Religious Conversion and the Reconstruction of Ethnic Identity:

An Investigation into the Conversion of Muslim Kyrgyz to Protestant Christianity in Kyrgyzstan, Central Asia

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ABSTRACT

Social change, including religious conversion, challenges and transforms issues of identity. This thesis examines religious conversion from the perspective of Kyrgyz Christians. Religious conversion to Protestant Christianity challenges the normative Kyrgyz ethnic identity construct summed up in the local expression, "to be Kyrgyz is to be Muslim".

Faced with accusations of betrayal and rejection from the wider Muslim Kyrgyz community Kyrgyz Christians have responded by challenging both the authenticity of the Kyrgyz identity of their accusers and the accepted and traditional ethnic boundary markers. In this process Kyrgyz Christians have reconstructed Kyrgyz identity in a way that shows that Protestant Christianity is situated within the local community and Kyrgyz identity, rather than on the outside in a marginalised, or ostracised position.

The Kyrgyzstan context is striking because of the local circumstances in which conversion takes place. This context includes the collapse of Soviet Union and the revitalisation of religion after seventy years of the implementation of radical and enforced secularisation. From a handful of known Kyrgyz Christians at the time of independence (1991) upwards of 20,000 Muslim Kyrgyz have become Protestant Christians. This is a situation that has few precedents around the Muslim world. The study of Kyrgyz conversion offers special or distinctive insights into how innovation and religious change takes place in communities, especially non-Western communities.

To understand conversion from the perspective of Kyrgyz Christians a mixed method approach was utilised including participant observation (the author lived in Kyrgyzstan for over 4 years), in-depth interviews (49 respondents) and a survey (427 respondents). This approach allowed an understanding of the context and people who were the focus of the research, to access individual stories of those who were engaged in the process of conversion, and to gain a sense of the distribution of the phenomena of Kyrgyz Christianity.

The unfolding story of Kyrgyz conversion to Protestant Christianity raises significant questions about why people convert and what happens when people do. The approach that most appropriately applies to Kyrgyz conversion is one which recognises the socially constructed nature of identity involving the dynamic interplay between human agency, culture and social networks. Kyrgyz Christians have been active agents in bringing religious and identity transformation building upon the contextual parameters in which they are situated. Kyrgyz Christians are the products of culture and the initiators of cultural and religious change. The process of reconstructing ethnic identity through conversion has taken place as Kyrgyz Christians have creatively adapted, adopted, critiqued and reinterpreted indigenous (Kyrgyz social/cultural context) and exogenous (Protestant Christian) cultural and religious 'tools'. Kyrgyz Christians are transforming this new religious movement into something that affirms their sense of Kyrgyzness, their Kyrgyz identity, and reconstructs the normative ethnic construct to show that "to be Kyrgyz is to be Christian *as well as* to be Muslim."

DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

'I certify that this course work project does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.'

Signed...

David Radford
PhD Candidate
March, 2011

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GLOSSARY OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE TERMS

(all words are Kyrgyz unless specifically denoted Arabic or Russian)

Ailanain –A phrase expressing a sudden surprise, often more negative than positive, containing some bias or judgment towards the person or event that the word is referring to. A similar expression in English is, "Oh, my goodness!" Also used as an expression of love like 'dear', 'honey' etc.

Aksakal – A word for older Kyrgyz who are generally viewed with much respect and honour.

Alla-Taalai - A Kyrgyz equivalent of the word meaning the Muslim God "Allah"; the Supreme/Most High Allah (God).

Al barysty/baysryk – See explanation below for *basyryk.*

Arbak – The spirits of the Kyrgyz ancestors who are understood to continue to visit the living Kyrgyz for weekly ritual purposes (the Thursday meal) or through special occasions such as in dreams/visions. They are often prayed to, or called upon to protect their descendants.

Baike – Literally, 'older brother' or 'uncle'. Commonly used not just for a blood male relative but for men who are older than 'you' in the community.

Bakshy – Traditional 'shaman' similar to the fortune-teller/*kozu achik* (see below) but is understood to utilise, to a greater extent, trance-like states and occultic practices in exercising spiritual power. Usually *bakshy* are females.

Basyryk/al barysty – A dark, oppressive spirit is said to visit many Kyrgyz. Many believe that *albarsty* has an image of a dark woman although it does seem to take different forms. The experience with this spirit is characterised by a process of physical paralysis, of great physical pressure, choking and fear. The experience usually happens when a person is in a semi-sleep or sleeping state. These two terms are synonymous with the former more commonly used in the north and the latter term in the south of the country. I have also heard that these two terms can designate different spirits who do different things.

Boorsok – Traditional kind of 'bread' eaten by Kyrgyz and is made for festivals and feasts, when people have a lot of guests. It is an important component of the Thursday meal cooked for the ancestor spirits who are said to visit Kyrgyz families every week. In some places *mai tokoch* is prepared. *Mai totoch* is prepared exactly the same way as *boorsoks*, but in a round (circular) form. People usually make seven or nine *mai tokoches* for Thursdays.

Boz-ui (üi) –Traditional Kyrgyz house made of sheepskin commonly called a 'Yurt' in Russian.

Iisus Hristos/ Iisus Kristos/ Esus Kristos – Russian word for Jesus Christ.

Isa Masih –Arabic/Quranic title for the prophet Jesus Christ.

Isa (Iysa/Yisa)Mashaiak – Arabic/Kyrgyz amalgamation used by Kyrgyz Christians for 'Jesus Christ'.

Ishengen – Kyrgyz word – Literally, 'one who has faith in something', i.e. 'a believer'. It is the most common self-description by Kyrgyz Christians.

Jailoo – Kyrgyz word for mountain pasture.

Janaza 'prayer' – Muslim religious prayer recited as part of the funeral rites.

Kagilain – Kyrgyz word – Literally, 'let me be nailed', understood by some Christians to mean 'crucified' as Christ was.

Kalpak - Traditional Kyrgyz hat for men.

Kapyr/kafir – Kyrgyz/Arabic word to identify a non-Muslim or for an apostate - one who has left the Muslim faith/community.

Kozuachik – Kygyz word – Literally 'one whose eyes are opened', used to designate a traditional fortune-teller who can heal and see the future.

Kristianski/Kristianka – Russian word to identify a person who is a Christian.

Kyrgyzchylyk – Kyrgyz word – Literally, 'something belonging to the Kyrgyz – used to express Kyrgyz identity.

Kidir ata – The wandering traveller who helps people who is generally believed to have much wisdom. Found in traditional cultural stories and often plays an objective third party in conflicts or kind of a reflector of what is bad in the society. Some Kyrgyz Christians associate this personage with Christ.

Komuz – Traditional Kyrgyz stringed guitar-like musical instrument.

Kudai – Literally, 'God'.

Kymyz – Traditional Kyrgyz drink made from fermented horse milk.

Mashaiak – Literally 'Saviour' or 'Honoured One' and used by Kyrgyz Christians as the title or designation for Christ or Messiah.

*Mashaiakche (*also *mashaiakchi/mashaiakchy) –*- Literally 'one who follows the *mashaiak/Messiah'* - Kyrgyz phrase increasingly used to designate one who is a Christian by Kyrgyz Christians.

Mazar – Sacred place/s understood to be a place of spiritual power and blessing associated with the burial place of Sufi Muslim saints or with particular geographical features such as streams, waterfalls, trees and rocks. It is suggested that these places are also associated with figures of earlier Zoroastrian and other pagan religious beliefs.

Namaz – Arabic word used for formal, ritual prayer in Islam.

Nike (Arabic – *nika*) – Muslim wedding ceremony.

Nooruz (*Navruz*) - Literally 'new day' (from farsi). - Traditional New Year Holiday (also beginning of spring) celebrated on 21st of March. *Nooruz* is originally a Zoroastrian traditional 'fire' festival. It is basically a celebration of vernal equinox, which has now become a state holiday used to celebrate and reinforce the Kyrgyz cultural identity.

Paigambar – (Kyrgyz variant of Arabic term) - Word designating one of the prophets sent by God.

Ramadan/Ramazan Eid (Kyrgyz – *Orozo Ayt*) - Festival at the end of the Muslim fasting month.

Tabip –Traditionally healer.

Tengir – Pre-Muslim Kyrgyz word for the 'God of Heaven'. The primary meaning was 'heaven, heavens'. Only in Christian circles it is sometimes used as, 'The Lord'.

Tunduk /(*Tündük*) – Crisscrossed wooden lattice design at the top of the yurt.

Ummah – World-wide community of Muslims.

CHAPTER ONE - Introduction

Every religious idea, every idea of God, even flirting with the idea of God, is unutterable vileness…vileness of the most dangerous kind, "contagion" of the most abominable kind. Millions of sins, filthy deeds, acts of violence and physical "contagions"…are far less dangerous than the subtle, spiritual idea of a God decked out in the smartest "ideological" costumes…Every defense or justification of the idea of God, even the most refined, the best intension, is a justification of reaction (Lenin, 1959:89-90,93).

A result of Lenin's disdain, even revulsion for religion, was the development of a policy to eradicate religion from Soviet society, referred to by one writer as the 'Soviet Secularization Experiment' (Froese, 2008:172). Enormous amounts of energy and significant government authority, policy and organisation were utilised to achieve that end. Yet, within a few short years after the collapse of the Soviet Communism (1989 was the year the 'Iron Curtain' in Berlin fell), there was widespread revitalisation of religion in many countries that were once a part of the Soviet Union. This thesis investigates the rise of Protestant Christianity among the ethnic Kyrgyz of Kyrgyzstan, in Central Asia, as a way of understanding the new role of religion in the post-socialist Soviet context.

The Kyrgyz are considered to be predominantly a Muslim people who form the majority, or titular, ethnic group in the nation of present–day Kyrgyzstan, Central Asia. [1] Kyrgyzstan is one of the smaller Central Asian nations both in population and

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[1] For a brief historical and religious background (including the development of Islam) of the Kyrgyz see Appendix #1.

size (about 5 million population), tucked away and surrounded by Kazakhstan,
Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and to the east, China (see map below). According to the
1999 census the Kyrgyz people were the largest ethnic group in the nation making
up (52%)[2] of the population (Anderson, 1999a, Filonyk, 1994).

Figure 1.1 Map of Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia

1.1 *Religious conversion in Kyrgyzstan – the emergence of Protestant Christianity among the ethnically Muslim Kyrgyz*

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[2] Latest figures (1999 census) show changes largely due to post-independence emigration of Russians
and Germans: Kyrgyz 64.9%, Uzbek 13.8%, Russian 12.5%, Dungan 1.1%, Ukrainian 1%, Uighur
1%, other 5.7% - http://www.indexmundi.com/kyrgyzstan/ethnic_groups.html accessed 7 June 2011.

Since 1991 significant numbers of the majority Muslim 'ethnic' Kyrgyz people[3] of Kyrgyzstan (from this point I will refer to them as 'Kyrgyz' rather than 'ethnic Kyrgyz') have accepted the Protestant[4] Christian faith. If this phenomenon was simply one in which a few members had embraced a different religion it would not necessarily arouse much sociological interest. Exact numbers of Kyrgyz Christians are not available. Estimates vary between 10,000 and 100,000. A 2004 media article (Ahmad, 2004) quoted the Director for the Religious Affairs Committee of Kyrgyzstan, Omurzak Mamayusupov, as stating that over 100,000 Muslims of the five million population (2%) have converted to Christianity and that the percentage of Muslims from the total population had fallen from 84% in 2000 to 79.3% in 2004. From my own personal observation and interaction with local Christian leaders (including in-depth interviews undertaken as a part of this research) this figure does appear exaggerated and estimates closer to 20,000 seem more realistic. This conclusion is supported by the work of other researchers in the region and available internet resources (Pelkmans, 2007, McBrien and Pelkmans, 2008, 2009). If we were to take the figure 20,000 to be more accurate it would mean that about 1% of the titular Kyrgyz would be Christian.

> After declarations of religious freedom and the out-migration of the Germans, a new process of evangelization of the natives [in Central Asia] has begun. …The champion of the Protestantization of former Muslims is Kazakhstan, followed by Kyrgyzstan. A sign of new times is the Christianization of Kazakhs, Kyrgyz and Uzbek. As a rule new Christians of Turkic origin turn to Protestantism…[and they] have had great success among both urban, and rural people. Today it is possible to

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[3] Compared with people of other ethnicities but who are equally citizens of Kyrgyzstan (e.g. Uzbeks, Kazakhs and Russians).

[4] By 'Protestant', I mean non-Russian Orthodox, non-Roman Catholic, and non-Christian sects, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter day Saints.

speak of thousands of Kyrgyz and Kazakhs converted to Protestantism. This new
phenomenon has clashed with the common belief that all native people must be
Muslims (Tabyshalieva, 2003b).

In terms of the total Kyrgyz population, these numbers are significant. First, before
1991 there was barely a handful of known Kyrgyz Christians and within a short
period of time, just 5-15 years, it has grown into many thousands (Pelkmans, 2006).
This has happened in a location that has not had an indigenous Central Asian
Christian presence since the 14th century, and in which there has been virtually no
historical legacy of Protestant Christianity (Dickens, 1999, Baumer, 2006, Klein,
2000, Gillman and Klimkeit, 1999, England, 1996, Foltz, 1999, Vladmir, 2000).
There has, however, been a clearly visible presence of historical Christianity in the
form of the Russian Orthodox Church. The work of the Russian Orthodox Church
has historically (both pre and post-Soviet era) served exclusively Slavic peoples,
with little or no impact on indigenous Central Asians such as the Kyrgyz (Vladmir,
2000). Expressions of Christianity in Central Asia and Kyrgyzstan, outside of the
Russian Orthodox Church, have been present (Peyrouse, 2004b). A small Roman
Catholic community exists (Wojciechowski, 2009) and there are small groups of
Protestant Christians, in particular, 'Russian Baptists' (Lutheran, Mennonite, Baptist
and Pentecostal groups) almost exclusively made of ethnic German and Slavic
(Russian speaking) peoples (Filatov, 2000, Hale III, 2000, Lane, 1978, Peyrouse,
2004a). During the Soviet period there were examples of Russian Baptists who
attempted to evangelise ethnic Kyrgyz, with varying degrees of success, but this was
limited to a few individuals rather than an official church position (Yanzen, 1993,
JC, 1997). If indigenous Central Asians knew anything at all of Protestant
Christianity it was mostly as a disparaging, derogatory word, 'Baptist' (which will be
discussed later in the thesis), associated with 'sect-like' people who engaged in illicit

sexual practices and even cannibalism.

Second, the numbers of Kyrgyz Christians are high enough that it has become increasingly a source of concern in the wider community resulting in a number of mostly negative newspaper articles, internet and other media reactions. Common accusations are that 'Evangelical Churches are "totalitarian cults" that use hypnosis and advanced psychological manipulation to brainwash its members' (Pelkmans, 2007:895) and that Protestant Christians are a destabilising influence on society (Murzakhalilov, 2004). Conversions taking place in rural areas have led to attempts at physical intimidation, banishment of Kyrgyz Christians from their local communities and the prevention of burials in village cemeteries (Murzakhalilov, 2004, Pelkmans, 2006). This growing concern, together with fears of the work of extremist Muslim religious groups has resulted in the present Kyrgyz Government passing (January, 2009) a new, restrictive law on religious freedom (Bayram, 2009, Bos, 2008, Eurasianet, 2009). Clearly, though not large in number, the growth and impact of this religious movement has been significant enough to impact on society generally, and at a political level.

The collapse of socialism and the independence from Russia in 1991 brought a new sense of freedom for Kyrgyzstan that included religious pluralism and openness. It also heralded the arrival of a number of foreign missionary groups, both Muslim and Christian. Muslim groups came largely from the Middle East (the Hizb-ut-Tahrir), Turkey (Nurcus) and Pakistan (Tablighi Jama'at) (Akiner, 1996, 2003, Pannier, 2010) and Christian groups especially from Western Europe, the United States and South Korea (Peyrouse, 2004a). The ensuing years have seen a flourishing religious

market which saw a rise in public Islamic religious observance and commitment, of both orthodox and traditional, or popular, forms of Islam. This was visibly seen in the sharp increase in the number of mosques (from fifty nine in1991 to more than one thousand five years later), in mosque attendance (Anderson, 1999b, Murzakhalilov, 2004), and the proliferation of traditional fortune tellers and shamans. Kyrgyzstan also witnessed the growth of numerous Protestant Christian and non-Christian denominations and sects. These included groups as varied as the Baptists, Pentecostals, Seventh Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Baha'is, the Unification Church and the Hare Krishnas (Anderson, 1999b, Gunn, 2003).

For seventy years the Soviet Communist regime had systematically attempted to impose a government sponsored secularisation of all aspects of society. Religion was to be separated and eliminated from all institutions of society, and, it was hoped, from the world view and identity of its citizens (Froese, 2008, Greeley, 1994). The goal was a utopian Soviet community that had put aside all vestiges of religious ideas (supernatural and superstitious), rituals and institutions for rational scientific atheism. In the end, this did not happen. There has been an increasing level of scholarly interest in religious revivalist movements after the break-up of the Soviet Union (Bourdeaux, 2000, Filatov, 2000, Greeley, 1994, Kazmina and Filippova, 2005, Wanner, 2003). The significance of this was noted by The Max Plank Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle-Saale, Germany, which sponsored a conference on 'Religious Conversion after Socialism' in 2005, bringing together scholars from various disciplines who had been researching this phenomenon. The research into the renewal of religion in the post-socialist environment, however, has mostly been undertaken from an anthropological, historical or theological (Hann, 2006)

framework, but very little from a sociological perspective. One notable exception is the work of Paul Froese. In *The Plot to Kill God: Findings from the Soviet Experiment in Secularization* (2008), Froese attempted to analyse the treatment of religion by the Soviets, and the effects on the religiousness of the general population of the Soviet Union. His analytical framework is largely based on a more recent sociological approach to the study of religion utilising economic theories of supply and demand (see page fourteen below for explanation and references). Froese only touches on issues relating to the Muslim republics of Central Asia.

