



# The Immanent Frame

Secularism, religion, and the public sphere

The politics of religious freedom:

## Contradictions of religious freedom and religious repression

posted by [Mathijs Pelkmans](#)

The collapse of the Soviet Union marked the end of seventy years of anti-religious policies—of a period in which religious expression was severely curtailed and religious institutions were always controlled, at times co-opted, and at other times brutally repressed, with the aim of effecting the demise of religion, an aim which was never fully realized. The post-1991 era was radically different, at least in those newly independent countries that adopted and implemented liberal laws regarding religious expression and organization. It might be expected that religious leaders and practitioners would have a straightforwardly positive view of this widening scope for religious activities, but this turned out not always to be the case. Let me introduce this point by providing some examples.



- In 2001, the imam of a small town in Ajara, a predominantly Muslim region of Georgia, [told me](#): “During Communism we had more freedom; we still had our own lives. Now, we are losing everything.”
- In 2004, I talked with a Pentecostal pastor in Kyrgyzstan about the history of his church, including the forms of opposition his church encountered in this Muslim-majority context. He remarked: “We pray for [local government] officials to stop hindering us. But this may not be God’s way. Our faith thrives when it is being repressed.”

These two examples reveal a rather odd nostalgia for religious repression, but they do so in quite distinct ways. The imam’s intimation, that the new era of “religious freedom” was less free than the era of repression, points to tensions that have accompanied the post-Soviet de-privatization of religion, which can render certain religious tenets more vulnerable or disadvantaged than they previously had been. By contrast, the Pentecostal pastor did not so much call “freedom” into question as suggest that freedom is not necessarily beneficial to a church like his own. The unstated logic was that “[passionate religious movements](#)” can only remain passionate as long as they provide their member with a sense of exclusivity. Neither the imam’s nor the pastor’s comments should be accepted at face value, but they do require a re-evaluation of what is meant by “religious repression” and “religious freedom.” Indirectly they draw attention to the role of the law, and here it is useful to provide two further examples.

- In 2004, a functionary of the state committee of religious affairs in Kyrgyzstan lamented to me: “[These evangelical missionaries] only want to talk about rights, rights, rights! For them it is easy. After a few years they leave again, having no idea about the mess they leave behind.”
- Studying the Tablighi Jamaat (an Islamic piety movement) in Kyrgyzstan in 2010, I asked how the 2009 law prohibiting proselytizing activities had impacted them. They were untroubled, in the words of one: “People have gotten used to our approach. This law is only intended for Jehovah Witnesses.”

The quotations both point to the role of the law, but do so in different ways. The functionary's complaint about foreign religious groups "abusing" the law suggests that state laws are, at least in the case of Kyrgyzstan, not solely owned by the state. The notable point in the Tablighi example is that some groups are more vulnerable to the law than others. The first example suggests that the law can become a tool to advance the interests of some religious groups, and in the second example we see a glimpse of the uneven application of the law by power holders. In both cases we need to focus on the *interplay between the law and the social field in which it operates*.

In short, the quotations raise at least four important questions:

- What forms or "freedom" does religious repression produce?
- What constraints and inequalities are produced through religious freedom?
- Who owns religious freedom laws?
- How can religion laws be variously employed?

In this contribution I comment on each of these questions, using empirical material from Georgia and Kyrgyzstan to illuminate the contradictions of religious freedom and repression.

### ***Freedom in repression and repression in freedom in Georgia***

What was the nostalgia for religious repression expressed by the imam quoted in the introduction all about? The short answer is that repression and freedom imply each other in unexpected ways.

Importantly, the imam was not referring to the violent repressions of the 1930s but talked instead about the 1970s and 1980s, when religion was banned from much of public life, but a relatively stable status quo existed. During this period, Moscow's anti-religious line did not always travel intact to local contexts. As has also been documented for Soviet Central Asia, local officials would sometimes participate in religious events such as circumcision feasts and Islamic funerals. The popular Soviet joke "they pretend to pay us, and we pretend to work" could with some justification be translated into "they pretend to eradicate religion, and we pretend not to practice religion."

