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**Article (Accepted version)
(Refereed)**

Original citation:

Pelkmans, Mathijs (2014) *Paradoxes of religious freedom and repression in (post-)Soviet contexts*. *Journal of Law and Religion*, 29 (03). pp. 436-446. ISSN 0748-0814

DOI: [10.1017/jlr.2014.23](https://doi.org/10.1017/jlr.2014.23)

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Available in LSE Research Online: January 2015

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Paradoxes of Religious Freedom *and* Repression in (Post-)Soviet Contexts

Mathijs Pelkmans

Associate Professor, Department of Anthropology, London School of Economics.

Abstract

The religious revival that followed the collapse of the USSR provides an excellent opportunity to compare the dynamics of projects of religious freedom with those of religious repression. Based on extensive ethnographic fieldwork in Georgia and Kyrgyzstan, this article documents the contradictory effects that both repressive and liberal policies and laws have on religious expression. Thus, while Soviet anti-religious policies undeniably caused much suffering and hardship, religious repression also contributed to an intensification of religious experience among certain Muslim and evangelical groups. And while religious freedom laws expanded the scope for public religious organization and expression, they also produced new inequalities between religious groups, as the cases of Georgia and Kyrgyzstan demonstrate. Ultimately, the article shows that the effects of liberal and repressive laws are far from straightforward and need to be analyzed in relation to the social context in which they are applied.

Keywords: religious freedom; religious repression; law; former Soviet Union; conversion.

Introduction

Consider an imam in Ajara (Georgia) who longs for the Soviet period when religion was repressed; imagine a state functionary in Kyrgyzstan who complains about the unfairness of religious freedom. How to explain such nostalgia for religious repression expressed by the

practitioners of a formerly repressed faith? What does “religious freedom” look like when the law itself is fragile? This article looks to post-Soviet examples to reveal contradictions in regimes of religious freedom *and* repression. In considering the unintended consequences of religious freedom, it also draws attention to how laws about religion relate to the exercise of other forms of power in situations of social and political turmoil and transition.

Recent scholarship on the subject of religious freedom has revealed how the Christian and liberal roots of the modern categories of “religion” and “freedom” have contributed to the emergence of a “political doctrine of freedom” that affects religious groups in multiple ways.¹ For one, it requires religious groups to disentangle religious and non-religious aspects of life.² This is so because “religious freedom” projects tend to equate religion with interiorized belief, which restricts and shapes the ways in which religion enters the public sphere.³ Moreover, the Western construction of freedom rests on a semiotic ideology that underwrites the “autonomy supposed of a free agent” and is based on a separation of language from action that reflects a Protestant bias, but is incongruous with the semiotic ideologies of many other religious traditions.⁴

The post-Soviet liberalizations of the religious sphere have similarly shown that “freedom” affects religious groups in many ways, producing not only opportunities but also new constraints, and creating new inequalities. By tracing the (sometimes contradictory) effects of post-Soviet liberalization, this essay contributes to the critical discussion of “religious freedom.” However, it argues that this discussion needs to be complemented by

¹ See Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, “Believing in Religious Freedom,” *The Immanent Frame* (blog), March 1, 2012, <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2012/03/01/believing-in-religious-freedom/>; Courtney Bender, “The Power of Pluralist Thinking,” *The Immanent Frame* (blog), April 11, 2012, <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2012/04/11/the-power-of-pluralist-thinking/>.

² For a concise discussion of this issue, see Bender, “The Power of Pluralist Thinking.”

³ Talal Asad suggests that affording people “the right to choose their religious beliefs” is in a secular world “everything that the modern state can afford to let go”: Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 147. For a recent discussion on this topic, see Robert Yelle, “Christian Genealogies of Religious Freedom,” *The Immanent Frame* (blog), April 6, 2012, <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2012/04/06/christian-genealogies-of-religious-freedom/>.

⁴ See especially Webb Keane, “Freedom and Blasphemy: On Indonesian Press Bans and Danish Cartoons,” *Public Culture* 21, no. 1, (2009): 47–76.

attention to its opposites: “religious unfreedom” or, applied to the politico-legal domain, “religious repression.” Such an effort will add a sense of grounding to discussions of freedom, and draw attention to the fact that not only “religious freedom projects” but also “religious repression projects” are characterized by multiple contradictions.