In the case of Central Asia, and Kyrgyzstan in particular, there has been some effort to investigate the revitalisation of religion. These have included the role of religion in the construction of national identity (Anderson, 1991 , Rashid, 1994, Roy, 2000), the question of what role religion will play in the rise or potential rise of Islamic fundamentalism (Castells, 2004, Derlugan and Tabyshalieva, Imart, 1986, Rashid, 2002), the return of traditional spirituality (Tabyshalieva, 2000, Tabyshalieva, 2003a), and the effect that this might have on religious pluralism (Anderson, 2002, Tabyshalieva, 2003b). Some recent anthropological research has considered the impact that missionaries have had in Christian proselytisation in Kyrgyzstan (McBrien and Pelkmans, 2008, Pelkmans, 2005, 2007, 2009). While there has been a cursory attempt at considering Kyrgyzstan as a 'religious market' in the wake of independence (Pelkmans, 2006) there has been little empirical sociological research and therefore a gap in research into NRMs in Kyrgyzstan, especially those that do not look to the traditional religious outlook (Islam or traditional Kyrgyz spirituality). The movement of Kyrgyz to Protestant Christianity is not an isolated case in the region. There have been similar movements within Central Asia (Clark, 2005,

Hilgers, 2005, 2006, Tabyshalieva, 2003b) since the collapse of the Soviet Union and research into the Kyrgyz case will be invaluable in understanding those movements in Central Asia, as well as in understanding religious revitalisation in other parts of the former Soviet Union (for an example in the Ukraine see Wanner, 2003).

The rise of New Religious Movements (NRMs) to public prominence, especially in Western nations, has further encouraged recent sociological research and theorising concerning religion - how and why people join these movements, and what kind of conditions support religious/spiritual renewal. Within this focus on NRMs there has been considerable emphasis on religious conversion – the mechanism or process that a person goes through in switching from one position to another along the religious continuum. Religious conversion suggests that there appears to be a constant religiousness or spirituality hovering, as it were, within society and the need/desire/satisfaction for people to find religious explanations to make sense of self, circumstances, and the world around them. Further, religious conversion is not simply about individuals, as if they are numbers to be counted, it is about people who make profound personal changes and whose worldview or framework for understanding the world, has been significantly changed.

My awareness of the Kyrgyz situation came about as a result of my involvement with a Christian organisation, Youth With A Mission, working primarily in the Indian sub-continent. Through this involvement I had the opportunity to visit Kyrgyzstan and thus became aware of the recent movement of the Kyrgyz to Protestant Christianity. Interested in investigating this phenomenon I had the opportunity to spend 4-5 years in the country to undertake the field research for this dissertation.

While doing the research I also worked with a Non-Government Organisation (NGO), Aslan Alliance, sympathetic to the Christian community and whose members were involved in various social and cultural development projects in the country. As someone who holds a Christian faith, I also participated in various activities with Kyrgyz Christians during the research process. While this provided an opportunity to gain trust and access to respondents who were the focus of the research, as a social researcher, it also required that I clearly communicate to those I was researching the nature of the research I was undertaking as a PhD candidate. Further issues related to this are discussed in the methodology chapter.

This thesis investigates religious and social change in the form of religious conversion and the emergence of religion in a geographically remote location (from Australia where the researcher is presently located). As a result this required an approach that facilitated entry into the field location, understanding the context, and establishing trust relationships that would facilitate opportunities to gain access to respondents (Kyrgyz Christians). As a consequence, the research for this thesis initially required a qualitative approach utilising inductive methods involved in field research. This was achieved through participant observation in the Kyrgyz Christian community and through semi-structured face-to-face in-depth interviews with forty-nine Kyrgyz Christians. Based on these interviews, a self-administered questionnaire, was administered to 427 Kyrgyz Christians (2-5% of the estimated total Kyrgyz Christian population). This was done to establish how widespread and consistent the findings were across the Kyrgyz Christian community. Both the in-depth interviews and the questionnaires were administered in various parts of the country in both urban and rural settings, and within a wide demographic cross section – age, gender,

marital status, education and occupation. An analysis of this information has given a rich set of data to be able to provide background material on respondents as well as answers to descriptive questions concerning who is converting and how conversion is taking place. It also provides information that helps answer explanatory questions concerning why this has occurred and how these Kyrgyz Christians continue to construct their identity in light of their conversion.

1.2 *The sociological context*

From a sociological perspective there are a number of resources available to help consider the revitalisation of religion in the former Soviet Union, and in particular, the rise of Protestant Christianity in Kyrgyzstan. One area has been the increasing debate within sociology regarding secularisation and the place of religion in society, sometimes referred to as the 'Secularisation Thesis'. It has been suggested that with the rise of industrialisation, urbanisation, rationalism and modernity religion will ultimately disappear (Bell, 1977, Breen and Hayes, 1996, Hadden, 1987, Köse, 1999). While traditional social thinkers from Durkheim, Weber to Marx have been interested in the subject of religion, there has been an underlying presupposition that religion, as a significant force, or even as an integral element, in society, will eventually disappear (Gorski and Altinordu, 2008, Possamai, 2008, Stark, 1999, Hutchinson and Smith, 1996). Despite these predictions religion appears to remain an important factor in society worldwide (May, 2008). While church attendance in some western nations appears to be declining (Anthony et al., 1983, Gill, 2003, Kaldar et al., 1999, Presser and Chaves, 2007), religious belief continues to be relatively strong.

The Secularisation thesis is also being challenged around the world in recent decades by the rise of new religious movements and spiritualities (Hunter, 1981), religious fundamentalisms (Marty and Appleby, 1991 - (c.1995)), religious nationalisms, for example the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India and its partners such as the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak (RSS) (van der Veer, 1994), religious terrorism, and the increasing prominence of the 'sacred' in public 'secular' life (Bell, 1977, Bouma, 2008, Possamai, 2008). There is considerable empirical evidence that religion is, in fact, blossoming rather than disappearing around the world (Berger, 1999, Bouma, 2008, Thomas, 2005), and a growing voice that insists that the so-called conditions for secularisation do not necessarily result in the disappearance of religion (Anthony et al., 1983). In the words of one commentator, 'Modernity and globality do not result in the disappearance of religion either in terms of importance for the conduct of social life or in terms of visibility on the social landscape' (Beyer, 1994:225).

Some of the most outspoken critics of the Secularisation Theory have been Rodney Stark and Roger Finke. The final statement in their provocative essay, 'Secularization, R.I.P.', claims that, 'After nearly three centuries of utterly failed prophecies and misrepresentations of both present and past, it seems time to carry the secularization doctrine to the graveyard of failed theories, and there to whisper, "Requiescat in pace"' (Stark and Finke, 2000:79). While not all hold their position, Stark and Finke have done much to stoke the debate into life (Gorski and Altinordu, 2008, Possamai, 2008). Peter Berger, who was once a major proponent of the secularisation thesis (1969) changed his view some thirty years later (1999) after considering what was apparently overwhelming evidence to the contrary. He commented, 'The world today, with some exceptions…is as furiously religious as it

ever was, and in some places more so than ever. This means that a whole body of

literature by historians and social scientists loosely labelled "secularization theory"

is essentially mistaken' (1999:2).

Certainly secularisation processes are at work in society, and so are religious

processes. What is needed is an approach to the study of religion that limits

premeditated biases potentially hindering the research process (Finke and Stark,

2003, Martin, 2005). The collapse of the Soviet Union and its concerted attempt to

eliminate religion together with the revitalisation of religion within its former borders

is not an opportunity to degrade or remove either category from our research in the

sociology of religion. Rather it is an occasion to look again at the definitions,

categories, relevance and realities that make up both secularisation and religious

phenomenon and to consider empirically and theoretically how, and in what ways,

they are at work in society. For instance, Beckford (1992) suggests that rather than

focusing on the 'secularisation of religion' it may be more helpful to consider the

relationship *between* religion and modernity. In order to understand the

desecularisation process underway in Australia Possamai (2008) proposes an

approach that recognises 'various phases of secularisation and sanctification,' or

what he refers to as Martin's (2005) 'multiple secularisations' thesis.

Anthropologists have already begun to consider issues such as secularism,

desecularisation and atheism in the context of post-socialist Soviet Union and

Kyrgyzstan (McBrien and Pelkmans, 2008, Rogers, 2005).

Another area within sociology that helps us to understand the Kyrgyzstan situation is

of the area of 'New Religious Movements' (NRMs). Since the 1960s there has been a

significant increase in sociological and other literature on the development of what has come to be known as 'New Religious Movements' (Beckford and Richardson, 1983, Robbins, 1988). The development of NRMs has been recognised as one of the features of the upsurge in global religious revitalisation and one of the factors that have challenged the traditional secularisation theory (Anthony et al., 1983, Hunter, 1981). While the literature has focused on understanding the growth of Christian off-shoot groups such as the Moonies (the Reunification Church), the Church of Scientology, the Mormons (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints), the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Children of God, research has also considered New Age, mystical religious groups, eastern religious movements; and even Wicca (witchcraft) and various pagan religious movements (Anthony et al., 1983, Bergeron, 1983). The initial focus of research was on North America and Europe. Less attention has been given to understanding these movements beyond Western contexts such as those found within Asia, Africa and South America, though this is changing (Barker, 1999a, Wilson, 1999a, Beckford, 1986a). The Kyrgyzstan case study helps to fill this gap both in terms of non-western and post-socialist Soviet environments.

There are peculiar characteristics of NRMs that arose in the twentieth century (particularly the latter decades). Beckford (1986b) suggests that rapid social change has been a feature of the context in which NRMs arose and that the substantial increase of these movements in this particular period of time signifies a situation quite different from what has occurred before. While it may seem that social change appears to move rapidly in any era it has been especially true in twentieth and early twenty first centuries. Conditions of uncertainty and opportunity have been facilitated through the advent and development of technology, communications and

transport. A globalised environment has increased the speed with which this change has occurred. This has created an environment for questioning and experiencing religiosity and spirituality – the seeking of new answers, in this case spiritual, to help better understand and make sense of self, relationships, and the changing environment (Robertson and Chirico, 1985, Travisano, 1970).

Eileen Barker (1999a) suggests NRMs are 'new' because they seem to have become so publicly identifiable since World War II, and they are 'religious' because they have largely attempted to answer some of the ultimate questions in life that older mainstream religious groups have focused on. At the same time Barker locates these movements in the context of broader social changes. She observes,

> Organised religion no longer has the kind of hold over social institutions that it has enjoyed in earlier periods... [We] have witnessed the growth of religious pluralism...increased social and geographical mobility, universal franchise, universal education and the break-up of a traditional occupational structure, traditional values and authoritarian structures - all of which can contribute to a dissatisfaction with... the beliefs and practices that might otherwise have been passed on by parents or others in roles of authority...(1999:18)

The attention on NRMs, for Barker, is the way individuals have rejected organised, institutional or traditional religion for other spiritual experiences/options. Modern conditions, such as rapid social change, certainly provide a context for people to rethink religious beliefs and practices passed down from the family and the

community. However, it could be that the alternative is found, not so much in eastern, mystical or other such movements, but in other forms of traditional religion that maybe new for a particular community. They offer apparently meaningful alternative religious/spiritual experiences and frameworks for comprehending the world around them. The commonality is not so much that religious/spiritual frameworks are institutional or non-institutional, traditional or non-traditional, even western or eastern – what is common is that they are *new* or are seen as new frameworks for individuals and/or the community to consider. In some cases they may be old frameworks that are re-packaged in a way that are understood to be contextually relevant, or perhaps old frameworks that for some reason are seen in a new light.

The literature on NRMs is now quite exhaustive (for extensive bibliographies see Beckford and Richardson, 1983, Rambo, 1982, Robbins, 1988). Early studies looked at religious conversion primarily through theological and psychological lenses (Clark, 1929, James, 1902, Starbuck, 1897), and were focused on identifying personality traits that predisposed some people toward conversion, the psychological profiles of those who were more likely to convert. Latter studies included models of conversion which saw 'brain-washing' as a further explanatory factor in why people joined these movements (Bromley, 2001, Levine, 1980, Miller, 1957, Sargant, 1957, Snow and Machalek, 1984). Those people who joined new religious movements were considered weird, or in some way not normal, and research looked at discovering why people would engage in such so-called deviant behaviour. Snow and Machalek (1984) list a number of factors that limit these approaches. They comment that findings have shown that conversions to NRM's are voluntary and that

there is a high turnover (leaving) rate that is also largely voluntary, even from groups with strong authoritarian features. Charges of brain-washing and coercion often seem to be used as a way of maligning NRMs. Lastly, they cast doubt on the fact that much of the information gathered to support criticism of NRMs came from the testimony of ex-converts who, after deprogramming, were more likely to claim that they had been brainwashed.

Through their research on the Divine Precepts new religious movement in the 1960s, Lofland and Stark (1965) managed to move beyond these early explanatory models and seek sociological answers. In doing so, they were able to identify causes and processes involved in conversion. Research has since shown that these stages or steps in the conversion process, while a helpful analytical tool, are not consistent enough across different groups and contexts to constitute a general explanatory model (Lofland and Skonovd, 1981b, Snow and Machalek, 1984). Nevertheless, Lofland and Stark raised some key issues for further research into the way people are recruited into NRMs. Further research focusing on what has come to be called social networks (Snow et al., 1980b, Stark and Bainbridge, 1980) considers the role that trusted social relationships and networks play in the introduction and acceptance, by a potential convert, into a new religious movement. Of course this alone does not explain why or why not some people become a convert or do or do not join a movement. There is often a complex group of factors involved, but it does highlight the importance that trusted social relationships have in conversion and the necessity of looking for these if we are to more accurately understand the conversion process.

While external and internal influences are no doubt at work in different ways and to

different degrees in the conversion process, studies have neglected to take the convert seriously as an agent of change. Richardson (1985a) believes that studies in NRMs have shown that a new kind of convert can be identified – the 'active' as opposed to the 'passive' convert. The convert is not simply one who converts because of external influences but does so because of an inward, self-motivating and religious seeking drive. This may be true for some individuals, and for some particular contexts, but is it true more generally in conversion movements? This thesis will demonstrate that while there may be converts who are 'active' in the sense that they are 'seeking religion', it is also the case that the convert *converts* because they are actively agents of change themselves, not simply as pawns in the hands of external agents (structural or human) (Asad, 1996, Lofland, 1978). A vital aspect of understanding conversion, therefore, is the need to take converts seriously as change *agents* as well as the *products* of change, and to understand how and why people make conversion choices. This thesis will address converts as both agents and products of change in the context of the rise of Protestant Christianity among the Kyrgyz.

How do people make these religious choices to convert or switch religious preferences? More recent sociological research has considered the way economic models may apply to religion in society (for examples see Young, 1997, Jelen, 2002 - an in depth discussion of this theory is considered in chapter three). It is suggested that an economic theory of religion sees religion in society as a 'market' or 'economy' in which religion is considered a commodity, something which is an object of choice (Iannaccone, 1991). Economic factors such as 'supply and demand', monopolies (the control of supply), preferences, the freedom (or lack of) in the

market place for buying and selling of goods, religious pluralism, the suppliers and consumers of religion, all play important roles in the availability and acceptance of religious choices. Some emphasise the demand-side (Sherkat and Wilson, 1995) and others the supply-side (Finke, 1997, Stark and Innacconne, 1994, Iannaccone, 1990, 1991, Warner, 1993). Economic theories suggest that religious pluralism will encourage religious participation. While there has been some criticism of this model (e.g. Bruce, 1999, Voas et al., April, 2002, Chaves and Cann, July 1992) dynamics suggested by the 'religious economy' can be found in the Kyrgyzstan situation.

Religious choices that involve religious conversion ultimately address issues of identity (discussed below). Conversion, at the very least, involves change. While there may be some debate as to the degree of change taking place, the term by its very meaning requires a process of movement from one thing to something else. Religious conversion can never be static; by its very nature it must be dynamic. A convert chooses and engages in change – in beliefs, behaviour, attitudes and in relationships. The environment and the 'foreignness' of the religious choice will dictate the degree in which this process is easy or difficult, or along what kind of cultural continuum it is expressed. Ultimately, it must touch the core issue of identity.

Castells (2004) suggests that, from a sociological perspective, identity is constructed in a social context using various 'building materials'.

> The construction of identities uses building materials from history, from geography, from biology, from productive and reproductive institutions, from collective memory and from personal fantasies, from power apparatuses and religious revelations. But

individuals, social groups, and societies process all these materials, and rearrange

their meaning, according to social determinations and cultural projects that are

rooted in their social structure, and in their space/time framework (Castells, 2004:7).

It is imperative that any interpretation of religious conversion and the meaning

associated with this process for the individuals (i.e. identity) should be understood in

light of the social, religious, and necessarily, cultural, context in which it takes place.

One important aspect of identity and the social/cultural context is that of ethnicity

(Barth, 1969a, Brass, 1996, Glazer and Moynihan, 1975) and the role that religion

plays in ethnic identity (Enloe, 1996, Mol, 1978). The 'converting choice' that

Kyrgyz Christians have made strikes at the heart of both individual and community

identity and impinges on both ethnicity and religion and the construction of identity.

For most indigenous Central Asians, including the Kyrgyz, to be Central Asian - be it

Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Tajik or Kazakh - is to be Muslim. Religion and ethnicity have been

deeply entwined in Central Asian identity (Manz, 1998, Haghayeghi, 1996).

