cross a religious boundary, Muslims in Ajaria who remained Muslim also had to cross boundaries, since the new need to display religious affiliation in public often implied a distancing or at least reinterpretation of ideas about Georgians nationality. In Kyrgyzstan the boundary continued to coincide with an ethnic and cultural distinction between Kyrgyz and Russians. Untangling the links between religious and national identity was indispensable to facilitate the crossing of religious boundaries.

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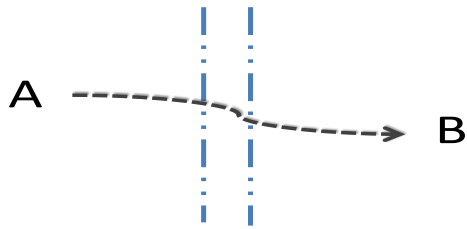
The term boundary only partly manages to capture the contours of the social and religious field that was being traveled. The concept only refers to the lines, divides, or points of contact, and has little to say about the power differentials involved in cross-boundary interactions.<sup>13</sup> To overcome these caveats the related concept of the frontier has more potential. A rather blunt definition by Kristof from the 1950s serves to illustrate this. He writes that the frontier used to refer to ‘the spearhead of light and knowledge expanding into the realms of darkness and the unknown. [The frontier was characterized

by] pioneer settlements of a forward-moving culture bent on occupying the whole area' (1959: 270). That is, these social and cultural fields have a dynamic of their own, which is partly defined by the asymmetries between the groups that encounter each other on this frontier.

Kristof's definition resonates with the self-perception of conversion movements as 'spearheads of light and knowledge'. Pastor Kadyrjan and Father Meriani saw themselves as pioneers in hostile area, as messengers of truth or of 'the Good News'. These ideas also thrived among members of their congregations. But obviously this perception of superiority did not necessarily reflect existing power differentials. At the local level, new Christians were minorities facing negative reactions of various kinds. It is in the broader contexts, however, that we find clear differences. National discourses in Kyrgyzstan favored a 'moderate' Islam as part of the national imagination, whereas in Georgia Islam was presented as a threat to the national body. And while Orthodox clergy in Georgia had close ties to the national (secular) establishment, evangelical missionaries in Kyrgyzstan did not have this kind of back-up. At the same time, though, this was part of the evangelical's strength and attraction since disillusion with the Kyrgyz government and the state structures abounded anyway. Instead, the evangelical conversion movement was able to draw on globally circulating discourses of terrorism and concomitant suspicion of new forms of Islamic devotion, offering entrance into transnational networks that were associated with the wealthy nations of the world.

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The term conversion does not define or predict the shape of conversion – abrupt, gradual, or temporary – that occurred on the frontiers of Islam and Christianity. However, ethnographic study of these spiritual moves and changes show that conversion is a useful sensitizing concept for a cluster of socio-religious processes. In these concluding reflections I return to the three key-elements in conversion – movement, boundaries, and categories – to re-assess their intertwinement on the basis of the presented case-studies. The conventional image of conversion, both in its popular Western understanding and in the classical social science definition, corresponds more or less to the diagram depicted below.



In this diagram, the convert travels from religion A to religion B, crossing the boundary (or boundaries) between these religions. This article has shown the problematic nature of such an assumption, yet argued that the tight intertwinement of the key elements underscore the usefulness of this model of conversion as a frame of reference to argue with and against.

In the reviewed cases the ‘spiritual homes’ were partly defined in the process of conversion, with non-converts reacting to the occurrence of spiritual movement. In doing so they influenced not only specific conversion trajectories, but also redefined and to some extent objectified their own ‘spiritual home.’ The boundaries between religious categories were neither clearly defined. The Soviet attacks on religion meant that such boundaries were porous to begin with, in some cases even non-existent. But the actions of spiritual seekers triggered reactions from their immediate social surrounding, reactions inspired by a wish to defend the cohesiveness of the community. The ensuing dynamics of action and reaction set limits to the kinds of action that were possible. In the cases of Khulo and Jalal-Abad the inscription of new boundaries meant that the converts could *not* easily be ‘spiritual consumers’ who freely traversed or zigzagged the boundary.<sup>14</sup>

Although converts were certainly not insensitive to the tensions that their conversion produced within their families or their neighborhoods, the ideal of community cohesion was just as much theirs. New Christians in Ajaria would even reject the suggestion that they converted, since from their perspective they had returned to the religion of their ancestors – to the true Georgian religion – and they saw their own role as paving the way for further integration of Ajarians into the Georgian national community. In Kyrgyzstan converts could not rely on a dominant nationalist discourse. But they did have a sense of entering a global community of Christians. And many new Christians

suggested that only such a spiritual move would be able to address the intense disintegration, immorality, and lack of cohesion that according to them characterized Kyrgyz society.