The post-Soviet world offers a useful case precisely because it allows us to study religious freedom and repression together. The collapse of the USSR marked the end of seventy years of anti-religious policies that severely curtailed religious expression and controlled religious institutions—at times co-opting and at other times brutally repressing those institutions—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 such as Kyrgyzstan and Georgia 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 was not always the case, as I explain using two examples from my ethnographic research⁵:

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.”⁶

In 2004, I conversed with a Pentecostal pastor in Kyrgyzstan about the forms of opposition his church encountered in this Muslim-majority context. He remarked:

⁵ Ethnographic research in Ajara, Georgia, was carried out during eighteen months in the period 1997 to 2001, and ethnographic research in Kyrgyzstan was conducted over twenty months in the period 2003 to 2010. The examples I present have all been drawn from this research. Some have been presented in previously published work, as indicated in the footnotes.

⁶ Mathijs Pelkmans, *Defending the Border: Identity, Religion, and Modernity in the Republic of Georgia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), 121.

“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 longing 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. The unstated logic was that religious movements can only retain their effervescence as long as they provide their members with a sense of exclusivity, that is, when boundaries are maintained with society at large. Neither the imam’s nor the pastor’s comment should be accepted at face value, but they do require a re-evaluation of what is meant by “religious repression” and by “religious freedom.” Indirectly they also draw attention to the role of the law, which brings us to two further examples:

In 2004, a functionary of the state committee of religious affairs in Kyrgyzstan lamented to me: “[These evangelical missionaries] come here and only want to talk about religious freedom. They only 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.”⁷

Studying the Tablighi Jamaat (a Muslim piety movement) in Kyrgyzstan in 2010, I asked about the impact of a 2009 law prohibiting proselytizing activities by their movement.

⁷ Mathijs Pelkmans, “Asymmetries on the ‘Religious Market’ in Kyrgyzstan,” in *The Postsocialist Religious Question: Faith and Power in Central Asia and East-Central Europe*, eds. C. M. Hann, et al. (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2006), 32.

They were untroubled, in the words of one of them: “[P]eople have gotten used to our approach. This law is only intended for Jehovah Witnesses.”

These examples point out that the law is only as effective as its implementation, but they do so in different ways. In the first example we see 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. Both examples call attention to the interplay between the law and the social field in which it operates.

These brief ethnographic vignettes raise several important questions. A first set of questions pertains to the possibilities and impossibilities that are (inadvertently) produced by liberal and repressive laws: What forms of “freedom” does religious repression produce? What constraints and impossibilities are produced through religious freedom? A second set of questions relates to the ways in which religious freedom laws are pushed, applied, ignored, and used. More concretely: Who “owns” religious freedom laws and to what effect? How can religious freedom laws be variously employed?

The next section discusses these questions in the context of the changing position of Islam in the Georgian province of Ajara, specifically in light of the increasingly close connection between Georgian nationality and Orthodox Christianity. In section three the geographical focus shifts to Kyrgyzstan, a country that radically lifted restrictions on religion in the early 1990s, thereby producing a relatively open religious field, until, starting in 2008, a series of more restrictive laws were adopted.

From repression to freedom . . . or vice versa?

So what was the freedom in repression to which the imam in Ajara (Georgia) alluded? It is important to point out that he was not referring to the Stalinist repressions of the 1920s

and 1930s, decades that were characterized by a rapidly dwindling tolerance for religious institutions and for public religious expression. In Ajara this period had been marked by a heavy-handedly repressed rebellion that had been prompted by the unveiling campaign of 1929, the closure of all 172 madrasas and 158 mosques (except one in the provincial capital Batumi), and the imprisonment of unwilling religious leaders.⁸ Rather, the imam was referring to the anti-religious efforts of the 1960s to 1980s that had focused on eradicating the so-called “backward and harmful traditions” by targeting religious holidays and rituals and disseminating atheist and anti-religious ideas through the media and in schools.⁹ The combined effect was that “religion” disappeared from much of public life, but the resulting status quo also implied that there was room for religious expression in a more “domesticated” fashion, to use Dragadze’s term.¹⁰

Importantly, Moscow’s anti-religious line was not always followed in local contexts.¹¹ As is often noted about Muslim regions of the Soviet Union, even local officials (Communist Party members) would sometimes participate in religious events such as circumcision feasts and Islamic funerals.¹² The popular Soviet joke “they pretend to pay us and we pretend to work” could with some justification be adapted as “they pretend to eradicate religion, and we pretend not to practice religion.” Put differently, there was more room for religious expression in the late Soviet period than the image of the “totalitarian” USSR tends to project.