However, identity is in flux, open to change, adaptation and interpretation, and the

situation in Central Asia is no different (Gross, 1992). While there is a strong

connection between religion and ethnic identity (Lewins, 1978, Mol, 1978), it does

not necessarily mean that there is a simultaneous connection between Muslim

national identity and the broader Muslim supra-national international community

(*ummah*) or that there are other ways in defining one's identity outside of the

religious label (Atkin, 1992, cf.Shahrani, 1984), or, as I suggest in this thesis, outside

of traditional religious labels. There are various identities that are defined by the

social context (Castells, 2004), a context in which rapid change is taking place, new

options for life choices are available, and doors open for new identities to emerge in

a process that redefines and at times rejects old identities.

National identity constructs are an important aspect of ethnic identity construction especially in the context of the Soviet Union where national identities were an essential element in the developing Soviet identity (Atkin, 1992, Brubaker, 1994, Castells, 2004, Roy, 2000). These national identities fostered by the Soviet Union fell into a remodelled national identity that took place in newly independent former Soviet Republics, such as Kyrgyzstan, minus the direct relationship to an overarching Soviet identity. The reinforcement and promotion of Kyrgyz ethnic identity during and post-independence has directly affected the role that religion has played in identity formation. In the case of Kyrgyz Christianity, the new religious frameworks have been incorporated into a heightened sense of nationalism, but with the attempt to exclude, change or reconstruct the religious factor as an essentialist element in the sense of ethnic or national identity.

1.3 *The case for Kyrgyz Christianity*

The research context for this thesis is located amidst the collapse of the Soviet Union and the resulting rapid, social and economic changes that resulted, in particular, a revitalisation of religion. The revival of religious interest in Kyrgyzstan is a good example of a juxtaposition between the secular and the sacred worlds or domains. The secular 'religion' of the Soviets has not completely gone away. Some Kyrgyz remain committed to an atheistic or materialistic outlook on life. Others have found a new liberated opportunity to declare a sacred or religious Muslim association. Still others turn to their traditional spiritual practices associated with Kyrgyz traditions. Yet there are those Kyrgyz who have spurned both the Soviet secular answers and the Muslim or traditional spiritual outlook for those offered by NRMs. The focus of

this thesis involves the religious conversion of the Kyrgyz to Protestant Christianity. While the secular/sacred dichotomy is a helpful concept to consider providing an overall umbrella or framework that situates my research, the Kyrgyz case requires more specific attention. It is more than a sacred/secular debate; it is about how and why people make religious choices and the consequences.

Sociological research into the phenomenon known as 'New Religious Movements' offers further insight into the Kyrgyzstan case. I contend that Kyrgyz Christianity is a new religious movement for the Kyrgyz people. Prior to 1991 there was barely a handful of known Kyrgyz Christians and there was virtually no knowledge or experience of the Protestant Christian faith, and for some, even of Christianity as a religion. The Kyrgyz understanding of Christianity was almost exclusively limited to a vague understanding of the Russian Orthodox Church, and that as 'Russian religion'. Though Protestant Christianity may be considered 'old world', 'institutional' or 'organised' religion, historically it is a new religious movement, among the old world religion of Islam, albeit the Kyrgyz manifestation of it, in a kind of hybrid merging of the two. Kyrgyz Christianity is a new religious movement for the Kyrgyz. Historically, Protestant Christianity has not been a religious option for the Kyrgyz, and it offers non-traditional, alternative explanatory frameworks for life and spiritual experience. This makes the Kyrgyz case somewhat of a twist on the general sociological approach toward New Religious Movements and one that potentially adds new insights into this field of research. This thesis addresses important gaps in in-depth empirical research and knowledge of religious revitalisation, including New Religious Movements, in a post-Socialist/Soviet environment - Muslim Central Asia - and in Kyrgyzstan in particular.

The economic approach to understanding religion is one helpful tool in exploring the situation of Kyrgyzstan and points to clues as to how and why this religious revitalisation has taken place in a post-Soviet context (Pelkmans, 2006), and how it is that thousands of Muslim Kyrgyz would choose to become Christian Kyrgyz. In this thesis I will seek to apply this theoretical perspective, particularly as it relates to human capital investments – social, cultural and religious - (Stark and Finke, 2000) as it relates to the Kyrgyz case study. The economic approach has been considered in terms of the Soviet Union as a whole but has yet to be applied in depth to Central Asia or Kyrgyzstan (Froese, 2008).

The construction of Central Asian identity has a long history, particularly in relationship to the way it was employed by the Soviet Union and the emerging construction of national identity that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union and the birth of new independent states (Brubaker, 1994, Glenn, 1999, Hirsch, 1997, Roy, 2000). For the titular, majority, ethnic peoples, such as the Kyrgyz in Kyrgyzstan, extra effort was exerted into reiterating ethnicity, history, folk heroes, language, and the formation of national identity. The conversion of the Kyrgyz to Protestant Christianity falls right into the heart of these issues. It is important to understand not just why or how the Kyrgyz make their choice to convert, but how they then construct or reconstruct their sense of Kyrgyz identity. This is true particularly when religious conversion is considered in cross-cultural settings and when the converting religious choice involves a change from one major religion to another.

While it may be true to say, in the Central Asian scenario, 'to be Kyrgyz is to be

Muslim', the question arises, what is meant by 'being Muslim'? Likewise, the question arises, what is meant by 'being Kyrgyz'. For instance, in the case of Kyrgyz Christians, what happens, as it does in religious conversion, when a person no longer considers him/herself to be Muslim? Do they cease being Central Asian? Does a Kyrgyz Christian cease being Kyrgyz because they no longer identify themselves as Muslim or because they also identify themselves as being Christian? These questions are not new - the accusation that 'Christianity is a foreign religion' or the 'religion of the West' has been made, from Asia to Africa, over centuries. For societies that place a high value on family, community and their ancestors, religious conversion has significant repercussions that require navigating and negotiating multiple identities (Castells, 2004, Hefner, 1993b) and adapting them to their local context. The Kyrgyz situation highlights these very issues, and as will be discussed in this thesis, the converting choice for Kyrgyz Christians has involved adaptation and adoption within their local context and in the way they have constructed their identity. They are Christians but still feel deeply 'Kyrgyz' and look for ways to affirm that identity. An analysis of the research data highlights the way Kyrgyz Christians have sought to do this in relation to the perceived 'Russianness' of Christianity and the adoption and adaptation of Protestant Christianity into their religious, cultural and ethnic identity.

1.4 Structure of the thesis

This thesis investigates the rise of Protestant Christianity among the Muslim Kyrgyz of Kyrgyzstan. The challenging question is to try to explain why and how it is that several thousand Muslim Kyrgyz have embraced Protestant Christianity. Broadly speaking, this thesis investigates the way social change, in particular religious

conversion, challenges and transforms issues of identity. Specifically, this thesis investigates Kyrgyz conversion from the perspective of Kyrgyz Christians, and seeks to understand how Kyrgyz Christians have described and interpreted conversion to Protestant Christianity as it relates to their sense of Kyrgyz identity. While there are dynamics in the conversion process that find general application in other conversion movements, and which can be identified in the Kyrgyz case study, there are also specific dynamics peculiar to the Kyrgyz case that highlight key social processes, in particular, how religious conversion influences issues of identity. The social context is vital for understanding what is happening (Kazmina and Filippova, 2005). Religious conversion is not simply about what doctrine/or ritual one believes or practises but it is about who the individual is in relation to their social relationships - past, present and future – family, local community, ethnic community, nation, and, for the Kyrgyz, also their ancestors. In doing so, this thesis also seeks to add further knowledge to the growing field of research on religious revitalisation, including NRMs, in a post-Socialist/Soviet environment, and Kyrgyzstan in particular.

The next chapter will review the literature that explores research developments in the study of religious conversion. I will review the various ways religious conversion has been considered – conceptual approaches, socio/structural approaches, convert approaches and cross-cultural conversion among traditional religions, particularly Christianity and Islam. Religious conversion is a multifaceted phenomenon and each approach has its benefits and limitations. The thesis will touch on the relevance or use of various approaches. Understanding *what* is conversion is vital for any investigation to proceed otherwise we will not know what we are discussing or where we are going. Awareness of the social setting – the social/economic demographic

background of the people being investigated is essential to know *who* are converting and the circumstances in which conversion is taking place. Knowing the religious background of those being converted and the religious groups involved in the conversion process is important if we are to know what people are being converted *from* and what people are being converted *to* and *how* this is occurring. Ultimately, however, it is *people* who are switching religious affiliation, and the recent attention on recognising the need to make the convert the focus of research is a positive development in furthering our growing understanding of religious conversion. Unlike earlier studies that presumed an irrationality regarding the religious convert and religious conversion, this dissertation argues that people often make converting choices precisely because it makes 'rational' sense to them. Any approach to researching religious conversion should be the same as that made to any other social phenomenon – not to find ways to explain it away, or to discover what is wrong or right about it, but to understand what it is, and why and how it occurs in society.

Chapter Three will look at the methodological framework in which this thesis takes place, discussing in detail each method used in the triangulation approach for the research. This is also a descriptive chapter looking at the socio-demographic make-up of the respondents and allows us to consider the broad social setting in which Kyrgyz Christianity has arisen. An analysis of the research data has resulted in a primary focus on the way religious conversion has come to be a vehicle for identity reconstruction. Conversion is not simply a radical religious reorientation - it is also a radical reorientation in the way people perceive themselves as members of the social group, the Kyrgyz community.

Chapter Four considers the data from the quantitative research, the survey material, as it relates to this theme, and Chapter Five does the same with the qualitative data, especially the data gathered from the in-depth interviews.

Chapter Six is the major discussion chapter looking at the main issues raised from the research data. Viewing Kyrgyz Christianity as a deviant identity trajectory, this chapter offers explanatory models for understanding how the re-construction of ethnic identity by Kyrgyz Christians has taken place and what we can learn about the processes involved in Kyrgyz conversion especially as it relates to the making of religious choices.

Finally, Chapter Seven summarises the main findings of the thesis, outlines the main limitations, offers suggestions for further research, and draws out the ways in which the thesis contributes to the sociological study of religion.

CHAPTER TWO - Approaches to the study of religious conversion

Religious conversion and religious switching have given rise to a significant amount of sociological research especially since the early 1960s when the West experienced an increased interest in the phenomenon of New Religious Movements. A wide range of approaches has been utilised to investigate religious conversion in New Religious Movements. The following chapter is a discussion of this literature. It can be broadly divided into four sections: conceptual approaches, structural approaches, religious convert approaches, and religious conversion research in traditional religions, particularly Christianity and Islam. The prominent literature related to these different approaches will be considered highlighting the major characteristics advocated, noting differences between various approaches, offering a critique, and drawing out essential elements that directly impinge on the rest of the thesis.

2.1 Conceptual approaches

2.1.1 Definitions

One of the difficulties in any discussion on religious conversion remains defining what is meant by 'religious switching' or 'religious conversion'. The very idea of discussing conversion in terms of stages, steps or types of conversion implies that one knows what one is talking about or that it moves in a linear direction. There are a number of issues that need to be addressed. If conversion is moving from one religious position to another, what exactly is conversion moving from, and to, and

can it really be called conversion? If there is a continuum upon which religious

change takes place, where on this continuum can one say that conversion occurs?

Religious change can take several forms or directions, namely from: a non-religious

position to a religious position of some kind or vice versa; a re-vitalised religious

faith within a particular religious tradition (passive to active participation, nominal to

'real' belief); a movement from one denomination to another within one major

religious tradition; a movement to or from fringe movements within a religious

tradition; a movement to new religious movements/spiritualities outside of traditional

religious groups; or it may be a movement from one religious tradition to another. It

may also refer to the merging of various religious positions, between the old and

new, within a religious tradition or between religious traditions (cf. Rambo in

1981a).

It is helpful to distinguish between the two terms, religious switching and religious

conversion. Religious switching may be said to refer to any form of movement

(switching) or religious change within the continuum of religious change (Sherkat

and Wilson, 1995) but it can also refer to change that involves a turning away from

or leaving one religious position to another (or to a non-religious position),

apostasies (leaving or rejection of a religious position) of one kind or another

(Rambo, 1993). Religious switching is hence a flexible term describing any form of

religious change, for any kind of reason. The term is useful in that it is very

pragmatic, general, and non-provocative and recognises that over a lifetime people

do not remain in one fixed religious position but often go through several changes or

transitions along the religious continuum (Tamney and Hassan, 1987). In other

words, the kind of religious change which a person indicates they have gone through

is a dynamic process of on-going change/transformation.

While some (Rambo, 1999) consider 'religious conversion' an adequate term to describe all forms of religious change in the same way that 'religious switching' does, others disagree. Snow and Machalek (1984) list a number of different categories of religious change that can be identified while religious conversion refers to one specific kind of change. Nock (1933) talks of a category called 'adhesion' which refers to a person's involvement in the various activities of a religious group without embracing a new way of life, something akin to a kind of nominal religious position. The concept of 'regeneration' (Clark, 1929, Nock, 1933, Lang and Lang, 1961) apparently can be described as a whole-hearted return to the belief system that one grew up with but had rejected or turned away from at some time. Travisano (1970), and later Pilarzyk (1978), offer 'alternation' as a category of religious change through which a person can go, being one that is less radical and more transitional in nature. The change does not alter a person's present world view in a significant way and is indeed, reversible. For Travisano (1970), conversion is nothing less than a complete break with past religious affiliation, and all other kinds of religious change are forms of alternation.

Gordon (1974) has suggested 'consolidation' as a different kind of religious change. Consolidation occurs when a person incorporates the ideas or identity of two previous world views and synthesises them into a hybrid third kind. The 'metamorphic' change that Snow and Machalek (1984) mention describes the dramatic conversion experiences of people epitomised by the conversion experience of the Apostle Paul as described in the New Testament (The Book of Acts, chapters

8-9). This seems to be closer to the kind of 'radical personal change' description about which much conversion literature seems to speak.

Is conversion something that happens on a single occasion, at a point in time, or a process that proceeds at different speeds and in different encounters over time? While it may be true that, for some, a life-changing encounter or spiritual experience occurs as a trigger towards conversion, this is not always true for others. What does seem to hold true is that religious conversion is a process of religious change over time (Rambo, 1999, Snow and Machalek, 1984), that may or may not involve one or more pivotal spiritual encounters, but which does result in life transformation, a transformation that involves significant changes in behaviour, beliefs, values, identities, and as often as not, communities.

For the purpose of this research it is suggested that, while religious conversion includes changes in the above mentioned areas, it primarily involves a radical change in religious/spiritual allegiance – the source of religious/spiritual authority - be it sacred scripture, deity or human religious/spiritual leadership (cf. Lang and Lang, 1961, Strauss, 1959, Travisano, 1970). The result of this radical change in religious/spiritual allegiance will ultimately influence changes in all areas of life, to a smaller or larger degree, at least in the meanings and explanations given to them by those converting. Ultimately, conversion affects a person's sense of identity, the explanations of who we are as individuals, our relationships to the world around us – family, community (at all levels), or physical environment, and of course a person's relationship to the metaphysical – the spiritual truths concerning 'God', life beyond death, other spiritual entities. If this thesis takes religious conversion to mean a

radical change in religious allegiance it also suggests that the best examples of religious conversion are seen in the process of change from one religious tradition/community to another[5], such as Christian to Buddhist or Hindu to Muslim (Stark and Finke, 2000). Changes within religious traditions/communities, while they may involve some changes in allegiance to human religious authority, are often not as radical in their source of religious authority as they are in their interpretations or understanding of that source. For the purpose of this dissertation, this form of religious change is not considered 'religious conversion' but would concur with Stark and Finke, who prefer to call this 're-affiliation' (2000:114).

Although conversion inevitably touches on beliefs, values, behaviours, interpersonal loyalties, and identities, it does not necessarily mean or require a radical break in all of these areas, nor that they occur all at one time in the same way. What often occurs in conversion is that, in at least a few, if not many, of these areas, there is a degree of overlap and even similarity between the former religious position and the one now held by a person who has gone through 'religious conversion'. What has changed may not be the particular value, ritual, or behaviour itself, but the meaning given to it, or the premise that upholds it. For instance, the value of a strong family may now be considered a Biblical value rather than a Quranic value. The locus of meaning may have changed but the value is still upheld. A person's actions can change to the degree that a previously held behaviour is seen at odds with the new religious position (on the continuum) – the food we eat, the way we eat it, the clothes we can

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[5] The author recognises that this definition is not strictly held by all of those referred to in the literature review where the term is often used to identify radical religious transformation across the broad spectrum of religious identities – from within a religious tradition as well as between religious traditions. Nevertheless, when the author uses this term, it is intended to be understood with the above meaning.

or cannot wear, the rituals that we can or cannot now practise. It becomes more complicated when family, cultural, religious and ethnic domains are intertwined. This is clearly evident when religious conversion takes place in the context of a cross-cultural and cross-religious tradition. Indeed, what conversion means, in the initial or later process of conversion, may variously differ, what Travisano (1970) calls 'the eye of the beholder', for the convert, the converting community, the community from which the convert is converting, and the outside observer such as the sociologist, who is looking on analytically (Taylor, 1999).