Taking this line of thought further one can even question if it were the converts who were moving or changing. Clearly we are talking about change in a changing context, and this meant that in some respects the converts to Christianity were merely trying to regain what they had lost or feared losing: access to services and ordered communal life such as in Kyrgyzstan, or being a part of the larger national body such as in Ajaria. In other words, the experience of converts can be likened to those of people who after territorial readjustments find themselves to be inhabitants of a foreign country. The notion ‘we didn’t cross the border, the border crossed us’<sup>15</sup> is reflected in the experiences of these new Christians. In the wake of Soviet collapse they found themselves marginalized, in a society that was partly alien to them. In Kyrgyzstan conversion was often a reaching out to new horizons in order to escape the destitute socio-economic situation or to overcome a personal crisis, crossing ethnic and religious boundaries in order to undo exclusionary social effects and gain entrance into a new moral community. In the case of Ajaria, the sentiment of ‘the border that crossed us’ was even more widespread. In order to go back to where they felt they belonged, they not only had to try to cross that out-of-place boundary, their conversion was also an attempt to erase that boundary.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Meriani's wife was of Muslim background and converted to Christianity while living in Ajaria's capital Batumi. It is worth noting that a large portion of Batumi's population are Georgians with Christian background.

<sup>2</sup> According to Father Meriani there were 250 baptized Christians in Khulo in 2001 (5 percent of the population).

<sup>3</sup> I have replaced the names of most informants with pseudonyms in order to guarantee their anonymity. I have made an exception for the clergy of the Georgian Orthodox Church, as these are public figures operating under the auspices of a well-established Georgian institution.

<sup>4</sup> Fieldwork in Ajaria was carried out from 1997-2001 and fieldwork in Kyrgyzstan in 2003 and 2004.

<sup>5</sup> Since I don't have enough space in this article to discuss the history of Soviet repression and cooptation of religion and its effect on subsequent possibilities for post-Soviet religious expression, I refer for Georgia to Dragadze (1993) and Pelkmans (2006), and for Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia more broadly to Hann and Pelkmans (2009), McBrien and Pelkmans (2008) and Khalid (2006).

<sup>6</sup> Nock uses the word 'frontier' instead of 'boundary' in his formulation, but he does so in a manner that corresponds more closely to contemporary anthropological uses of the term 'boundary'. The differences between both concepts will be discussed below and I have used the latter term here in order to avoid confusion.

<sup>7</sup> 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)

<sup>8</sup> Tim Ingold, "keynote speech" at BOREAS workshop: Heading North, Heading South: Arctic Social Sciences Research in Global Perspective", 6-9 March, 2008.

<sup>9</sup> Without speculating on such predictions, it is noteworthy that in towns located closer to the regional capital Batumi, a much larger portion of the Muslim population had converted to Christianity by the early 2000s.

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<sup>10</sup> Kyrgyzstan's secular authorities hardly interfered with the activities of the CJC in the first ten years of its existence, but after its membership grew to over 10,000 it met with increasing opposition from the government. Likewise, Muslim leaders became increasingly active in trying to win converts back after 2000, at least partly in response to the successes of evangelical churches.

<sup>11</sup> The specificities of the research settings contributed to this outcome. Not only were these post-Soviet contexts in which religion had obtained many political connotations, but relatively small towns in which the density of interpersonal ties guaranteed that social control was a force to be reckoned with. In Batumi with its more diverse population as well as in Kyrgyzstan's capital Bishkek I came across more people who, at least for a while, acted as 'postmodern' consumers picking and choosing from the various religions and denominations at offer.

<sup>12</sup> This thought is informed by Berdahl's suggestion that in the borderlands ambiguity tends to create clarity (1999: 232) and Gupta and Ferguson's suggestion that 'as actual places and localities become ever more blurred .... *ideas* of culturally and ethnically distinct places become perhaps even more salient' (1992).

<sup>13</sup> Discussions of boundaries discuss whether they are rigid, flexible, porous, or dissipating, but the location of these lines in social, territorial, or cultural space is often taken for granted. This reveals a Barthian (1969) legacy as his aim was to understand boundary maintenance through cross-boundary communication, and said very little about the qualitative changes in, or shifts of, those boundaries (see also Pelkmans 2006: 12-13, 45-46).

<sup>14</sup> I dwell on this point because of the tendency to see conversion as incomplete and usual gradual work-in-progress (for example Austin-Broos 2003; Coleman 2003), which risks overlooking or ignoring experiences of discontinuity and rupture (See also Robbins (2007) criticism of anthropology's 'continuity-thinking').

<sup>15</sup> The origin of this slogan is unclear. Luna-Firebaugh (2002) used it with reference to Latin-speakers in the U.S. southern states, and various websites suggest that the slogan has caught on among 'immigrant-rights' groups.