⁸ Giorgi Sanikidze, *islami da musulmebi tanamedrove sakartveloshi* [Islam and Muslims in Modern Georgia] (Tbilisi: The International Research Center for East–West Relations, 1999), 16–17.

⁹ Christel Lane, 1981. *The Rites of Rulers: Ritual in Industrial Society—The Soviet Case* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1981), 27-29; Yaacov Ro’i, “The Task of Creating the New Soviet Man: ‘Atheistic Propaganda’ in the Soviet Muslim Areas,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 36, no. 1, (1984): 26-44.

¹⁰ Domesticated refers both to the state’s “taming” or controlling of religious organization and practice, as well as to the shift of religious practice from the public to the domestic sphere. Tamara Dragadze, “The Domestication of Religion under Soviet Communism,” in *Socialism: Ideals, Ideologies, and Local Practice*, ed. C. M. Hann (London: Routledge, 1993), 148–56.

¹¹ Reuel Hanks, “Repression as Reform: Islam in Uzbekistan during the Early Glasnost Period,” *Religion, State & Society* 29, no. 3, (2001): 227–39.

¹² Yaacov Ro’i, *Islam in the Soviet Union: From the Second World War to Gorbachev* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 648–51.

Moreover, there is a certain “freedom” in being able to affiliate oneself with a religious tradition *without* conforming 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 a good excuse not to be bothered. In the words of a villager in Ajara: “[W]e were Muslims, of course, but we could only pray inside our homes. We didn’t think badly of anyone who drank at work or offered wine to guests, as those things were simply unavoidable.”¹³

Such possibilities were convenient to those who were “not very religious” and tended to think about religion mostly in terms of (family) tradition, but what about those who cared a great deal about the doctrinal aspects of their faith? The Pentecostal pastor quoted in the introduction alluded to the possibility that the intensity of faith-based communal life may flourish in situations of repression. Similar suggestions emerged from stories of devout elderly men in Ajara, one of whom commented, with a smile: “We knew exactly, with every neighbour, what you could and couldn’t say. In this way we were able to spread information.”¹⁴ The danger of being reported and restrictions on carrying out religious rituals or circulating forbidden literature produced an intensification of ties between committed members of religious communities. The exclusivity of such “secret societies” is illustrated by the adoption in one village of a locally produced Muslim calendar based on the moon and the stars, which resulted in the villagers starting Ramadan two days before the rest of the Muslim world. When the possibilities of external communication revealed this discrepancy in the 1990s, the villagers refused for at least another decade to conform to the official Islamic calendar.

¹³ Pelkmans, *Defending the Border*, 128.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 108.

A final point that illustrates how religious repression may inadvertently invigorate religious affiliation relates to politics. Disillusionment with communist rule was widespread in the 1970s and 1980s. The state's anti-religious stance meant that religious activities derived part of their attraction from the side benefit that they also constituted political acts of resistance. Indeed, claiming to be a Muslim or a Christian could serve to detach oneself from a corrupt and bankrupt regime. In response, post-Soviet governments often tried to distance themselves from their atheist predecessors and legitimize their rule through religion. This was often successful, at least for a while, but in some cases the fact that religion became part of the political status quo detracted from its attractiveness (the case of Turkmenistan is particularly instructive in this regard).¹⁵ None of this is to ignore or downplay the horrific fate of tens of thousands of clergy, the desperation of those who sent off their deceased in an unholy manner, or the countless people who lost their positions because their relatives were linked to religious institutions. But it is important to highlight some of the counterintuitive effects of religious repression: repression created opportunities (and some liberties), some of which were lost when the ban on religion was lifted.

These historical facts may clarify the imam's selective nostalgia informing his statement that "during communism we had more freedom," but it does not clarify the implied indictment of post-Soviet religious "freedom." He elaborated on this further: "You know what the bitter thing is in all this? Finally we are able to freely carry out our beliefs, but now Islam is in decline. Satan is playing his own game."¹⁶ He was indirectly referring to the difficulties he experienced in persuading villagers to attend Friday prayers and the fact that he had been witnessing a steady process of conversion to Orthodox Christianity since the early 1990s.