What kind or how much change needs to have taken place to constitute religious 'conversion'? Heirich (1977:673) speaks of conversion as a 'change in a sense of root reality...a conscious shift in one's sense of "ultimate grounding"...one that provides a clear basis for understanding reality, that provides meaning and orientation for one's situation and acting in relation to it.' He suggests that any new perspective embraced by a convert should explain the issues they are addressing in a more satisfactory way than that perspective which was held previously. Kenneth Jones (1977, 1978) introduced the idea that religious conversion was a kind of 'paradigm shift' in the way a person views and constructs the world around them (cf. Kuhn, 1962 (1996)). Both these definitions of conversion imply a change in thinking and in a sense of ultimate meaning – a change of religious outlook that inevitably changes a convert's view on other non-overtly religious areas of their lives. This present thesis takes the position that shifts in thinking and in a sense of ultimate meaning takes place when a person commits their allegiance to a different source of religious authority. While this may be, as Heirich says, a 'conscious shift', a rational calculation of change, I also argue that there may be unconscious shifts that take

place as a convert socialises, embraces, and subjectively feels their way through their conversion and the circumstances in life that comes their way.

There are limitations in these definitions of conversion and questions remain regarding where conversion starts and finishes within the varieties of change expressed in the above definitions, and also how much change is needed to have taken place to be accepted as 'true' conversion. Snow and Machalek (1984) comment that it if personal transformation is a key element of conversion, then the key changes that have taken place should be able to be identified. While a number of examples are given – beliefs and values, behaviour and identity, interpersonal loyalties – Snow and Machalek (1983a, 1984) suggest it is the 'universe of discourse' as that which fundamentally changes. Utilising ideas first described by George Herbert Mead (1962), they comment,

> '[T]o the extent that conversion is viewed as a radical change, we propose that it is the *universe of discourse* which changes. As "a system of common or social meanings," a universe of discourse provides a broad interpretive framework in terms of which people live and organize experience...[conversion is best conceptualized as the process by which a new or formerly peripheral universe of discourse comes to inform all aspects of a person's life [as a primary authority]'   (original author's italics, 1983a:265).

Conversion, therefore, for Snow and Machalek, is not about life changes (beliefs, values, behaviour or identity) but changes in the way a convert *talks* about conversion. The difficulty with the position of Snow and Machalek (1983a, 1984) is that while a convert's 'universe of discourse' most definitely changes, and provides

much worthwhile data for analysis, it limits conversion to simply a change of words. Words, the communication device by which conversion and the convert's life experiences are expressed, are tools for expressing meaning, and that meaning, in this case the expression of religious change, is real for the convert. For an outside observer to deny the validity of a person's perceived sense of change, or to restrict that change to simply the way they talk, can be a form of arrogance. In the former case it is the observer who imposes meaning, not the observed (Coleman, 1990). This is not to deny the validity of analysing the conversion discourse as a valuable means of understanding or, as Snow and Machalek (1983a) claim, of identifying the convert, but it is an argument that affirms the use of the narrative as a means of understanding the transformation and explanation, the meaning, that is vital for the convert themselves.

2.1.2 Processes, types and stages of conversion

A major focus of sociological research on religious conversion, especially since the 1960s, has been a focus on the processes and stages involved in conversion (Lofland and Stark, 1965, Lofland and Skonovd, 1981b, Lofland and Skonovd, 1981a, Rambo, 1999, Snow and Machalek, 1984). Lofland and Stark's ground-breaking sociological work on religious conversion, 'Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective' (1965), has become a forerunner for an increasing body of empirical research and theory on religious conversion. Through their research on the Divine Precepts (the Unification Church) new religious movement in the 1960s, Lofland and Stark attempted to better comprehend how religious conversion could be conceptualised. Specifically, they sought to delineate the causes and processes

involved in conversion. Assuming the necessity of directly studying a nascent movement, they observed first-hand the development of this group. On the basis of their observations, Lofland and Stark analysed what they called 'Predisposing conditions' and 'Situational contingencies'. The former looked at the characteristics of individuals before they came into contact with a religious group, and the latter looked at factors that would lead to successful recruitment into a religious group. As one of the most prominent articles dealing with conversion it is appropriate to briefly outline their findings.

Lofland and Stark (1965) developed a model of conversion that included seven stages. The first three stages were the 'predisposing conditions': 1. Tension (personal crisis); 2. A problem-solving perspective that was religious; and 3. Seekership (an action on the part of a person to seek religious answers); 4. Turning points (significant personal events that caused openness for change); 5. Cult affective bonds (development of relationship with member/s of a religious group); 6. Extra-cult affective bonds (relationships outside the religious group that influence them are either indifferent or are 'neutralised'); and 7. Intensive interaction (the need for extensive involvement and participation in the religious group's ideas, activities and relationships). The strength of their model lay in the fact that it was not merely based on theoretical propositions, but on a longitudinal in-depth study of a religious movement, from its earliest stages to initial growth. Lofland and Stark saw first-hand the interactions that took place before and after conversion and consequently were in a position to witness the events and changes as they occurred. A weakness of this model was that it represented one particular group in one particular context. It raises some problems when trying to draw out general principles for all conversion

movements.

Another significant example of the causal or process approach was Lewis R. Rambo (1999) who provided a detailed description of the phenomenon of conversion by offering a model for understanding conversion that incorporated seven stages: context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, committing, and consequences. Rambo suggests that, though this is a sequential model, converts in actual fact, move backward and forward between the different stages emphasising the process aspect of the conversion experience. While a helpful tool[6], it has been suggested that there are difficulties in generalising this model as patterns seem to be different from one group to another, and perhaps from one culture to another (Snow and Machalek, 1984).

Motifs are helpful as they allow for the possibility of different kinds of conversions and they also help categorise different kinds of conversions that can be identified as characteristic of particular movements, in cultural or time-situated contexts. One of the most well-known approaches to conversion has been that of Lofland and Skonovd's (1981b) who developed the idea that there were several major 'types' of conversions and suggested that key motifs could be located across various kinds of conversions. They identified six major 'motifs' and five variations (which they formulated as a matrix). They called the motifs: 1. Intellectual, 2. Mystical, 3. Experimental, 4. Affectional, 5. Revivalist, 6. Coercive; and the variations: 1. Degree of Social Pressure, 2. Temporal Duration, 3. Level of Affective Arousal, 4. Affective Content, 5. Belief-Participation Sequence. While it does not focus on steps or processes for each type of conversion, Lofland and Skonovd (1981b) suggest that

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[6] See, for example, Zebiri's (2008) work on British Muslim converts.

this model allows the researcher to better understand the phenomenon of conversion. They indicate that these motifs might differ from one historical time to another and across various societal and cultural contexts. What Lofland and Skonovd's approach lacks, however, which they readily admit, is the detail behind the conversion that is taking place - the what, why, and how questions that seek to identify the mechanisms and processes involved in conversion.

2.2. Structural approaches

2.2.1 Demographic characteristics and structural availability

This thesis will endeavour to identify some of the socio-demographic characteristics of Kyrgyz Christians as both a way of gaining information about the kinds of Kyrgyz who are becoming Christians but also as a way of comparing them with the general population. Research into the phenomenon of New Religious Movements has identified a number of characteristics of those people who are joining these religious movements (Barker, 1983, Bromley and Shupe, 1979, Gallup, 1978, Hadaway and Roof, 1979, Roof and Hadaway, 1979, Sherkat, 1991, Tamney and Conran, 1980, Tamney and Hassan, 1987, Wuthnow, 1978). Tamney and Hassan (1987:180-182) have grouped some of these characteristics as 'indicators of opportunity' - such as being young (usually in the 20s), never married, mobile, relatively friendless, and from stable and middle class backgrounds. Other characteristics are referred to as 'indicators of exposure' - such as higher levels of education and residence in urban areas. These results show that converts to New Religious Movements were not the 'marginal, alienated, and materially dispossessed population' that many think would join new religions (Snow and Machalek, 1984:181-182).

Research into the early growth of Christianity as a religious movement or cult (Stark, 1986) indicate that this was historically true of people who joined religious movements, as well as the more recent phenomenon here described as NRMs. These findings challenge stereotypical or preconceived ideas about the kinds of people who choose to convert to NRMs, and indeed, to any religious tradition. These 'indicators' do not imply that people with these characteristics *will* join a religious group, but rather that they are structurally more in a position to be receptive to do so. It was these kinds of people who had greater potential to be discontent with conventional faith, more prepared to consider new ideas, and the first to risk religious innovation.

2.2.2. Stratification and status

Other research has looked at the correlation between religious identity and social stratification (Clarke, 2003, Newport, 1979, Oddie, 1977, Robinson, 2003c, Tamney and Hassan, 1987, Wohlrab-Sahr, 2005a). This perspective suggests that different religions are linked with different social strata. Structural approaches to religious conversion in locations such as India show that no one model explains all. In the west of India significant numbers of the privileged high caste Brahmin community converted to Catholicism as a means of maintaining status and privilege (Robinson, 2003d). In other places, however, such as Tamil Nadu, in the south, large numbers of low caste, underprivileged *Dalits* converted to Islam in order to break free from social, economic, and religious constraints that they felt imposed by Hinduism (Clarke, 2003, Oddie, 1977). While structural factors were issues in the conversion discourse, they were not uniformly the same, although in both cases, those people involved in religious change appeared to see the religious change for the purpose of

either maintaining good social position, or moving toward a position that would bring better economic or social opportunities (Tamney and Hassan, 1987).

In the U.S., the Episcopal Church is viewed as a high status denomination while the Baptist Church is deemed as a low status denomination. In this light, when a person changes social status they would also be expected to change religious affiliation (Newport, 1979). Newport's (1979) research suggest that the social status argument is more likely to hold true where the ideological differences between the religious groups involved are relatively small, such as the Episcopal and Baptist Protestant denominations. Newport indicates that this is less likely to hold true where the ideological differences are greater, such as between major religious traditions, although the situation in India, described above, would challenge this proposition.

In comparative research undertaken in Germany and the United States, which explores religious conversion to Islam, Wohlrab-Sahr (2005a) found that one salient factor in the conversion process was the failure of respondents to achieve successful upward mobility. In some cases, while religious conversion may be seen to be conducive as a means to move up the social ladder, or recognises someone's higher social status, it can also become a means to find fulfilment or inward stability when a person fails in that attempt at upward mobility.

2.2.3 Religious intermarriage

Religious intermarriage is another factor involved in religious conversion especially where individuals marry outside of the religion they grew up with (Barro et al., 2010,

Iannaccone, 1990, Loveland, 2003, Musick and Wilson, 1995, Perry, 2008, Sherkat, 2004). The research has mixed findings. In Singapore, Hassan and Tamney (1987) found a strong correlation between religious intermarriage and religious switching [conversion], but found that differences existed between religious communities. The correlation was stronger when it involved ethnic Chinese, but was not as strong when it involved Malays, Pakistanis and Indians. Their conclusion was that among the Chinese '...no religion is part of their ethnic identity and therefore, it is not very important to Chinese parents that their children share their religious experience' (1987:41). However, among Malays, Pakistanis and Indians, religion (Islam for the Malays and Pakistanis, and Hinduism for the Indians) plays an integral part in their ethnic and national identity. As a consequence, the costs of switching religions are high and result in fewer cases of it occurring.

In an example of conversion to Islam in Germany, Wohlrab-Sahr (2005a) indicated that though religious intermarriage was a factor in the conversion, the role that intermarriage played in the conversion was not consistently strong, hence other issues needed to be taken into account as well. This was highlighted by the fact that in some cases conversion took place before marriage. Wohlrab-Sahr suggests that issues of sexuality and gender relations reflect a type of conversion to Islam and that this represents one of the 'other' issues involved in the conversion process. Islam, for the convert, becomes a means, a solution, to re-order their life and place new value on personal identity, in this case their place and understanding of what it means to be a woman, and their relationships with others. There is a lack in the literature regarding the female perspective in conversion (Rambo, 1982) and Wohlrab-Sahr's work is a welcome addition.

While there appears to be little research from the female converts perspective, conversion research does clearly show that females tend to be more religious than men, have stronger personal religious commitment and attend religious places of worship more frequently and that this remains true throughout the life course no matter what kind of religious organisation or belief system[7] (Bainbridge, 1992, Köse, 1996, Miller and Hoffman, 1995, Sherkat and Ellison, 1999, Stark, 1997).

Demographic/structural approaches are helpful in providing background information to the community that is being studied - the 'who' that we are researching - and may indicate trends in particular movements. It has been helpful, for instance, to debunk stereotypes or characterisations of people joining religious groups that are considered 'deviant' or beyond the accepted or normal way in society. Whether these are people who join 'cult-like' groups or religious fundamentalist or extremist groups, or religious groups that are very different from that which a person grew up with and are familiar with. One example is that, contrary to common thinking, those persons who are involved in some of the radical Muslim fundamentalist groups are not so much the uneducated, rural poor who have nothing to lose and unable to understand what they are doing, but are from well educated, often middle-class, urban communities (Gambetta and Hertog, 2007).

Without widespread comparative analysis of conversion movements it is difficult to come up with clear propositions with reference to the dynamics of conversion in these movements, be it economic, gender, age, status etc, beyond some broad generalisations. While the young, urban and more educated seem more available for

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[7] E.g. Cult, sect, or church affiliation; belief in astrology, magic, spirits etc.

conversion it does not tell us why some of these potential candidates engage in the conversion process and some do not. Neither does this mean that individuals from this background will inevitably join such groups. Many who are young, educated and urban do not convert. Hassan (2009) makes a persuasive argument, in an Australian context, that it is often the young and educated which find themselves disillusioned through structural anomie – socio/structural tensions that put them in a 'vulnerable' position to consider radical religious options as viable alternatives to their current sense of structural disenchantment. But it need not be so. As Wohlrab-Sahr (2005b) outlined, most German women in Germany do not become Muslims. We need, therefore, to consider other factors in the conversion process. Knowing the demographic/structural make-up of the respondents we are studying helps us to look for other social processes/societal factors that may be present for that particular group. But the information itself does not help us understand why and how people make conversion choices. For that we need to look to other social processes.

2.2.4 Deprivation theory versus social networks

The role of social networks has increasingly become a focus in conversion research (Bainbridge, 1978, Balch and Taylor, 1977, Gerlach and Hine, 1968, Heirich, 1977, Knox et al., 1991, Lofland and Stark, 1965, Richardson and Stewart, 1978b, Rochford, 1982, Snow et al., 1980b, Snow et al., 1983b). This has occurred partly in response to an over emphasis on deprivation or strain theories as explanatory models for conversion. Deprivation or strain theory holds that those people most likely to join cults and sects, or other deviant religious groups, were likely to be people who suffered some kind of deprivation or, in the words of some scholars, those set 'adrift

in a Durkheimian sea of anomie' (Stark and Bainbridge, 1980:1378). This view indicates that by studying the particular ideological premises espoused by particular religious groups we will be able to identify the deprivation needs of the people recruited. It also suggests if we are able to understand a person's psychological and social profile (their deprivation needs) then one will be able to identify which people are most likely to convert (Bainbridge, 1992, Richardson, 1985a, Stark and Finke, 2000). Studies have shown that relative deprivation has a role in conversion but as Bainbridge points out that 'there is no tendency for religious persons in particular to be more deprived than the irreligious members of society, and some evidence exists that church members are actually better off than the average' (Bainbridge, 1992:181). Something more is needed if we are to explain why some individuals are more likely to convert or switch religious affiliation.

Social network theory, on the other hand, posits that conversion, and the subsequent joining of a new religious group, can be understood as occurring as a consequence of processes of relational interaction within networks of interpersonal attachments (Lofland and Stark, 1965, Snow et al., 1980b, Stark and Bainbridge, 1980). Stark and Finke state that over three decades of research conducted in a wide variety of religious and geographical contexts substantiates the claim that 'attachments lie at the heart of conversion, and that conversion therefore tends to proceed along social networks formed by interpersonal attachments' (2000:118). While social network theory does not dismiss either the role that a person's sense of need/deprivation has in the conversion process, or the role of cognitive or ideological considerations, it does suggest that without the necessary impact of inter-personal relationships conversion is unlikely to take place (Snow et al., 1983b).

These studies also indicate that the majority of people who join a new movement do so through relationships with known and trusted people, what Richardson and Stewart refer to as 'affectionate ties' (1978b:38), be it family, friends, or other social networks. Most do not join religious movements through meeting with strangers, or people not known to them. This is not to say that people are not influenced by nor do not convert through non-personal means (e.g. media, literature) or through people not personally known to the 'convert' (for example through public witnessing of one kind or another) but that most do not convert primarily as a result of these factors.

Much of the focus of the social network literature has been viewed through the lens of recruitment. It sees social networks as a means by which people are recruited into and maintain commitment to a religious group/organisation. The role of 'interpersonal bonds or attachments' or 'affectionate ties' is a necessary element not just evident in the initial contact with a prospective convert but in the follow-up and commitment process. Stark and Finke (2000) explain that the rates of deviance, the choice towards an act that violates what is considered normal or legitimate in society (such as joining a new religious group considered a cult or sect), is much higher for those who do not have considerable personal attachments. Accordingly, social network theory suggests that while ideological considerations are present, maybe even attractive, it is largely because of a person's close relational ties to the group, and conversely, the weakness of their relational ties outside of the group, that a person becomes interested in and/or embraces a new faith. Put simply 'faith [conversion] constitutes conformity to the religious outlook of one's intimates' (Stark and Bainbridge, 1980) and '…coming to accept the opinions of one's friends' (Lofland and Stark, 1965). Social network theory certainly adds much needed insight

into our understanding of religious conversion. But it still has limitations. It stresses the importance of strong relationship connections but not all people follow the choices that their close friends/family members have made.

Studies cited above have indicated the role of social networks in the conversion process to New Religious Movements. But these were largely undertaken in western nations which place a high value on individuality and freedom of personal choice (*gesellschaft*) and where it may be assumed that conversion through social networks may not be so prominent. Since social networks play such a significant role in western contexts one would assume that in non-western contexts where the value on family and community is much higher there would be a stronger case for the role and importance of social networks in any conversion movement. It is clear that any serious study of religious conversion needs to consider the impact of social networks in any explanatory model offered. Further, in societies which are group-oriented, as in many non-western contexts, there is a greater emphasis on group decision making (*gemeinshaft*). While in most western societies it is to be expected that individuals will make individual choices apart from group involvement, it is less likely to occur in group-oriented societies where decisions are usually made in conformity with group consensus (Kraft, 1992).