Moreover, there is "freedom" in being able to affiliate oneself with a religion *without* having to conform to doctrinal demands. During Soviet times religious affiliation did not always have to be accompanied with other displays of commitment such as fasting, regular prayer, or abstaining from alcohol because the ban on religion made this either impossible or provided good excuses not to be bothered. The possibilities were convenient to those who were "not very religious," but what about those who cared a great deal about their faith? The Pentecostal pastor quoted in the introduction alluded to the possibility that the intensity of faith-based communal life may depend on repression. Similar suggestions emerged from the stories of devout elderly men about life in the Soviet region of Ajara. The danger of being reported, restrictions on conducting religious rituals, and bans on religious literature produced an intensification of ties between committed members of a religious community.

None of this denies the horrific fate of the ten-thousands of clergy, the desperation of those who sent off their deceased in unholy manners, the countless people who lost their position because their relatives were linked to religious institutions. But it is nevertheless important to highlight some of the

counterintuitive effects of religious repression: that repression creates opportunities (and some liberties), several of which were lost when the ban on religion was lifted.

The above does not yet clarify the imam's implied indictment of post-Soviet religious "freedom." The points to be stressed are that "freedom" may produce new inequalities and may reduce rather than boost commitment to religious communities.

This point was particularly sensitive for the imam, who struggled to persuade people to attend the Friday prayers and had been witnessing a steady process of conversion to Orthodox Christianity. It is important to mention that the region had been part of the Ottoman Empire for several centuries and that the local population had converted to Islam during that time. When the region became part of Soviet Georgia (as an Autonomous Republic) its Georgian-speaking inhabitants were classified as Georgians even though their religious affiliation set them apart from other Georgians. The Soviet domestication of religion proved useful in the sense that it allowed Ajarans to continue to be Muslim at home while increasingly becoming secular (Soviet) Georgians in public. This fragile balance was disrupted when in the 1990s Georgian nationality was framed in Orthodox Christian terms. It is within this context that the imam's nostalgia for religious repression makes perfect sense. Despite the specificities, the mentioned complications are instructive for other contexts as well, especially those in which notions of ethnicity and religion are closely entwined.

First, religious freedom changed expectations concerning religious affiliation. During Soviet times, identifying as a Muslim was often a matter of background. If you were Kyrgyz, Uzbek, or Ajaran, you were Muslim by default, irrespective of your knowledge of Islam and your conduct. But "nominal" dispositions became less acceptable when religious affiliation obtained more content. For significant groups of people this created problems. Can a Georgian be Muslim? Is it possible to be a divorced Muslim woman? Can you consider yourself Muslim when you drink alcohol or eat pork?

Second, "religious freedom" is more free for some than for others. In Ajara, Islam had to compete against a well-funded Orthodox Christian church, which was backed by a powerful national discourse according to which Georgians ought to be Christian. Elsewhere in the former Soviet Union, many of the "traditional religions" felt that they were up against unfair competition of rich evangelical denominations with their basis in Western Europe or North America.

The end of Communism undeniably widened the scope for religious activity, but the return of religion to the public sphere also produced new tensions and new constraints. These ran from social pressure to participate in religious activities to new dynamics of exclusion that accompany the politicization of religion: the entanglement of religious and national identities, the sacralization of secular power, and the reverberations of the global discourse of terrorism. These ironies of Soviet and post-Soviet times warn against making simple assumptions about either "repression" or "freedom."