¹⁵ In post-1990 Turkmenistan the government pushed a state-endorsed version of Islam not least to legitimize its rule, but the state-controlled mosques have remained conspicuously empty. Chris Hann and Mathijs Pelkmans, "Realigning Religion and Power in Central Asia: Islam, Nation-State and (Post)Socialism," *Europe-Asia Studies* 61, no. 9, (2009): 1517–41.

¹⁶ Pelkmans, *Defending the Border*, 123.

To understand the context, it is important to remember that Ajara had been part of the Ottoman Empire from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, and its inhabitants 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 (non-Ajaran) Georgians who were Orthodox Christians. 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, as part of a process to overcome the Soviet ideological legacy and reconnect with the long historical roots of the imagined Georgian nation. Despite this larger national religious framework, the new situation did bring more freedom to practice Islam openly: new mosques were constructed and madrasas were opened, young men studied abroad at Islamic universities, and elderly people went on *hajj*. However, the return of religion to public life made it problematic to be simultaneously Muslim and Georgian, a conundrum that had the effect of eroding the Muslim community.¹⁷ It is within this context that the imam's nostalgia for religious repression makes perfect sense.

These examples are instructive for other Soviet and post-Soviet settings as well, especially those in which ethnic and religious affiliations have been closely intertwined. Religious freedom tends to increase the expectation that religious affiliation is accompanied by behavior deemed appropriate for that specific faith. During Soviet times, identifying as a Muslim was often a matter of ethnic background. If you were Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Azeri, or

¹⁷ I have discussed this history more extensively in Pelkmans, *Defending the Border*, 95-119. See also Thomas Liles, "Islam and Religious Transformation in Adjara," Working Paper 57 (European Centre for Minority Issues, 2012); Ekatherina Meiering Mikadze, "L'Islam en Adjarie: Trajectoire historique et implications contemporaines," *CEMOTI. Cahiers d'études sur la Méditerranée orientale et le monde turco-iranien* 27 (1999): 241-261.

Ajaran, you were Muslim by default.¹⁸ The repression of religion meant that it was acceptable to drink alcohol, to refrain from participating in Ramadan activities, and to abstain from daily prayers. By contrast, religious freedom meant that such behaviours became more controversial—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 if you drink alcohol or eat pork? Intriguingly, while during Soviet times anti-religious activists would frequently voice their frustration with people who insisted that they were Muslim *because* they were of a specific ethnic background, after 1991 newly trained imams complained about the same attitude. For the former, the amalgamation of ethnic and religious affiliation prevented people from becoming true socialists¹⁹; for the latter, the problem was that it prevented people from becoming true Muslims.

Moreover, “religious freedom” is more “free” for some than for others. In Ajara the key asymmetry was that Muslims had to compete against a well-funded Orthodox Christian church that 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” (a term reserved for religions that existed before the Soviet period) felt that they were up against unfair competition against, especially, rich evangelical denominations based in Western Europe or North America.²⁰ Conversely, representatives of newly active religious groups felt that they were disadvantaged by the distinction made between “traditional” and “non-

¹⁸ Pelkmans, *Defending the Border*, 121–41; Adeeb Khalid, *Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

¹⁹ Chantal Lemercier-Quelquejay, “From Tribe to Umma,” *Central Asian Survey* 53, no. 3, (1984): 473-78.

²⁰ John Witte, Jr., “Introduction,” in *Proselytism and Orthodoxy in Russia: The New War for Souls*, eds. John Witte, Jr. and Michael Bourdeaux (New York: Orbis, 2009), 1–27.

traditional” religions, a distinction that was enshrined in many religion laws across the former Soviet Union.²¹

It is undeniable that the end of communism dramatically widened the scope for religious activity in the former Soviet states. This has been evidenced by the vibrant construction of mosques and churches, the reappearance of religious symbols in public life, the return of clergy in public positions of various kinds, and the virtual evaporation of atheist ideology. However, the return of religion to the public sphere also brought with it new tensions new constraints. These vary 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 sacralisation of secular power, and the impact of the global discourse of (counter-)terrorism.²² These ironies warn against making simple assumptions about either “repression” or “freedom,” and draw attention to how possibilities and impossibilities for religious expression graft onto different social realities.

Contradictions of the Law

The religious freedom guaranteed in the constitution of the Republic of Kyrgyzstan includes the right of every citizen to freely and independently choose his/her relation to religion, to individually or with others profess any religion, or not to profess any, to

²¹ Alexander Agadjanian, “Revising Pandora’s Gifts: Religious and National Identity in the Post-Soviet Societal Fabric,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 53, no. 3, (2001): 473–88; see especially *Ibid.*, 481–84.