Social influences are not limited to social networks. Conformity to a group's values, behaviour and outlook, especially, but not limited to, group-oriented societies, no less de-legitimises or discredits the 'apparent' changes that have taken or are taking place in individual lives. Some scholars have considered the place of role theory in explaining conversion (Balch, 1980, Bromley and Shupe, 1979, Snow and Machalek,

1984). Balch (1980), who undertook participant observation research among a UFO cult, concluded that the rapid personality changes that members apparently underwent were not conversions (where inner transformation of consciousness takes place) at all but rather changes in outward behaviour occurring as result of rapid role learning. Moving beyond an approach that assigns a prominent place to predisposing personality traits, Bromley and Shupe (1979) consider how individuals bring self-transformation – both cognitive and behavioural - through a more expansive interpretation of role learning. Change occurs as individuals learn and live out roles in a process of socialisation. While Balch (1980) concludes that only outward changes (behaviour) have taken place in the lives of the group he studied, it does not necessarily hold that this would be true of other groups or contexts. What one does daily or on a regular basis, if and when it is done with those a person has a meaningful relationship/s with, eventually becomes something familiar, 'normal', natural and real or meaningful for the person/s concerned.

2.3 The religious convert

In the end religious conversion is about individuals in society making religious choices. Studies have increasingly come to focus the religious converts themselves (Lofland, 1978, Richardson, 1980, 1985a, Snow and Machalek, 1983a, Stark and Finke, 2000, Straus, 1976, Taylor, 1976, 1978). The literature can be divided into three sections. The first section looks at the convert as an agent of change. The second section considers the importance of studying conversion narratives – how converts talk about their conversion experiences. The third section focuses on how converts make religious (converting) choices.

2.3.1. Converts as agents of change

Some years after his seminal article on conversion with Stark (1965) Lofland (1978) returned to his earlier work and expressed concern about its tendency to see the convert as a passive figure in the conversion process. In doing so he sought to include a much more active agent, one who not merely suffers at the hands of external pressures but who actively participates in the change process. There was a dearth of literature that considered this approach but in the late 1970's and early 1980's this began to change. Sociologists, such as Taylor, were concerned with this absence as 'a lack of *sociological* nerve' (1976:8) and recommended it was time to look at ways in which the convert themselves views their experience of conversion as an active participant. Richardson (1980, 1985a) took this idea further when he suggested that not only can people follow 'conversion careers' (conversion as a vocation of sorts), but that a new paradigm was developing in sociology, a paradigm that recognises an 'active' convert who is seeking religious change. This paradigm increasingly replaced an earlier paradigm suggesting that the convert is 'passive' and at the mercy of deterministic forces - be it secularisation, deprivations, psychological, social or even biological.

Straus succinctly defines the new 'seeker-active convert' paradigm approach:

> ...[it is about] the individual *seeker* striving and strategizing to achieve quantum change to his or her life experience, and which treats the groups and others involved in this process as salesmen, shills, coaches, guides and helpers...(Straus, 1979:158)

While it is unclear what percentage of converts fall into this 'religious seeker' category, it is clear that any attempt at understanding religious conversion as a phenomenon must take the convert seriously as a dynamic element in the process, not simply a bystander who simply watches and/or waits to be manipulated by other forces or as a passive receptacle.

2.3.2. The conversion narrative

As a consequence of this increasing emphasis on the active role of the convert one of the more recent developments in sociological research into conversion has been that of the 'conversion narrative', how a person talks about their conversion (Beckford, 1978, Harding, 1987, Snow and Machalek, 1983a, Taylor, 1978, van der Veer, 1996b) . This approach is both a critique of predominant sociological practices related to conversion research as well as a recommendation for further research. One sociologist, Brian Taylor, suggests that a ethnomethodological approach that considers how individuals fulfil daily '...activities in particular social situations [and] whose reality is known to them only from within such situations through the use of language interaction encounters' (1976:20) is a helpful way to research the conversion phenomenon. In fact, he does not stop there. Taylor further claims that any data collected from converted individuals (for example details regarding the social or cultural context, the setting, the convert's experience before or causal explanation of conversion) is not information that helps us understand anything about the convert's *pre*-conversion situation, be it circumstance or identity, but *only* their *post*-conversion context. What is necessary, therefore, indeed, the only reliable source of data for the sociologist, is to analyse how a convert 're-members' or talks

about their conversion and the way they account for it as a 'social construction [in the present] of the past' (Taylor, 1978).

Beckford (1978) takes this position in his own research on the Jehovah's Witness movement. He finds that 'actors' self-reported accounts of religious conversion cannot be taken as objective and unproblematic reports on experience' and that, rather than being a useful source of information about what happened to converts, it is the way converts talk about conversion that becomes a valuable focus of study. The meaning brought to bear on these conversion accounts is situated in the social environment in which it takes place. This approach acknowledges that the speech used by the convert is not really an objective expression of what actually happened but rather the means by which the convert uses external resources to construct a 'correct' view of reality. In Beckford's case, the controlling factor influencing the telling of conversion stories was the ideology of the Jehovah's Witnesses which enabled its members to produce uniformity/conformity in conversion accounts. In other words what you hear from individual Witness accounts is what the organisation wants you to hear about their story, not what actually happened. Their conversion stories become what Beckford refers to as 'artfully accomplished constructions'. In addition, the conversion narrative becomes a useful tool to understand the ideological discourse of the religious group under consideration.

Van der Veer (1996b) makes the point that an analysis of conversion discourse in various historical and ethnographic contexts enables us to explore more deeply conceptual issues related to a fuller understanding of conversion. An example of this is found in Harding's (1987) analysis of the way fundamental Baptist's talk about

conversion[8]. She argued that conversion talk, for Baptists, is both a means of self transformation and a means of bringing about self-transformation in the hearers. It is not only what makes up the conversion narrative as a subject of discourse analysis, it is the very act of communicating that discourse, yet still connected to its content, that brings transformation.

> '[F]undamental Baptist witnessing is not just a monologue that constitutes its speaker as a culturally specific person; it is also a dialogue that reconstitutes its listeners... Listening to the gospel enables you to experience belief, belief that indisputably transfigures you and your reality, belief that becomes you, comes only through speech. Among fundamental Baptists, speaking is believing' (Harding, 1987:167, 179).

Taking their cue from this ethnomethodological approach, Snow and Machalek (1983a, 1984), based on their research into the Nichiren Shoshu new religious movement, have suggested that a key aspect of the conversion narrative is that 'the talking' itself becomes a location marker by which we are able to identify which member of a religious group can properly be labelled 'a convert'. In other words it answers the question: Who is a convert? Building on the idea that conversion involves radical change Snow and Machalek argue that it primarily involves a change in the 'universe of discourse' (cf. Mead, 1962, Taylor, 1976, 1978). One universe of discourse - the verbal communication of a 'system of common social meanings' shaped by its accompanying grammar or rules for putting things together - is replaced with another, or where a particular universe of discourse moves from a

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[8] In this case Harding considers 'conversion' as an appropriate label for what I earlier called re-affiliation - see page 6.

peripheral place to one that takes precedence over others. They argue that if a change in consciousness has taken place (beliefs, values – word view) it will be reflected in a change in a person's universe of discourse which, ultimately, will be seen in changes located in the language a person uses.

Snow and Machalek (1983a, 1984) hold that there are four essential elements or 'rhetorical indicators' in the talking and reasoning of a person by which a person can be identified as a convert: biographical reconstruction, adoption of a master attrition scheme, suspension of analogical reasoning, and embracement of a master role. *Biographical reconstruction*, in line with Taylor (1976, 1978) and Beckford's (1978) comments above, refers to the process by which the convert's past is deconstructed (unwanted parts removed) and reconstructed (reinterpreted and reconstituted) according to the new constraining universe of discourse or 'enlightened present' (i.e. according to the new religions ideology). This aspect of the conversion narrative is elsewhere acknowledged by a number of different scholars (Berger and Lukhmann, 1967, Gordon, 1974, Jones, 1978, Stark and Finke, 2000, Travisano, 1970). Biographical reconstruction is not limited to conversion narratives alone, but, according to Snow and Machalek, it is 'greatly amplified and intensified' in the convert (1984:177). The second indicator, *adoption of a master attrition scheme*, simply implies that converts tend to apply one major 'casual scheme or vocabulary of motives' (Snow and Machalek, 1983a:270) to explain all causal rationale – about self, others, and situations that occur in the world.

The third indicator, *a suspension of analogical reasoning*, suggests that a convert will refrain from using analogic metaphors when describing various aspects of their

new faith. Analogical metaphors are metaphors that compare one thing to another as being 'like' or 'similar'. According to this indicator converts are averse to comparing their 'true faith' with anyone/thing else, as if in some way they were equally true. They will, however, use iconic metaphors in their narratives, that is, metaphors that highlight the uniqueness of their religious group/world view to show its superiority over others. The fourth indicator, *embracement of the convert role*, implies that a convert sees their new status as a convert (be it membership or belief) as central and informing all aspects of their lives and situations that they face. All other roles (family role, work role etc) are subordinate to their new role as a convert. It is not simply about self-gain, but about how their lives count for the cause or mission of their new religious faith/group. It is usually manifested in their inability to prevent themselves from 'announcing their identity (new faith/convert membership)' in virtually every place they go and every conversation that they engage in.

An analysis of language is worthwhile in adding knowledge and understanding concerning conversion, nevertheless, the issue here is whether the interpretations of those observations about rhetorical usage means what the authors indicate. Snow and Machalek (1983a, 1984) have certainly advanced our understanding of conversion through their analysis of the talking and reasoning of people who recently joined a new religious group. However, if 'biographical reconstruction' is one indicator of identifying a person as a convert, although this phenomenon is not limited to converts, then this raises a question: how much biographical reconstruction needs to have taken place for this to prove or distinguish their convert status as opposed to other kinds of religious status?

On what basis could we make the same conclusion regarding the other indicators? The authors do not make this clear. Is it possible that there are those who consider themselves a convert, but who do not show these rhetorical indicators? Recognising that conversion is a very subjective experience who then is authoritative to say who is a convert and who is not - the outside observer (researcher), the person who claims to have converted or those to whom the person has converted to?

Staples and Mauss (1987), who specifically sought to apply these rhetorical indicators to a group of young Christians, concluded that most of these indicators were evident in Christians with a wide range of religious commitment – from new converts to those who had been 'life-long' Christians. One indicator however, was only present in new Christians – biographical reconstruction. Staples and Mauss (1987), while agreeing with Snow and Machalek (1983a, 1984) that biographical reconstruction is an important factor in conversion, and hence the convert, differ in the interpretation of the role that biographical reconstruction plays. Their research suggests that biographical reconstructions are not reflections of essential changes in consciousness, as Snow and Machalek (1983a, 1984) indicate, but rather are *tools* used by individuals to bring about self transformation. Conversion is therefore, for Staples and Mauss (1987), not so much something that happens to people but rather a process in which a person actively joins in to bring about change – to create a 'new real self' (see Harding, 1987 above), and these tools of language and reasoning are a means to achieve this.

This thesis also holds the position that the 'tools' for self transformation, as Staples and Mauss (1987) call it, can partly be located in the language and reasoning of the

convert (see also Stromberg, 1990, 1991, 1993). Indeed, this thesis considers this in relation to the way Kyrgyz converts to Protestant Christianity find meaning and construct new identities in their narratives, while finding continuity with the old. However, these tools can be found in other places as well. These tools are the mechanisms, be they internal (language and reasoning) or the external factors (structural or human or cultural, or in the thinking of the convert (the transcendental, metaphysical or spiritual) that people utilise or manipulate in order to bring about transformation of self or of their environment (social, cultural, political, economic) in the context of religious conversion. I also take it that these processes of transformation are both conscious and unconscious. They take place as an overt/deliberate attempt at change but also take place naturally in the midst of processes of socialisation.

So who then is a convert? For the purpose of this research, it is hard to go beyond the conclusion of Staples and Mauss that 'the subject, and only the subject, is qualified to tell us who he or she *really* is' (1987:138). Our beginning point is who the convert tells us that they are (Rambo, 1993). We then are in a position to investigate processes, indicators, characteristics and types in the conversion process. Indeed, when can we decree that a person has 'converted', in the sense that conversion is complete or when does personal transformation come to an end? A convert is a person who indicates that they have made a change from one religious or non-religious position to new religious position, and in which he/she continues, or learns, what that means with its resulting consequences (on a conversion 'journey' as it were). Social scientists are not in a position to judge spiritual changes or causes, our focus is on locating and understanding social and human agency. One needs a

beginning point and this thesis holds that this can be located when a person indicates that they are a convert or are seen to be in the process of converting.

There is no doubt concerning the reality of biographical reconstruction in conversion narratives and that an unreserved and uncritical acceptance of all the information presented as factually correct (i.e. it really happened that way) is problematic. At least three major objections are presented (Snow and Machalek, 1984). Firstly, that convert's accounts appear to be constructed according to the way specific religious groups define how particular experiences should be interpreted and communicated as shown by Beckford's (1978) study on the presentation of conversion stories among Jehovah's Witnesses (for other examples see Preston, 1981, Snow, 1976). Secondly, convert's accounts vary temporally so that during the course of time that one is considered a convert a person is likely to change, reconstruct or re-interpret their conversion experience more than once. The third objection is that conversion accounts are given retrospectively as social constructs, created after a passage of time has taken place. Where time has elapsed there is always the potential that one's recollection of information of what actually took place becomes faulty.

Snow and Machalek (1984, cf. Taylor, 1976, 1978) make two claims in their presentation about what information can be usefully used in conversion narratives. At one point they say that it is misguided empirically and theoretically to locate 'causal explanations' (regarding motives and intentions) from the recounted experience of the convert and then later clearly imply, as already mentioned, that *any* information about the past given in a narrative can only be understood as information about the convert's present experience and orientation. These arguments have been

challenged by those researchers utilising traditional sociological approaches.

Bruce and Wallis (1983, Wallis and Bruce, 1983) argue for the validity of utilising actor's accounts as legitimate sociological practice. This is not to say that structural (economic factors as primary casual reasons), functional (explanations found in the sphere of social structure and institutions) or ethnomethodological viewpoints are not taken into account, or that the actor's viewpoint is, uncritically, the correct one. Rather, it is crucial that sociological explanations for social phenomenon, which by nature includes religious conversion, *also* seriously take into account the view points of the actors including the beliefs and motives/intentions that the actors ascribe to themselves and their actions.

Wallis and Bruce (1983:102) argue that the connection between what the sociologist hopes to explain and the actor's version of it is *hypothetical*. It is a proposed explanation that requires validity. Either point of view should not be discarded out of hand unless the accessible evidence clearly indicates that there is a significant discrepancy. In those situations where there seems to be strong evidence linking macro-sociological factors as causal factors in change, the *meaning* associated with these changes and *how* these changes are made must lie in what Wallis and Bruce (1983) call the 'action story' (the actor's accounts) of those involved in the process. In this regard one difficulty with the ethnomethodological approach is that it *a priori* makes assumptions that imputes motives behind what and why actors say what they say (the the verbal accounts of their story), and so discredits the actor (in this case the religious convert) of any validity or explanatory reality in the events or experiences of their own lives. Wallis and Bruce conclude:

Explaining social action therefore entails understanding individual motivation and belief, and thus taking actors' meanings, and what they say about them, seriously. Doing that, however, requires constant reference to a social and historical context. No-one will adequately explain social action who does not understand how individuals interpret their world. But no one will understand how individuals interpret their world who is not aware of the social[,cultural] and historical context within which they do it (1983:109).

When approaching the conversion narrative, therefore, one must keep a number of factors in mind. These include an awareness of the social, cultural and historical context (Castells, 2004) in which the conversion narrative, and the convert subject, takes place. It includes an awareness of the problematic nature of the narrative as a discursive tool. It recognises that convert subjects construct their stories with available social resources – language, ideology, culture, memory etc – in order to communicate and give meaning to their subjective experiences. At the same time, the meaning behind action requires, indeed, necessitates a legitimate inclusion of the subject's interpretation of their actions.

2.3.3. Making religious (converting) choices

Another perspective of the religious convert is that of religious choices. How and on what basis do people make religious choices? For the purposes of this thesis, the salient question to ask is: How do people make choices to convert? This thesis argues for the importance of understanding both how (the process) people make religious [converting] choices and the social, cultural and historical contexts in which these choices take place and find meaning. Within the literature there are three broad

approaches to these issues. The traditional approach, which has strong European roots, has tended to view converting decisions as those framed within a culture milieu along structural and socialised frameworks (Bruce, 1993, Chaves, 1995, Demerath III, 1995, Spickard, 1998). A more recent approach, primarily coming out of the United States, has applied economic theories to the sphere of religion. Appropriating rational choice theory (Finke, 2003, Iannaccone, 1991, Iannaccone and Klick, 2003, Stark and Finke, 2000) this approach considers converting choices to be the result of the individual who rationally weighs up the costs and benefits of conversion within a religious market milieu. A third approach affirms value in both the traditional and rational models and seeks to utilise elements from both (Sherkat and Wilson, 1995, Sherkat and Ellison, 1999).

As discussed in the Chapter One of this thesis the discussion seems to be intricately linked with the wider debate on the role and place of secularisation in society. The former holding a more traditional view, highlighting the increased privatisation and weakening of religion in modern society, and the latter, challenging this position. The latter view holds that the demand for religious preferences has been stable over time and that it is the supply of religion that affects its vitality in society. The following is a discussion of the three positions. I will discuss it as the literature does, beginning with the more recent economic approach and following with a critique from the traditional camp and those who propose a third way.