### ***Religious liberalization and its discontents in Kyrgyzstan***

The case of Kyrgyzstan is instructive because of the speed with which the country lifted restrictions on religious activity after 1990. [Forum 18](#), a Scandinavia-based religious rights NGO, mentioned that in Kyrgyzstan "both registered and unregistered religious communities were able to function freely"

between the early 1990s and 2005. The deputy director of the State Agency for Religious Affairs pointed out to me in 2004: “Our laws on religion are far more liberal than those held by European countries.” He was not boasting of the democratic credentials of his country, but rather bemoaning what he saw as a chaotic situation. The implied rift between the state and its laws prompt the question: Who owns the law? And related: What possibilities exist for using and manipulating the law?

The Kyrgyz government’s embrace of religious freedom was part of a larger foreign-designed “shock therapy” package that was accepted by the Kyrgyz government in the early 1990s. These reforms had unforeseen and often undesired effects. Contradicting all expert knowledge, the dismantling of the planned economy failed to attract the hoped-for foreign direct investment. In the religious sphere, by contrast, the government had assumed that “traditional religions” would resume their activities, but above and beyond that, liberalization triggered massive religious “foreign direct investment,” of which evangelical missions and Islamic piety movements such as the Tablighi Jamaat were the most visible and successful. The data suggest that in Kyrgyzstan, liberalization was particularly beneficial to religious groups with transnational (financial) connections, which had a strong mission component, focused on the individual, and stressed that faith and culture should be disentangled. Kyrgyz politicians perceived these developments as a threat to the collective good, and after several failed attempts to amend existing law, in 2009 a new Religion Law was adopted which outlawed proselytizing and prohibited religious activities that undermined national integrity.

The 2009 Religion Law threatened to severely restrict the activities of “non-traditional” religions, triggering the protests from religious rights movements and representatives of evangelical churches. Apart from several raids on Jehovah Witnesses and some closures of evangelical Churches, the full effects of the Religion Law are not yet clear because in 2010 the government was ousted from power and replaced with a potentially more liberal but weak temporary government. Still, it is useful to refer back to the Tablighi quoted in the introduction, who were unperturbed by the adoption of the new Religion Law, despite officially rendering illegal their central practice of *davit* (proselytizing tours).

This untroubled attitude indicated a realistic view of the fragility of the law, combined with a conviction that God’s plan cannot be known. I already alluded to the idea that repression may positively contribute to the intensity of religious experience. This idea resonated in the Tablighi’s heroic stories about the suspicion they encountered in the 1990s. These stories also revealed that the liberal laws of the 1990s were more useful to religious groups who fit the “freedom image” than those who were easily associated with danger (such as the Tablighi). The implementation of the repressive 2009 Religion Law was equally partial. During the preceding decade the Tablighi had strengthened their links to the Muftiate of Kyrgyzstan while their activities had gained (reluctant) acceptance among the population and secular authorities. The Tablighi were untroubled by the legal changes because their integration in a number of informal orders had made them less vulnerable to the letter of the law. However, groups that had not been able to secure such a position—because they were disconnected or because they were disliked—found themselves in an increasingly vulnerable position.

### ***Final note***

One point of this paper has been to illuminate the uneven effects of freedom and repression on

different religious groups, depending on the position they occupy in society. Another point has been to stress that “freedom” and “repression” do not exist as absolutes and might imply each other in a number of ways. Both points suggest that the “religious freedom” rhetoric should not be taken for granted. But the conclusion should certainly not be that there is little difference between “freedom” and “repression.” I agree [with Sullivan](#) that liberal laws are not able to protect religious freedom, maybe especially when the law itself is fragile. But even if it cannot guarantee rights, this does not indicate irrelevance. Its relevance need not be about the protection that is offered, but about the ways in which the law can be used and manipulated.

Tags: [communism](#), [Eastern Orthodox Church](#), [Georgia](#), [international affairs](#), [Islam](#), [Kyrgyzstan](#), [liberalism](#), [multiculturalism](#), [Pentecostalism](#), [pluralism](#), [privatization](#), [religious diversity](#), [religious freedom](#), [religious persecution](#), [Soviet Union](#)

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