²² An extensive discussion of these issues is Chris Hann and Mathijs Pelkmans, “Realigning Religion and Power in Central Asia: Islam, Nation-State and (Post)Socialism,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 61, no. 9 (2009): 1517–41. The most insightful study of how global discourses of (counter)terrorism have affected the politico-religious landscape in Kyrgyzstan is Julie McBrien, “Extreme Conversations: Secularism, Religious Pluralism, and the Rhetoric of Islamic Extremism in Southern Kyrgyzstan,” in *The Postsocialist Religious Question: Faith and Power in Central Asia and East-Central Europe*, eds. C. M. Hann, et al. (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2006), 47-74.

change one's religious conviction, and also to voice and spread one's conviction as related to religion.²³

When discussing the contradictions of religious freedom laws, the case of Kyrgyzstan is instructive because of the speed with which the country lifted virtually all restrictions on religious activity after the collapse of communism. Indeed, one remarkable aspect of the Kyrgyz law quoted above is the date—signed only four months after the disintegration of the USSR. The law explicitly forbade any differentiation in the treatment of religious groups and confirmed the separation of religion and state. Unlike other Central Asian countries such as Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, which signed liberal religion laws but quickly amended them or restricted religious activity in practice notwithstanding changes to the law,²⁴ the Kyrgyz government by and large stayed away from religious regulation until around 2005.²⁵ It is for these reasons that the US Center for World Mission²⁶ described Kyrgyzstan as “the most open Muslim country” in the mid-1990s.²⁷ Even *Forum 18*, a Scandinavia-based religious-rights nongovernmental organization that dogmatically promotes “the fundamental human right” to worship, to change one's religion, and express one's beliefs, acknowledged that in

²³ Law of the Republic of Kyrgyzstan on Religious Freedom and Religious Organization, chap. 1, art. 3, December 16, 1991.

²⁴ A good discussion of the situation in Uzbekistan is Reuel Hanks, “Religion and Law in Uzbekistan: Renaissance and Repression in an Authoritarian Context,” in *Regulating Religion: Case Studies from around the Globe*, ed. James T. Richardson (New York: Kluwer Academic, 2004), 319–30. For Kazakhstan, see Roman Podoprigora, “Religious Freedom and Human Rights in Kazakhstan,” *Religion, State & Society* 31, no. 2, (2003): 123–32.

²⁵ Nuria Kutnaeva, “Svoboda veroispovedania v Tsentral’noi Azii. Teoria i praktika” [Freedom of Religion in Central Asia. Theory and Practice] n.d.; see also John Anderson, *Kyrgyzstan: Central Asia's Island of Democracy?* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1999), 32–33.

²⁶ The US Center for World Mission, located in Pasadena, California, is the central evangelical research centre and think tank committed to missionary work around the world: see the center's website at <https://www.uscwm.org> (accessed August 19, 2014).

²⁷ As mentioned by Mark Palmer, coordinator for the US missionary organization Campus Crusade for Christ in Kyrgyzstan between 1992 and 2004.

Kyrgyzstan “both registered and unregistered religious communities were able to function freely” between the early 1990s and 2005.²⁸

This state of affairs was not, however, seen as an unequivocal blessing by everyone. When a state official pointed out to me in 2004 that “our laws on religion are far more liberal than those held by European countries,” he was not boasting about the liberal credentials of his country, but rather bemoaning what he saw as a chaotic situation. This sentiment dovetails with the functionary quoted in the introduction who complained about the law being abused by Evangelical missionaries. Both reveal tensions between the law and the state, prompting the questions: Who controls the law? What are the possibilities for using and manipulating it?

The Kyrgyz government’s endorsement of religious freedom was part of a larger “shock therapy” package designed by the IMF and the World Bank that was accepted by the Kyrgyz government in the early 1990s.²⁹ These reforms had unforeseen and often undesired effects. Contradicting all expert knowledge, the dismantling of the planned economy failed to attract hoped-for foreign direct investment. In the religious sphere, by contrast, the government had assumed that “traditional religions” would resume their activities. Ironically, economic investment did not materialize, but liberalization did trigger significant religious “foreign direct investment” in the form of Evangelical missions and Islamic renewal movements such as the Tablighi Jamaat.³⁰ Evangelical and Pentecostal missions started to have significant success in attracting converts among both the Russian minority and (mostly

²⁸ Mushfig Bayram and John Kinahan, “Kyrgyzstan: Religious Freedom Survey, December 2009,” *Forum 18 News Service*, December 17, 2009, http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1388&pdf=Y.