1. The economic approach

The economic approach has been called a 'new paradigm for the sociological study

of religion' (Warner, 1993:1044). It is not simply about how individuals make religious decisions. Iannaccone (1990, 1991, 1992, 1995a, 1995b) has been one of the chief architects of the new model applying rational choice theory to religion. Drawing on the work of Adam Smith (Smith, [1776]1965) and Becker (1976), Iannaccone has developed a unifying model for understanding the religious sphere of society which he refers to as a 'religious economy' or 'religious market'. Within the religious market, Iannaconne utilises Becker's three key principles: the assumptions of maximising behaviour, market equilibrium, and stable preferences. Iannaccone sees the first principle as fundamental to his ideas, 'that people approach all action in the same way, evaluating costs and benefits and acting so as to maximize their benefits' (Iannaccone, 1995a:3). Although Iannaccone applies this to both religious groups or organisations and entire communities or societies, the focus of this thesis is his application to the third area – that of the individual.

In applying economic theory to religious individuals Iannaccone (1990) draws on the concept of ' religious human capital' which refers to the accumulation of religious capital (knowledge and familiarity with rituals, doctrines, behaviour and other co-religionists) in order to produce religious commodities (things of religious value). Iannaccone then uses this to predict a number of religious phenomena, such as the tendency for people to convert at young ages (little developed religious capital); to be more likely to marry within one's own religion (strengthen religious capital) ; to maintain denominational identity over a long period of time (higher risk of losing religious capital); if a person switches religion, he/she will do so to a denomination closer to that which was originally held (similar religious capital); and why women are more likely to engage in religious activity than men (specialisation in performing

religious tasks) (Sherkat and Ellison, 1999).

2. Critique from those who hold to the 'traditional approach'

This approach has been challenged by traditionalists (Bruce, 1993, Chaves, 1995, Demerath 1995, Spickard, 1998) on several grounds. It is argued that the economic approach falls short in successfully explaining religious behaviour and fails to properly take into account the impact of culture. This approach, according to its critics, actually works better in a secularised environment which the theory purports to criticise. Further, the same data used to support the economic approach could be as easily explained by alternative reasons without using economic metaphors. The reasonability of someone's religious beliefs could also be explained as occurring as a result of social interaction with trusted others or that it works to the degree that it satisfactorily answers life's questions for the individual involved. It is also argued that the rational approach does not necessarily resonate with the way the individuals who are being studied understand their own religious experience, and that it is unclear what the 'rational' choice in any situation should be (Bruce, 1993).

The approach of Iannaccone and other rational choice proponents has been criticised as an attempt to make the world [religious behaviour of individuals] fit economic explanations, rather than the reverse, which is seen as the sociological approach, where explanations are sought to fit the world (Demerath 1995). Another critical argument states that this approach '...tells us nothing specifically about religious behaviour, nor actual religious phenomenon, nor predictions about the future state of the religious world, nor what religious choices a single individual will make at a

given time – [it only gives] formal statements' (Chaves, 1995:99). Of course, what is fundamental to the antagonists of the economic approach is that religious behaviour, and therefore religious choices, can only be understood if we are aware of the social and cultural context (the details and meaning) in which it takes place, and without these important details, the rational approach gives nothing more than a broad structure, which by itself, tells us little (elsewhere Innanccone 1995b has responded to this criticism).

3. The third approach – bridging the economic and traditional approaches

However, there is a third approach when looking at the way people make religious choices, and here there has been an attempt to bridge a way between the rational or economic views and the traditional position drawing on key elements from both. Sherkat and Wilson (1995, Sherkat and Ellison, 1999) have been some of the key proponents of this approach. They distinguish between supply-side theorists and demand-side theorists within the rational choice paradigm. While both groups uphold the idea of a religious market, Sherkat and Wilson (1995, Sherkat and Ellison, 1999) identify 'supply-side' theorists as the stricter adherents of the 'new' paradigm, whose approach can be characterised by an emphasis on the restricting and assisting of external factors (e.g. religious monopolies restricting freedom and potential plurality of religious options) related to the collective production of religious value. A basic assumption here is that preferences for religious goods remain stable. Demand-side theorists, which include Sherkat and Wilson (1995, Sherkat and Ellison, 1999) highlight the changing nature of preferences and the influence of social constraints on individual choices. For them, previous religious encounters strengthen the desire

for familiar religious goods, but preferences for particular products can be affected by changes in the external social world. For example 'individuals might learn alternative preferences when novel information is introduced through [trusted] social ties or changing life circumstances such as education, cross-cultural contact, geographic mobility, social movement participation, or social mobility' (Sherkat and Ellison, 1999:380).

Sherkat and Wilson (1995) also highlight three key social factors that they believe had previously been overlooked by rational choice theorists in the way individual religious choices are constructed. Building on the work of others (Sen, 1977) they suggest that people do not simply make decisions to maximise their own utility (personal benefit). Rather there are times when decisions are made in 'sympathy' or 'antipathy' - to please or spite people around them; as 'example –setting' – making choices because we think it will be a good example for others; or as a result of group norms, the collective ability of groups to reward or punish (sanction) the behaviour of those within the group (Ellison, 1995). The latter point is especially poignant in the case of collectivities which have strong ethnic and/or religious identification. In a separate publication Ellison (1995) warns of the danger of removing individual decision making from the social and religious context and argues for an approach which takes both into consideration.

Other questions have been raised concerning the role that rationality plays in relation to religious or spiritual matters. It has been suggested by those favouring the traditional model that religious matters fall outside the purview of rationality (i.e. less subject to calculation and utilitarian logic) because it deals with supernatural

issues that cannot be measured or understood in the same way as other more earthly features of human existence (Ellison, 1995, Iannaccone, 1995a, Wilson, 1999a). In this light Stark and Finke (2000), who have been associated more with the supply-side version of rational choice theory and religion, have utilised an approach to rationality that takes into account utilitarian, subjective and social elements. They move away from a strict rational choice approach to rationality that holds the view that 'humans attempt to maximize – to gain the most at the least cost', and instead speak of 'subjective rationality' that recognises that '...human reasoning is often somewhat unsystematic and "intuitive," and that maximisation is often only partial and somewhat half-hearted (2000:37). People think and feel their way through life's choices, including religious choices or converting choices but given this dynamic, 'Within the limits of their information and understanding, restricted by available options, guided by their preferences and tastes, humans attempt to make rational choices' (2000:38).

Stark and Finke (2000) have made one of the most robust attempts at explaining how people make religious choices especially as it pertains to religious change whether it be conversion or re-affiliation. Their approach strongly endorses the role that social networks have in conversion decisions. While they place value on the role of ideology and doctrine in conversion (the traditional view) they see these elements playing a greater role in strengthening and retaining religious commitment *post* conversion. According to Stark and Finke (2000) conversion is not so much accepting a particular ideology as it is choosing to keep one's religious behaviour in conformity with those of one's intimate relationships. Applying the control theory of deviant behaviour they suggest that at issue in conversion is not the question, why do

people engage in deviant behaviour? But rather, why do people conform? In making decisions to conform individuals weigh up the potential rewards and loss concerning the investment they have made in relation to their social capital (network of relationships seen as valuable) and religious capital ('the degree of mastery of, and attachment to, a particular religious culture'). Stark and Finke (2000) suggest that in conversion individuals will tend to make decisions that will retain as much of their social and religious [and cultural] capital (Bourdieu, 1984) as possible.

As a theoretical framework Stark and Finke's (2000) approach is compelling. They posit a mechanism by which people process converting decisions (an application of rational choice theory) and then fill it with substance that is embedded in the social, cultural and religious environment in which converting individuals exist. The milieu in which Stark and Finke (2000) have developed their ideas has primarily been that of a Western context, relating to the rise of New Religious Movements and the kind of religious switching between various levels of Christian denominations. What happens though, when conversion takes place in a non-Western context, between those of traditional religious backgrounds, where the act of conversion is very much a behaviour that appears to be deviant and the cost appears to outweigh the rewards? Do these same principles in decision making hold up?

So how do people make religious/converting choices? What is clear is that in actuality there is a common ground shared by the competing approaches. The tensions come when one position is held to the exclusion of all other. Though this seems to be a source of concern for advocates of both the 'new paradigm' and the 'traditional' positions, the literature does not bear this out as it relates to making

religious choices (Chaves, 1995, Demerath III, 1995, Iannaccone, 1995b, 1995c). Ellison (1995:90) points out that Iannaccone, one of the strongest proponents of rational choice theory, recognises that 'rational choice perspectives work best when economic theories and models are combined with sociological insights about substantive issues in religion.' Iannaccone does not claim exclusivity to understanding religious behaviour, but rather puts forward an alternative or complementary approach. The new paradigm characterised by rational choice theory, approaches religious behaviour utilising ideas borrowed from economics. While it has its limitations, it does provide a framework for understanding *how* people make religious and converting choices. The substance and meaning to that understanding necessarily comes from the social and cultural context within which individuals live and participate with others (Bourdieu, 1980, 1983, Nagel, 1994, Swidler, 1986). An approach, such as that taken by Sherkat and Wilson (1995), or that of Stark and Finke (2000), which builds on the strengths of both the new and the old paradigms, will add greater depth to our understanding of religious transformation in society. This thesis will primarily draw from this third position in investigating the phenomenon of Kyrgyz conversion.

2.4 Conversion in traditional religions

It is at this point that some discussion should be directed towards approaches to conversion in more traditional religious faiths. As mentioned in Chapter One, one of the unique characteristics of Kyrgyz Christianity is that it forms a kind of hybrid religious experience, representing at the same time both a new religious movement and a traditional religious faith. A discussion of conversion that includes approaches

to traditional religions will substantially add to the dynamics involved in the conversion process particularly as it relates to the 'old' world religions of Islam and Christianity in which the context for the research for this thesis takes place (Cohen, 1995, Gillespie, 1991, Hefner, 1987, 1993a, 1998, Lamb and Bryant, 1999, Robinson and Clarke, 2003a, Sanneh, 1990, Sanneh, 2003, Walls, 1996, Walls, 2002).

Religious change within a religious tradition, such as denominational switching within Christianity (e.g. Anglican to Roman Catholic), or from orthodox Sunni or Shi'ite Islam to Sufism, is not considered here as religious conversion. Instead it should more properly be considered a form of 're-affiliation' or 'alternation' (Stark and Finke, 2000, Travisano, 1970), or religious revitalisation within the same denomination as renewal or recommitment. Religious conversion, on the other hand, is of a more radical nature, involving the changing of allegiance from one major religious position or tradition to another such as from Islam to Christianity.

It can be argued that conversion has been viewed in different ways within Christianity over history and even within Christian different groups. However, today, for most evangelical and sectarian traditions of post-Reformation Protestant Christianity, the conversion experience is strongly linked to 'new birth' (Bryant, 1999, Gillespie, 1991), a process that changes a person's orientation to God and most likely involves some kind of denominational switching. It is also a process that is as likely to take place for a person raised within a Christian tradition as it is for a person coming from a different religious tradition. The key stages, Bryant (1999:187) suggests, in this process are: 1. Conviction of sin; 2. A recognition of one's need of a redeemer; 3. An experience of redeeming love or assurance of salvation; and 4. The

living of the Christian life. This process highlights the emotional and psychological aspects of a person's personal spiritual transformation.

In Islam, conversion takes place with the recitation of the *Shahada* (Arabic – "*La illaha Allah, Muhammad rasul Allah*"; English – "I bear witness that there is no god but God [Allah], and I bear witness that Muhammad is the Messenger [Prophet] of God") in front of witnesses (Dutton, 1999). As Taylor (1999) points out, in the case of conversion from Christianity to Islam, the convert may also be asked to renounce belief in the Trinity. In so doing, the Christian, now converted to Islam, acknowledges, on the one hand, the Unity of God, the Apostleship of Muhammad, and the divine origin of the Qur'an, but also a public distancing from previous Christian origins. Becoming a Muslim, therefore, means becoming 'submitted' to God, as a life of worship. In its ideal form, conversion to Islam, is not simply the acceptance, or performance of, outward forms of religious practice or confessions of faith, but involves an inward pure worship of, and obedience to the Divine - to God (Dutton, 1999), and entry into the community of the Muslim faithful - the *ummah* (for examples of literature on conversion to Islam see Luckmann, 1999, Köse, 1999, Sultan, 1999, Wohlrab-Sahr, 2005b, Zebiri, 2008).

In both cases the 'simple' conversion ritual, baptism in Christianity and the formal declaration of the *shahada* in Islam, clearly identifies a change of religious allegiance, and by implication, a repudiation of any previous religious allegiance. While these descriptions of conversion to Christianity and Islam attempt to briefly sketch an outline for understanding conversion in their respective traditions, it is necessary to recognise that conversion is not something that can be so tidily put together as if to say, 'this is it'. As religious traditions intersect and merge within the

social, cultural and religious traditions different from themselves, a process of transformation takes place in which both the entering religious tradition and the existing religious tradition or culture undergo a process of dynamic change (Cohen, 1995, Hefner, 1993a, Sanneh, 1990, 2003, Walls, 2002).

Hefner (1993b), in the introduction to his edited volume on religious conversion, identified some key dynamics when conversion is viewed in a cross-cultural setting, especially as it relates to the major world religions. He points out that conversion is 'not always an exclusivist change of religious affiliation requiring repudiation of previously held beliefs…conversion assumes a variety of forms because it is influenced by a larger interplay of identity, politics and morality' (1993b:4). Taking Christianity as an example, Hefner comments that recent anthropological studies have shown that it is not as homogenous (socially or ideologically) as many have understood it to be but in cross-cultural situations Christianity has shown an ability to take on nuances that allow it to adapt and adopt in local cultural environments. These reflections on conversion address the fundamental issue that religious changes are never quite as clear cut as they may appear, and that over time there is often much overlap – adaption, adoption, rejection, interpretation and re-interpretation - between previously held religious/cultural world-views and the newly received religious view. In the context of the diversity of conversion in the multi-faith, multi-caste Indian context, Dube and Dube (2003) argue that conversion 'is less as unremitting rupture and more as fashioning of novel practices, beliefs, identities, visions and boundaries of discrete religiosities...' This phenomenon, I hasten to add, is as true historically of Islam as a religious movement in Central Asia, or indeed in other parts of the world, as it is of Kyrgyz Christianity (cf. De Weese, 1994, 1997, Geertz, 1971, Gellner,

1981, Privatsky, 2001, Robinson, 2003c).

Christopher Lamb and M. Darrol Bryant's *Religious Conversion-Contemporary Practices and Controversies* (1999) and Rowena Robinson and Sathianathan Clarke's *Religious Conversion in India* (2003a) are important additions to conversion literature, and develop this idea that religious conversion is a complex, multi-faceted phenomenon that cannot easily be explained by one model or another. Here religious conversion is applied to different religious traditions be it Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Chinese religions or Tribal, different geographical locations and different historical eras. They add insight into questions about conversion. Questions addressing whether it is an individual or group experience, whether changes in political contexts either forbid or give freedom to conversion, whether conversion is an 'intensely dramatic and personal event', or one which takes place over time as a process. All of these are encompassed in a kind of 'sliding scale'(Lamb and Bryant, 1999). Both edited works highlight the kaleidoscope of diversity that is revealed in the varied experiences of religious conversion across the religious spectrum of traditions, both new and old. As a result, one may conclude, as Robinson and Clarke (2003b:8) have, that we should imagine conversion '...as a fluid process of changing affiliations of religious beliefs and traditions with a range of possibilities.'

The very nature of this 'fluid process of changing affiliations' in conversion highlights the fact that ethnic and religious boundaries around which people and religious groups find social identity are not fixed but have the potential to change (Barth, 1969a, Erikson, 1966, Glazner and Moynihan, 1963, Lamont, 1995, Sanders,

2002, Syrjänen, 1984). In the Central Asian context, for instance, it has been pointed out that in fact it is possible to have new hybrid identities that appear on the surface to be contradictory such as Muslim/atheist, Muslim/communist (Froese, 2005, 2008, Heyat, 2004, Pelkmans, 2007). Religious conversion challenges religious and ethnic identities, especially in cross-cultural and inter-faith contexts. Reactions in the wider community against what would be considered deviant or non-normative behaviour, such as religious conversion in the Muslim Kyrgyz community, often lead to various forms of social control as a means of upholding traditional ethnic and religious boundaries. The converts themselves must respond to these societal reactions if they are to find a way to both manage their new [religious] identities while remaining within the wider community that they are a part of (Erikson, 1966, 1973, Becker, 1963, 1973, Goffman, 1963, 1969).

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter has sought to give an overview of the sociological literature concerning religious conversion. The topic of this thesis is the investigation into the rise of Protestant Christianity among the Muslim Kyrgyz of Kyrgyzstan. At heart is the phenomenon of religious conversion and its impact on the lives and communities of those involved. A challenging question is to try to explain why and how it is that several thousand Muslim Kyrgyz have embraced Protestant Christianity, and to understand what processes have been at work for those who now identify themselves as *mashayakche* or Kyrgyz Christians. Four major approaches to religious conversion have been considered: conceptual, structural, the religious convert, and conversion in traditional religions. While acknowledging the place of identifying the stages and

processes involved in the conversion process, it must be recognised that these vary from movement to movement and from one location to another. A definition of religious conversion is here adhered to that sees it as a religious change within the broad field of religious switching but with some unique features: that it primarily involves change from one religious tradition to another (rather than within a religious tradition), and that it involves a radical change of allegiance to a religious source/s of authority associated with the conversion. Social and structural approaches were seen as helpful as tools for understanding the kind of people who are converting and the circumstances that they are converting from and to. In particular they highlight the important role that social networks play in the recruitment into a new faith.

An approach that focuses on the convert affirms the understanding that individuals who convert are not mere passive bystanders to the process but are actively engaged in the process both in terms of the processes involved in choosing to convert as well as in the transforming process related to identity construction. The transforming process, as it relates to the conversion narrative, highlights the need for careful extrapolation of the data. While there are problematic issues relating to conversion narratives, such as biographical reconstruction, it is important to consider conversion from the convert's viewpoint when analysing the content and the form in which it is communicated. To understand those processes one must be keenly aware of, and sensitive to, the substance of conversion (the social, cultural and religious environment) that gives meaning, as well as to the mechanism or structure (the decision making processes) that enables that process to take place. Finally, considering the way conversion occurs in traditional religions, especially Christianity and Islam, the author recognises that religious conversion does not come in nice neat

packages. Like the multi-varied nature of the religious traditions themselves cross-cultural and cross-religious change involves a dynamic process of accepting, rejecting, translating and interpreting the old and the new in an attempt to find continuity with the past, make sense of the present and to forge new directions for the future.

Chapter Three will consider the methodological approaches used for the research which forms the basis for this thesis and details the methods in which it has taken place. Specifically it will describe the qualitative methods (participant observation and in-depth interviews) and quantitative method (survey) employed. Data gained from these methods will provide the opportunity to give a socio-demographic understanding of the Kyrgyz Christians, the subjects of this research.

CHAPTER THREE - Methodology

The research context provided a number of challenging and complex issues which contributed to the methodology chosen for researching this thesis. These issues included that Kyrgyzstan was international, post-Soviet, and part of the developing Muslim world. Therefore linguistic (Russian, Kyrgyz, English), cultural (Kyrgyz/Soviet/Russian), historical (pre-Soviet/Soviet/post-Soviet Central Asia), religious (Soviet atheism, Islam, Christianity), and economic (struggling economy after independence) factors needed to be taken into consideration. At the same time there was a dearth of information and academic research concerning the topic under consideration. Although there was recognition that the phenomenon of Kyrgyz conversion to Protestant Christianity existed, little clear empirical research had been undertaken.

Reflecting on these considerations, an inductive process using mixed research methods including both qualitative (participant observation, in-depth interviews) and quantitative (survey) approaches, were employed. Participant observation allowed the author to understand, and learn first-hand, about the research context and the phenomenon. This provided information that helped formed the questions and themes, as well as the relationship network, necessary for conducting the interviews allowing for an in-depth investigation into the development and meanings associated with Kyrgyz conversion. The subsequent survey conducted was developed utilising the data gained from the interviews to give further indication of how widespread the findings were. This chapter will consider the context and community which are the focus of the thesis, provide an outline of the research questions, describe the

sampling process for the interviews and survey (including an initial description of the socio-demographic data which relate to the sampling), and discuss the design and implementation of the research methodologies used.

As outlined in the previous chapters the broad identifiable phenomenon under consideration is the rise of Protestant Christianity among the Kyrgyz. The research focus is on understanding the processes, context and meanings with reference to the religious conversion of Kyrgyz to Protestant Christianity, especially meaning from the perspective of Kyrgyz Christians. The overall question under consideration is this: In light of the dominant historical, cultural perspective that Kyrgyz are Muslims what happens to identity when Kyrgyz no longer consider themselves to be Muslim? Although there has been identifiable rising growth in the numbers of Kyrgyz who have become Protestant Christians, this number is still very small compared to the Kyrgyz population as whole. Further, consideration therefore is also given in the thesis to answering the questions related to how Kyrgyz conversion to Protestant Christianity has taken place, and yet why *more* Kyrgyz have not become Christians?

3.1 Mixed-methods approach

For this research a mixed method/triangulation approach has been used and affirms the view of Denzin (1970:27) that it is appropriate for social research to utilise more than one method in the research process. 'Mixed method' refers to the combining of quantitative and qualitative methodology in the research process (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998, Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009). 'Triangulation' refers to a research approach that brings together different kinds of collected data (e.g. quantitative and

qualitative) and/or different methods (e.g. ethnography and interviews) to see how the information may add to the depth of the research or whether the data collected may confirm or contradict one another and is often referred to as 'triangulation of method' (Neuman, 2003:139, Silverman, 2006:404, Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998). Concerns have been expressed about the triangulation approach because each approach used is situated in separate contexts so that one is unable to get a true or complete picture of the situation (Silverman, 2006:292). Nevertheless, the author recognises that data collected in this way can be seen to 'make better sense of the other' (Silverman, 2006:292). In keeping with this view this research sees triangulation as '...best understood as a strategy that adds rigour, breadth, complexity, richness and depth to an inquiry (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008:7, see also Neuman, 2003). The use of both qualitative and quantitative methodology in data collection and analysis affirms the symbiotic relationship that can occur between the two (Bouma and Ling, 2004).

Due to the cross-cultural nature of the research it was necessary to understand the context before the author actually engaged in gathering the data itself. Social science research needs to take into account the assumptions and meaning held by the researcher, the target respondents, and the general socio-cultural context in which the research is conducted (Brislin et al., 1973:12, Silverman, 2006:290). This was true in both the development of the research tools (interview schedule, surveys) and the interpretation of the data gathered. An intensive and comprehensive literature review was carried out before and during the fieldwork, hence the literature[9] profoundly

[9] The literature included a focus on the geographical area – Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia, the role and place of the Soviet Union, the Kyrgyz as a people - and literature relevant to religious conversion as a social phenomenon.

informed the entire research process. It is unquestionable that both macro (the broader social, cultural, historical, religious, structural context) and micro (individual, inter-relational context) (Neuman, 2003, 70ff, Babbie, 2007:312ff) factors have had an impact in the conversion of the Kyrgyz to Protestant Christianity. The author then spent between nearly two years living in the research cultural context before designing and administering the interview and questionnaires.

In this study the initial approach began with field research through participant observation. A second step was to conduct in depth semi-structured interviews with the respondents, Kyrgyz Christians. This was followed by a survey whose design was based on the interviews, to provide a broader sample in order to obtain further statistical information that will enable greater generalisability of the interview results (Dressler, 1991). The larger number of respondents involved (from forty nine respondents for the interviews to four hundred and twenty seven respondents for the questionnaires) provides further evidence as to what is occurring in Kyrgyz conversion to Protestant Christianity. This has given the author greater confidence in indicating how representative and generalisable the data maybe for the target community as a whole (Silverman, 2006:303).

The methodology chosen was undergirded by an inductive approach. An attempt was made to begin the investigation with limited prior assumptions as to what had occurred and to allow the data gathered from the field to guide the investigative and analytical process so that the focus was on '*...making theory* from data, *rather than a guide to a method* for handling data' (Italics authors - Richards and Richards cited in Bryman and Burgess, 1994:220).

3.2 Description of field sites

There are seven provinces or *oblasts* in Kyrgyzstan. The northern part of Kyrgyzstan is represented by the capital Bishkek, which is surrounded by Chui, then Naryn, Issokol, and Talas. The southern part of Kyrgyzstan is represented by Jalalabad, Osh and Batken. Each province has a main town/city although Bishkek really functions as the main city for Bishkek and Chui regions. There is a north/south divide in Kyrgyzstan ethnically, culturally and religiously. The southern part of the country, particularly the area that is an extension of Uzbekistan's Ferghana Valley, has a large Uzbek community and is considered more conservative and religious in outlook and practice than the north and has had a long sedentary history. The northern part of the country has a history of closer connection with Kazakhstan and the Russian community, and has a stronger nomadic heritage. In general the north of Kyrgyzstan is more industrialised, more well-to-do, and more Russified than the south. Bishkek is by far the biggest city in the country with a population in excess of 800,000. Bishkek has a cosmopolitan population with a significant Russian ethnic presence. It is a slowly modernising city with newly built, modern looking shopping centres, and it is the educational, administrative and commercial centre of the country. The Russian language continues to be the lingua franca of the city although Kyrgyz is increasingly more evident. English language centres have grown exponentially in the last few years and it is common now to find university age students who have some spoken English ability. Internal migration from outer regions to Bishkek is high as people look to further their education and find employment. While other towns and

cities[10] have mixed populations the Kyrgyz population are clearly a majority except for Jalalabad and Osh (south) where there is also a significant Uzbek presence.

3.3 Nature of samples

3.3.1 Types of sampling utilised in this research

Due to the qualitative nature of in-depth interviewing and the specific target group involved it was neither feasible nor appropriate to randomly select respondents from the general population. Unlike quantitative research the primary goal was not to find general representativeness from a population but rather to locate respondents who highlighted relevance to the research topic, referred to as non-probability or non-random sampling (Neuman, 2003). There are a number of different kinds of non-probability sampling methods that are utilised in qualitative research, however, for this research, two kinds of sampling methods were primarily used, snow-ball sampling and purposive sampling (Liamputtong and Ezzy, 2005, Marshall and Rossman, 1999). Typically the researcher engaging in qualitative interviewing does not know beforehand the exact number of respondents he or she will interview. They begin with a broad idea of what kind of people they want to interview and where they can find them but remains flexible in the process (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984:83). The ability and understanding of the researcher to determine who would be the respondents to interview, how to find them, in what context to undertake the interviews was developed as a result of the field research through participant observation (Schwartz and Jacobs, 1979:38). The interviews were not conducted

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[10] A 'city' is considered to have a population over 100,000.
http://www.citypopulation.de/Kyrgyzstan.html downloaded 2011.02.09.

until the author had been living in Kyrgyzstan for about two years. The reason for this were that it allowed the author time to become familiar with the context as a participant observer, including language learning, and that initially, the author was engaged in the research only part-time. The author first arrived in Kyrgyzstan for research purposes in late August, 2004. The first interview was conducted in November, 2006, and the last interview was completed in February, 2008.

Snowball sampling (Babbie, 2008) refers to the process whereby each person interviewed is asked to suggest others who would be good sources of information who would in turn suggest others. This was particularly appropriate for locating Kyrgyz Christians as it allowed for introductions through trusted relationships for a group considered deviant or 'hidden' in the broader Kyrgyz community (Liamputtong and Ezzy, 2005, Renzetti and Lee, 1993). Through the process of field research the researcher was able to establish relationship with individual Kyrgyz Christians and 'gatekeepers' who either became informants or who were able recommend other Kyrgyz Christians to interview. 'Gatekeepers' are those people who have formal or informal influence over the ability for someone to gain entrance to or remain involved in a field site (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983, Neuman, 2003). Interviews took place in five major towns/cities and two villages close to two of those towns. In each place the author was introduced by someone who was known to the Christian community. Once the author had met one or two Kyrgyz Christians they then introduced the author to other Kyrgyz Christians. A number of individuals were approached through purposive sampling.

Purposive sampling refers to the process whereby respondents are chosen on the

grounds that the researcher believes them to be most useful or representative and (Babbie, 2007) and where the research 'aims to select information-rich cases for in-depth study to examine meanings, interpretations, processes, and theory (Liamputtong and Ezzy, 2005:46). The snowball sampling worked well in accessing a large number of potential respondents, however, one of the goals of the research was to attempt to access individuals from a wide range of backgrounds. Once the initial set of interviews was completed in each location some respondents were particularly selected because they fit certain types of people that were otherwise low in representation. The author would ask gatekeepers for introductions to those people. For instance, respondents who were from specific age groups, people who became Christians over particular time spans since independence in 1991, people from a cross section of professions and marital status, those from rural and urban backgrounds, from the north and the south of the country, a few key Kyrgyz Christian leaders, and a spread of gender.

As large numbers of respondents were required for the survey several methods were used to locate them. The subject population, as for the interviews, were a sub-group within the Kyrgyz population so it was not possible to randomly select any Kyrgyz. The author had to locate respondents in specific locations. Due to resource limitations it was decided to find locations where groups of Kyrgyz Christians would gather to meet to participate in Christian activities. Permission was sought from the leaders of those gatherings to request for volunteers to fill in the questionnaires. This was done after church services and small group Bible studies. The author or one of the research assistants would then explain to the group the research being undertaken, the confidentiality of any responses given, and how to complete the

survey. The questionnaires were then completed in the same location that the gatherings had taken place. The surveys were returned to the author or the research assistant, who would check to make sure all the questions in the survey had been completed. This was important because for many people this was the first survey they had partaken in. Some questions required a horizontal line response and others a vertical line response and this was confusing to some who occasionally missed whole sections thinking that they had completed the question. Most of the questionnaires were administered this way. Some surveys were completed by individuals or groups of two or three who were known to the author or to the research assistants who assisted the author in private homes.

3.3.2 Sizes and location of samples

3.3.2.1 In-depth interviews

The goal was to interview between forty to forty five Kyrgyz Christians. Eventually forty nine interviews were completed, twenty eight (57%) were women and twenty one (43%) were men (for a detailed description of respondents see Appendix #2). This is also a reflection of the fact that there are more Kyrgyz women who have become Christians than men. Although there are no exact figures, anecdotal evidence and the author's experience in field research over four to five years would affirm this. Thirty-eight (78%) were married/had been married and eleven (22%) respondents were still unmarried at the time of the interview. The respondents were generally well educated. Thirty-seven (80%) had completed some form of tertiary education[11] and seven had only finished high school. Two respondents had

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[11] University, technical college or vocational college.

completed less than high school. It was unclear what the completed education level of three of the respondents. Except for two occasions when interviews took place in the homes of two respondents in their respective villages, both located just outside of a major town, all the interviews took place in town/city locations. With this mind interviews were conducted in both southern and northern parts of the country. This also gave greater diversity to the interviews and survey within the Kyrgyz Christian community.

Forty-two respondents said that they first heard about Protestant Christianity in a major town or city[12] and seven in a village. Similarly forty-four respondents experienced conversion in a town or city and five in a village context. This would be consistent with the fact that almost all of the interviews took place in an urban environment. Only three interviews were administered in villages. Eighteen interviews were administered in the capital Bishkek, fifteen in Jalalabad, seven in Talas, and the rest spread over other major towns. There is no data for the broader Kyrgyz Christian community as far as how many live in urban or rural contexts. In fact there is no publically available data at all related to Kyrgyz Christians. The more significant data was that of the nineteen respondents who said that their significant conversion event took place in Bishkek, the capital, only one claims to have been originally from Bishkek. Most are migrants who have come into the city for study or work[13].

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[12] Including one respondent whose conversion experience took place in Russia.

[13] The rate of urbanisation in Kyrgyzstan is 34% which is very low. Kyrgyzstan is ranked 158 out of 204 countries. http://www.nationmaster.com/graph/peo_urb-people-urbanization viewed 13/7/2010

The capital city is a main attraction for study, medical treatment, and employment. The same is true for the towns of Osh and Jalalabad in the South of the country. The bigger centres, such as Bishkek, Jalalabad and Osh, are places where it is easier to be exposed to new things, and to try new things, with the added benefit of some degree of independence and anonymity from the closely knit, smaller, rural community environments. Most of the respondents came from villages but now live in urban contexts with minimal regular contact with the extended family or community. None of the respondents experienced significant if any real opposition in urban contexts in which they lived.

3.3.2.2 Self-administered questionnaires

Due to the size of the group to be studied and the difficulties in locating large numbers of respondents it was decided that a sample size of between four hundred to five hundred people would be sufficient for the purposes of this research. In the end the total number of respondents was four hundred and twenty seven. Several factors relating to limitations were taken into consideration in the number of questionnaires finally collected. The first is that the data collected in this way was seen as complimentary to the interviews rather than the main body of evidence. Secondly, the relative difficulty in locating and accessing large numbers of Kyrgyz Christians who were spread out widely around the country. Thirdly, the resources needed to complete such a large project in light of the context were insufficient (de Vaus, 2002:83). Fourthly, the author wanted to keep effective control over the administration of the survey and to aim for a much greater sample size would risk losing reliability and validity.

a. Age of respondents

A common understanding concerning religious conversion, especially as it relates to new religious movements is that it is primarily young people who convert (Ullman, 1989:1577, Johnson, 1977:40, Galanter, 1980). They are said to have less family responsibilities and are more likely to be studying, giving them more time and opportunity to consider and participate in conversion (Snow and Machalek, 1984). The following table indicates the age of respondents in various age groups.

Tables 3.1a and 3.1b (below) show the spread of Kyrgyz Christians from the survey within the various age groups from 15 years of age up to 69 years. The 25-39 year group has the largest single number.

Table 3.1a Population by Age Groupings

Age groups	Interviews % (N = 49)	Survey % (N = 427)	National Census %[14]
<26(Youth)	14.3	19.2	21.2
26-40(Adult)	38.8	48.9	22.5
41-55(Middle Age)	32.6	25.1	15.6
55>(Elderly/retired)	14.2	6.1	7.1
Missing data	0	0.7	0
Mean Age	39	34.65	24.7

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[14] http://www.census.gov/ipc/www/idb/country.php viewed 12/7/2010 - Kyrgyzstan total population = 5,508,626.