²⁹ Rafis Abazov, “Policy of Economic Transition in Kyrgyzstan,” *Central Asian Survey* 18, no. 2, (1999): 197–223.

³⁰ The Tablighi Jamaat, which nowadays is a global movement, has its origins in 1920s India; it focuses on spiritual reformation at the grassroots level. A good source on the movement’s history is Marc Gaborieau, “The transformation of Tablighi Jama’at into a transnational movement,” *Travellers in Faith: Studies of the Tablighi Jama’at as a Transnational Islamic Movement for Faith Renewal*, ed. Khalid Masud (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 121–138. The expansion of the Tablighi Jamaat into post-Soviet Central Asia is discussed by Bayram Balci, “The rise of the Jama’at al Tabligh in Kyrgyzstan: the revival of Islamic ties between the Indian subcontinent and Central Asia?” *Central Asian Survey* 31, no. 1 (2012): 61–76.

female) Kyrgyz of Muslim background.³¹ The Tablighi Jamaat also became increasingly popular, especially among young urban Kyrgyz men.³²

Such proliferation of religious activity is hardly surprising, but it was not the “religious revival” that the government had desired or anticipated. State functionaries, representatives of the “traditional religions,”³³ and segments of the general population³⁴ saw the religious proliferation and diversification as undermining the national integrity of the country, and creating tensions at the local level. Consider the words of Murzakhilov, the previously mentioned specialist at the State Agency for Religious Affairs:

The situation is a complex one: on the one hand, there is freedom of conscience; on the other, the need to legally regulate what the religious organizations and missionaries are doing . . . we need new laws . . . to keep within limits those religious organizations that may change the traditional family and clan relations and traditional religious preferences, and upset the religious balance in the republic.³⁵

It might be tempting to dismiss this statement as revealing a lingering Soviet mentality, including an obsession with control. Even so, the expressed concerns trigger a question: Who

³¹ See Mathijs Pelkmans, “Temporary Conversions: Encounters with Pentecostalism in Muslim Kyrgyzstan,” in *Conversion after Socialism: Disruptions, Modernisms and Technologies of Faith in the Former Soviet Union*, ed. Mathijs Pelkmans (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009), 143–66; Mathijs Pelkmans, “‘Culture’ as a Tool and an Obstacle: Missionary Encounters in Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 13, no. 4, (2007): 881–99.

³² In 2003, 710 Christian and 232 Muslim missionaries were officially registered, according to O. Mamaiusupov, *Voprosy (problemy) religii na perekhodnom periode* [Questions (Problems) of Religion in the Transition Period] (Bishkek, 2003). The number of Kyrgyz converts to Evangelical and Pentecostal churches has been estimated at 25,000. Pelkmans, “‘Culture’ as a Tool and an Obstacle,” 883. The Tablighi Jamaat does not have formal membership, but approximately 20,000 to 25,000 people are active in the movement, according to Emil Nasritdinov, “Spiritual Nomadism and Central Asian Tablighi Travelers,” *Ab Imperio* 2 (2012): 145–67.

³³ See, for example, Vladimir, “Christianity and Islam in Central Asia,” in *Islam and Central Asia: An Enduring Legacy or an Evolving Threat?*, eds. Roald Sagdeev and Susan Eisenhower (Washington, DC: Center for Political and Strategic Studies, 2000), 95–115. Vladimir was Archbishop of the Orthodox Diocese of Bishkek and All Central Asia at the time he authored this chapter.

³⁴ Julie McBrien and Mathijs Pelkmans, “Turning Marx on His Head: Missionaries, ‘Extremists,’ and Archaic Secularists in Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan,” *Critique of Anthropology* 28, no. 1 (2008): 87–103.

³⁵ K. Murzakhilov, “Proselytism in Kyrgyzstan,” *Journal of Social and Political Studies: Central Asia and the Caucasus* 31, no. 1, (2004): 83–87.

benefits from full-stop religious liberalization and with what effects? Proponents of religious liberalization often apply the notion of a “religious market” to stress that—like economic liberalization—it is the best available model not only to stimulate growth, but also to reach equilibrium. Like all markets, however, the “religious market” contains inequalities and asymmetries.³⁶ In Kyrgyzstan, far-reaching religious liberalization was particularly beneficial to religious groups that had transnational financial connections, a strong mission component, a focus on the individual, and an emphasis on disentangling faith and culture. Moreover, the rapid growth of such groups hardly indicated an emerging “equilibrium” but instead produced social friction at the local level.

In *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom*, Winnifred Sullivan draws attention to the fact that law and religion “speak in languages largely opaque to each other.”³⁷ The key problem is that religious freedom laws require religion to be delimited when it is impossible to draw unambiguous lines between religion and culture, especially with regards to everyday life. In the cases she analyzes, the effect is that “lived religion” remains unprotected or even opposed by the law (hence the title of her book). I agree with Sullivan’s argument, but I suggest that apart from leaving lived religion unprotected, the impossibility of delimiting religion may also offer opportunities. Indeed, it partly explains why Soviet authorities were unable to eradicate religion. They aimed to eradicate “religion” while promoting “culture,” which meant that significant aspects of “lived religion” remained out of sight.³⁸ Here I make a related argument: the impossibility of delimitation provided room for circumventing the law in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan. This is so because sometimes the issue is less about having one’s religious activities recognized *as* religion, and more about having religious activities recognized as *non*-religion. Evangelical missions were very skilled in producing this blurring

³⁶ Pelkmans, “Asymmetries on the ‘Religious Market’ in Kyrgyzstan.”

³⁷ Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 3.

³⁸ McBrien and Pelkmans, “Turning Marx on his Head.”

effect; in doing so they were able to both circumvent the law and avoid the various controversies their presence and activities were likely to produce in a Muslim-majority context.

To appreciate this point it is important to note that although Kyrgyzstan's liberal laws between 1992 and 2008 did offer opportunities for foreign-originating religious activities, the evangelical proselytizing activities among people of Muslim background continued to be controversial. Moreover, foreign "religious workers" had to be registered, and this could be a burdensome and drawn-out process, which could delay mission work by months. One way to avoid both the law and public controversy was to present oneself as a nongovernmental organization. In the early 2000s there were evangelical micro-loan projects, orphanages and centers for street children, cultural nongovernmental organizations promoting "mutual understanding," and even evangelical Internet cafes offering not only the advertised services but also spiritual guidance. Their public appearance was "secular"—and they were registered as such—but evangelizing was central to their work. It might be tempting to see this as "abusing" Kyrgyzstan's liberal environment (as did the state functionary quoted in the introduction), but from the point of view of the missionaries, the essence of being a Christian is to share your faith with others, and hence they saw no problem in mixing humanitarian and spiritual aid. Evangelical missions often remained unseen and unopposed precisely because they skilfully adopted the appearance of the aid industry and were associated with the powerful West. Moreover, the strength of their network—including connections with US diplomats—served as a guard against infringements of their rights by the host government.³⁹

While evangelical missions were able to pass as (secular) Western nongovernmental organizations, such a guise was unavailable to the Tablighis, for two reasons. First, their dress (long white robes) and beards made them instantly recognizable as religious actors. Second,

³⁹ Mathijs Pelkmans, "The 'Transparency' of Christian Proselytizing in Kyrgyzstan," *Anthropological Quarterly* 82, no. 2, (2009): 436-46.

in the post-9/11 context, Islamic piety movements are far more likely to be seen as a security threat than Christian missions, even in Muslim-majority countries such as Kyrgyzstan. It appears that “religious freedom” is particularly useful to those who fit the freedom picture, are able to mobilize market forces, and can manipulate the law.

As mentioned above, Kyrgyz politicians perceived the religious proliferation as a threat to the collective good. They increasingly bemoaned the “excessively” liberal laws, which they (quite realistically) perceived as having been imposed on the country by international organizations. In response, members of parliament (the Keneş) proposed a series of amendments beginning in the late 1990s.⁴⁰ International pressure prevented these initiatives from crystallizing for almost a decade, but in 2008 a new religion law was adopted which outlawed proselytizing and prohibited religious activities that undermined national integrity—an action clearly aimed at the activities of “non-traditional” religions. Religious rights movements and representatives of Evangelical churches protested vehemently.⁴¹ They had good reasons to do so because new registration requirements and bans on (vaguely defined) forms of proselytizing would bring an end to the era of “religious freedom” that had been beneficial to Evangelicals. Apart from several raids on Jehovah Witnesses and some closures of evangelical churches,⁴² the full effects of the religion law are not clear yet because in 2010 the presidential government was ousted from power and replaced with a potentially more liberal but weak parliamentary government. Still, it is useful to refer back to the Tablighi quoted in the introduction, who was unperturbed by the adoption of the new religion law despite its effect of making illegal their central practice of *davat* (regular mission trips expected of all Tablighis).

⁴⁰ John Anderson, *Kyrgyzstan: Central Asia's Island of Democracy?* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1999), 32–33, 56–57.

⁴¹ “Kyrgyzstan: Human Rights Activists Condemn New Religion Law,” *Eurasianet.org*, January 15, 2009, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insightb/articles/eav011609c.shtml>.

⁴² Mushfig Bayram, “Kyrgyzstan: Crackdown Follows New Religion Law,” *Forum 18 News Service*, May 28, 2009, http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1302.

The Tablighi's unworried attitude indicated a realistic view of the fragility of the law, combined with a conviction that God's plan cannot be known. Perhaps it is overreaching to call it a "benefit," but repression may positively contribute to the intensity of religious experience. This idea resonated in comments by Tablighis about the suspicion they encountered in the 1990s and heroic stories of those who were interrogated or arrested on suspicion of links to terrorism. Equally important, however, such stories reveal that the liberal laws of the 1990s offered protection to some groups but not to others. The implementation of the repressive religion law of 2008 was equally partial. During the previous ten years, the Tablighis had extended their links to the Muftiate of Kyrgyzstan, and their activities had become familiar, gaining reluctant acceptance by the population at large and the authorities. This meant that they received informal protection from local imams as well as the regional senior imams (*imam-khatib*). Their increasingly prominent position and public acceptance was much more significant than a change in the law, hence their relative indifference to a law that was so vehemently contested by religious rights groups.

As the law became more restrictive *and* the political situation became more unstable,⁴³ possibilities for secular authorities to randomly exercise force increased. The Tablighis were untroubled by the law because they had become integrated into a number of informal orders. However, groups that had not been able to secure such a position—because they were disconnected, disliked, or both—found themselves in an increasingly vulnerable position. The Tablighi quoted in the introduction was correct when asserting that the new law would affect Jehovah's Witnesses, but not them.

Final note

⁴³ I refer to the 2005 Tulip Revolution and the 2010 April Revolution, as well as the June 2010 violence between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in Southern Kyrgyzstan.

“Religious freedom” benefits some religious groups more than others, as seen in my analysis of Ajara (Georgia) and Kyrgyzstan. In the latter case, the government’s wish to counteract the “uncontrollable flux” produced by its liberal laws was understandable. As Peter Danchin mentions, the “‘liberal algebra’ of rights regimes is unable to resolve such conflicts without considering . . . different conceptions of collective goods in the historical context of particular political communities.”⁴⁴ This historical context was ignored when religious freedom laws were designed for (and imposed on) Kyrgyzstan, and politicians understandably aimed to counteract the tensions produced by a law perceived to be alien. This does not mean that the repressive turn is in any way desirable—indeed, both religious freedom and religious repression are bound to be rife with contradictions and fraught with perils.

In Kyrgyzstan, liberal laws were unable to protect evenly the interests of all religious groups, just as more repressive laws of the late 2000s did not impact all groups equally. The experience of the Tablighis was particularly instructive in this regard. During the period of religious liberalization they remained unprotected because they did not fit the “freedom” picture, while the subsequent more restrictive religion laws did not directly affect them due to their improved connections with secular and (state-endorsed) religious authorities. The position of Islam in Ajara showed a variation of this dynamic. Here, the end of Soviet religious repression increased the public presence of religion, a process which made Muslims more visible and vulnerable as a religious minority within the Georgian national context. Taken together, the examples presented in this essay have not only shown the uneven effects of freedom and repression on different religious groups, but also demonstrated that “freedom” and “repression” do not exist as absolutes and may imply each other in a number of ways.

⁴⁴ Peter Danchin, “Who Is the ‘Human’ in Human Rights? The Claims of Culture and Religion,” *Maryland Journal of International Law* 24 (2009): 112.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, Saba Mahmood, Kerilyn Harkaway-Krieger, and an anonymous reviewer of the Journal of Law and Religion for their comments on earlier versions of this text.