Table 3.1b Histogram of survey respondents by age
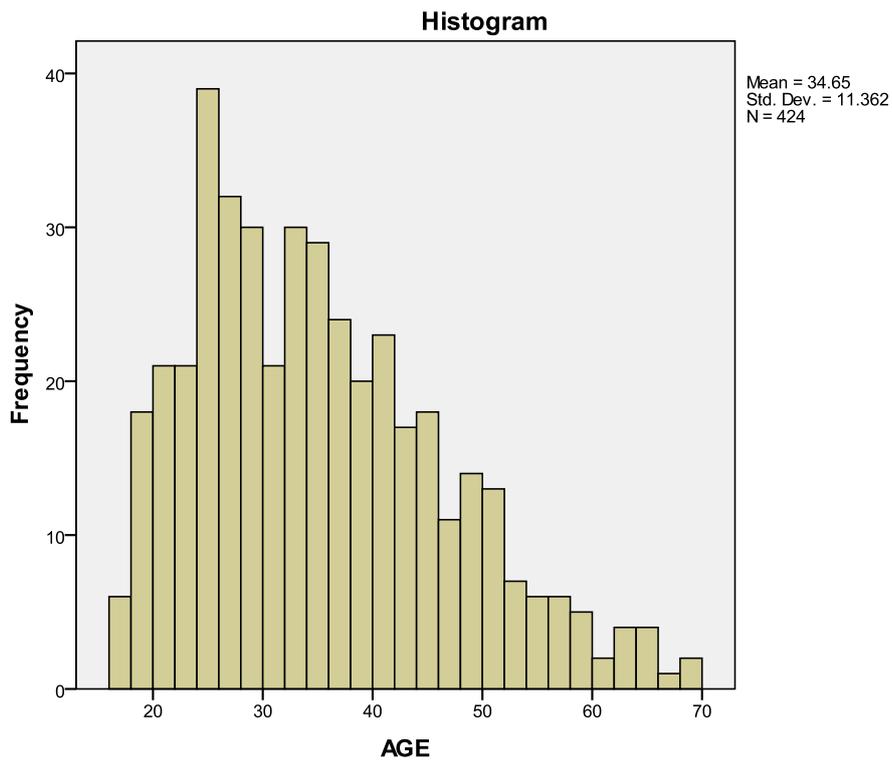
The data shows that the survey numbers for Kyrgyz Christians are over double those for the respective age groups in the census figures for the age groups 25-39. Likewise, while not double the size, the number of those in the 40-54 year age cohort has a higher representation in the survey than the census. These figures need to take into account that the survey respondents were chosen from those who were eighteen years or older and therefore the figures for the 15-19 age group and the percentage for the survey will be skewed lower for the 15-19 year age group and higher for the other age groups than the general census figures. Also the census data includes people over the age of sixty-nine which neither the respondents in the interviews or survey included. Nevertheless the survey data shows that the Kyrgyz Christians are more likely to be represented in age groups that are higher in age than the general population and in stages of life associated with family responsibilities and middle age development rather than primarily youth as is often the case with new religious

movements generally.[15]

b. Marital status and gender distribution

The marital status of survey respondents were similar to those indicated by the census figures (see Table 3.2 below). There is a difference between the married and divorced figures between the two sets of data with the survey suggesting a higher number of divorced/separated respondents among Kyrgyz Christians than the general population.

Table 3.2 Marital Status

Marital status	Survey % (frequency)	Census[16]
Never Married	34% (146)	31%
Married	44.3% (189)	56%
Divorced	16% (66)	6.4%
Widowed	5.2% (22)	6.4%
No Response	0.5% (2)	
Total	**100% (427)**	**100%**

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[15] These figures are similar to a survey conducted at one large Pentecostal church in the south of the country which also showed a even spread of Kyrgyz Christians over various age groups and not only young people (Pelkmans, 2006:41)

[16]

http://w3.unece.org/pxweb/Dialog/varval.asp?ma=005_GEPOPop5YearMaSta_r&ti=Population%2C+5-year+Age+Groups%2C+by+Marital+Status%2C+Age%2C+Sex%2C+Country+and+Year&path=../DATABASE/Stat/30-GE/01-Pop/&lang=1 accessed 12/7/2010 – It is not clear who is defined as married in these census figures but I assume it to mean those legally registered marriages with the government. The number of people that make up these categories was 3,738, 237. The balance of the Kyrgyzstan population, 1,770,389, were clearly young children. According to the figures from the source there were 10 recognised marriages for persons under the age of 15.

Although a gender comparison in the census is 49% male and 51% female[17] the Kyrgyz Christian gender comparison is 32% male and 68% female, or a nearly 1:2 ratio, which holds true over the different age groups of the cohorts. This confirms the common understanding that there are many more female than male Kyrgyz Christians.

c. Education and employment

Table 3.3 (below) gives a breakdown for those completing formal education among the survey respondents. The general level of education for those who completed the survey was reasonably high which is consistent with the generally high level of education in the country (Mertaugh, 2004, Republic, 2008)[18]. Most of the respondents (88.3%) have at least completed High School and nearly half (43.6%) have completed some form of tertiary (vocational or university) education.

Overall there is a generally higher completion level of university education among survey respondents than the census figures and a higher level of completion for vocational/technical (professional) education in the census figures. "Out of the total population aged 15 and older [in Kyrgyzstan]: 16,9 % have higher professional education, 2,1% - incomplete higher professional education, 13,8% - secondary professional education, 10,3% - primary professional education, 47,9% - secondary

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[17] http://www.census.gov/ipc/www/idb/country.php accessed 12/7/2010 - Kyrgyzstan total population = 5,508,626.

[18] http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTECONEVAL/Resources/EducInCentralAsia_Kyrguz_Rep.pdf downloaded 19/8/2010.

education, 6,5% - primary education, 2,4% - has only elementary education or has

not completed elementary school." [19]

Table 3.3 Highest level of formal education

		Frequency	Valid Percent
Valid	Some Primary school (Grades 1-4)	4	1.0
	Some High school completed (Grades 6-9)	31	7.4
	High School completed (Grade 11)	91	21.8
	Some Vocational/Technical school completed	33	7.9
	Vocational/Technical school completed	84	20.1
	Some university completed	67	16.0
	University completed	102	24.4
	No education	6	1.4
	Total	418	100.0
Missing	System	9	
Total		427	

d. Urban or rural

The majority (63%) of survey respondents are from or grew up in towns and just

37% in village areas (see Appendix #3). While there was a fairly even spread among

[19] http://www.unesco.org/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/INSTITUTES/UIL/confintea/pdf/National_Reports/ Asia%20-%20Pacific/Kyrgyzstan.pdf - See also http://www.jfdp.org/kyrgyzstan/education.htm (accessed 19/8/2010) for descriptions of the above. Secondary and primary professional education refers to technical or vocational training. Higher professional education refers to university level education.

four provinces (Chuy, Talas, Issokkol and Jalalabad – each between 12-16%) the largest proportion (30%) came from Naryn province. The first recognised Kyrgyz church was started in Naryn and from that church many Kyrgyz Christians spread out across the country (Radford, 2004). Several of the main leaders of the Kyrgyz churches originally came from Naryn. However, at the time of the survey, 81% of respondents resided in villages and only 18% in towns. Of these, 65% or two thirds of respondents, live in Bishkek or Chuy (the nearby province to Bishkek) provinces. Only 6% now live in Naryn. While there are limitations to what can be understood from these figures it does give us a helpful idea of the spread of Kyrgyz Christians. There has been a clear migration from the more isolated Naryn area to the more central Bishkek/Chuy region. Many of the villages that respondents now indicate they are presently living in are located near the capital Bishkek or close to main urban centres. This may also reflect an economic necessity. While there may be access to more work in these urban centres the cost of housing and living is significantly higher and often unaffordable.

e. Period when conversion took place

The data in Table 3.4 (below) indicate when conversion took place among the research respondents. For the purposes of comparison the time periods were divided into three – the period before 1991, 1991-2000, and 2001-2008 (when the research was completed). Kyrgyzstan became independent in 1991 and the years following were socially and economically very difficult. There was likewise a climate of rapid change and openness to new ideas. At this time there seems to have been significant growth in Kyrgyz Christianity. Anecdotally, the author was told, that after an initial

period of rapid growth, the numbers of Kyrgyz Christians plateaued. The author was told the initial euphoria of becoming new Christians eventually faded and Kyrgyz Christians began to lose their enthusiasm (literally their 'first love') for their Christian faith and witness. The data from the survey (Table 3.4 below) show that while there may have been an initial growth during the uncertain, unsettling and rapid change period soon after independence, there has not been a plateauing of the number of Kyrgyz who have become Christians, at least among the survey respondents, but rather Kyrgyz conversion to Protestant Christianity has maintained its growth over the second [uncompleted] decade [2001-2008] doubling its size.

Table 3.4 Comparison between interviews and survey concerning when conversion took place

Conversion Time-frame	Interviews (N=49)	Survey (N=427)
Before 1991	0	9 (2%)
1991-2000	22 (45%)	183 (43%)
2001-2008	27 (55%)	234 (55%)
Total	49	426[20] (99%)

3.4 Methods of data collection

The following is a description of the various methods employed in the research including participant observation, in-depth interviews and the survey.

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[20] One respondent did not give an answer to this question.

3.4.1 Entry into the field and participant observation

The first step in the research process was to engage in field research. Field research and ethnography have a rich history in the social sciences where it is seen as a valuable tool to observe first hand people in their everyday environment (Atkinson and Hammersley, 1994, Liamputtong and Ezzy, 2005, Lofland, 1971, Marvasti, 2004). Relying on the researcher's work in the field, this approach encourages an inductive approach to data-gathering. That is, observing and gathering data by studying the target members (a term given to identify the people studied in the field) in their social world, understanding their perspectives, and from that point theorising its implications (Neuman, 2003:364).

Guba and Lincoln (1994:106) point out the strengths of this approach. For example an ability to examine social meanings and grasp several different perspectives in the context in which the social reality is taking place. The researcher, here, seeks to understand things from the subjects point of view, what Lofland and Lofland (1995:61) refer to as 'insider meanings' of the members (an emic view), compared with seeing things from an outside point of view (etic view). It also allows for a more nuanced and deeper grasp of the social phenomenon under focus that may otherwise be missed by using other research methods (Babbie, 2005:295-296, 322, 389). Traditional anthropological fieldwork and ethnography has a focus on developing a 'thick' description of the community – a detailed description and understanding of all aspects of a particular community (Geertz, 1973). These would include such things as their material culture, worldview, social structure, social relations, status, and economic life. The focus of participant observation conducted for this thesis was not

so much to give a detailed description of the community as it was a detailed understanding of the community as a preparatory step or tool for effectively understanding the context of the target subjects and the meaning they give to their experiences, gaining access to them, and developing/designing effective research tools in the form of semi-structured interviews and questionnaires. It was also a necessary step in the analytical process.

After the initial moving and settling of the author's family in the capital city Bishkek, the first step was to begin to learn an appropriate language. The focus of the research was on Kyrgyz people and a decision was made to focus on learning the Kyrgyz language. Russian language is widely understood and spoken in the city but decreasingly so in outer towns and villages. There has been an increasing emphasis since independence on Kyrgyz as the national language and combined with the desire to build rapport with the heart language of the people it was evident that learning Kyrgyz was preferential for the research. This proved a positive decision by the many affirmative comments that Kyrgyz people gave the author when I sought to engage them in conversation in Kyrgyz rather than Russian language. A private language teacher was employed who came to the researcher's home for classes three times a week for the first year. Language lessons continued through the second year but with less frequency than the first year.

Neuman (2003:369ff) identified a number of steps that are involved in the field research process which involve choosing a site and gaining access. They include the need to decide such things as where to observe, the level of involvement to be taken in society, access to gatekeepers, access to deviant groups, building rapport, choosing

a role, normalising social research, reliability, validity, and focusing and sampling. The following section will use these steps as a basic outline and at the same time incorporate the specific ways in which this researcher approached the subjects and context in which the social phenomenon under question took place.

Kyrgyz Christians are spread out over the country although the greatest concentration is in the capital, Bishkek. Due to both work commitments with the organisation with whom the author was working and because of his children's education (with an international school) the author was focused primarily on Bishkek but made periodic trips to other locations outside of the city, usually to urban towns, but occasionally to a village, where Kyrgyz Christians were present. The author's observations and informal relationship building with Kyrgyz Christians over the four and a half years involved a number of different activities. Examples of this included attending and participating in church meetings where Kyrgyz Christians were present; meeting Kyrgyz in their homes as a guest, or attending family functions such as weddings; and working alongside Kyrgyz Christians, which included the translators and transcribers for the research. On one occasion the author's family lived for a one to two weeks with a Kyrgyz family in a town who had both Christian and non-Christian members. Some churches had mixed ethnic congregations (Kyrgyz and non-Kyrgyz). Independent Kyrgyz churches were largely made up of Kyrgyz and where the Kyrgyz language was the primary language medium used. The purpose of these activities was to build relationships of trust with Kyrgyz Christians and develop an understanding of the social, cultural and religious context in which Kyrgyz Christians live as a foundation for identifying and engaging Kyrgyz Christians in the data collection. As the research took place over an extended period of time the author

was able to observe the everyday life of the Kyrgyz Christian community and individual Kyrgyz Christians. This provided the author the opportunity to observe both the rhetoric and behaviour of the community.

It was necessary to choose what level of involvement and the nature of the role that the author was to have as a researcher with Kyrgyz Christians. The range of involvement that this could have taken varies along a continuum. There are commonly understood to be four main roles for a participant observer (Denzin, 1970:189-194, Neuman, 2003:372): from a 'complete observer' (non-participant), to 'observer as participant' (researcher known but limited contact), to 'participant as observer' (researcher role is clear and develops close relationships with subjects), to 'complete participant' (researcher behaves as a member and has access to hidden insider information). Adler and Adler (1987) indicate three possible roles. 'Peripheral membership' (keeping a level of distance between researcher and subjects), 'active membership' (researcher takes on a membership role, participates as a member, is able to withdraw from the field periodically while maintaining high levels of trust), and 'complete membership' (researcher "goes native" – becomes one in every way a fully committed member until they leave the field to become a researcher).

In keeping with the range of roles that Adler and Adler (1987, Neuman, 2003) described, the author decided on a primary level of involvement that they classified as 'active membership' (somewhere between the 'participant as observer' and 'complete participant' categories mentioned above). At the same time it was recognised that the various roles described above will be undertaken depending on

the stage of the research and the kind of method being used at a particular time. Kyrgyz Christians, as mentioned earlier, are considered a deviant group in the wider Kyrgyz community. While there are limited legal restrictions there is a general sense of unease about their status as Kyrgyz Christians and consequently there is a general unease when dealing with a researcher who is not sympathetic to their community. This level of involvement had several practical steps. Firstly, the author communicated that he held a Christian faith as the research subjects did. Secondly, the author was able to obtain a work visa with a NGO (this visa also provided the author an opportunity to undertake the research) that was known to be sympathetic to the Kyrgyz Christian community. Thirdly, while the author did not become an official member of a particular Kyrgyz Church, he participated in various activities supportive of the Kyrgyz Christian community, which included, when requested, occasionally Christian teaching. Fourthly, the author communicated openly that he was also a PhD candidate in sociology from a university in Australia undertaking research into the emergence of Kyrgyz Christians in Kyrgyzstan.

There are several advantages for this involvement. It helped gain the researcher better access to both gatekeepers and target subjects. It allowed the author to be able to build levels of trust and provide an environment that would facilitate a greater opportunity for the communication of honest and open personal information – the real meanings/story as opposed to one the subjects think the researcher wants to hear (Neuman, 2003:372). It also facilitated empathy and a sharing of the social meaning and experience of the subjects. 'The researcher', Holy states, does not participate in the lives of subjects in order to observe them, but rather observes while participating fully in their lives...' (Holy, 1984:29-30). There are a number of weaknesses though,

which needed to be taken into consideration. There are risks that the researcher will negatively reduce the distance required between the researcher and the researched, which potentially will create too much sympathy for, or become overly involved with the target subjects. This may result in a questioning of the reports that the researcher produces, hamper the data gathering process, negatively affect the well-being of the researcher's self, and reduce the ability for the researcher to maintain the distance required to effectively analyse the data (Neuman, 2003:372).

The researcher was aware of these issues. It was decided that the value of being an 'active member', or what the author would call a 'participating observer' outweighed the potential limitations. Access to, and a desire to gain the most reliable data from, the target respondents, was a primary consideration. Nevertheless, every effort was made to maintain a level of distance required for accurate data gathering and analysis. Field research was viewed as a primary tool in *locating* and *gaining access* to reliable sources and information and *understanding the context* in which conversion has/is taking place. It was also essential in order to understand the meanings and symbols of the group. Without extended time in participant observation (and ongoing reading on available literature) there would be a high risk of 'tacit assumption of understanding' resulting in a lack of confidence that the researcher has properly understood what has been communicated (Denzin, 1970:130).

Field research through participant observation also enabled the identification of gatekeepers. The main gatekeepers for Kyrgyz Christians were the Kyrgyz pastors or leaders. The author recognised that in order to gain access to respondents he needed

to build relationship and trust with these leaders. As the author lived in the location he was able to build relationships with Kyrgyz Christians and some of the expatriate community, both missionary and NGO volunteers, who were able to introduce the author and the research being conducted to these influential people. While it was not necessary for the author to find all the respondents through these people it was necessary to be understood and trusted and to limit any sense of threat from the research (Neuman, 2003:373). These leaders had the influence to close down access to many potential respondents within their Christian groups or within other groups - it is a relatively small community. As a way of doing this the author made it a point of approaching several of these leaders to interview. By so doing they were able to not only hear the author explain the research but actually experience what it is the author wanted to do with members of their churches.

There are benefits and challenges when deciding to include leaders for interviews. The benefit is that they are initiators, they are deeply involved and they have intimate knowledge of the history of the growth of Kyrgyz Christianity. In this case, some were the first Kyrgyz involved in religious switching (fifteen or so years ago) and so their story is important for the research. They are also able to open doors of access to identify respondents. The difficulty is that they are often very busy people, they find it difficult to turn their mobile phones off during interviews, and they are potentially the most ideologically-bent and selective in their thinking and remembering. While this was helpful the author also limited this group to only a few as it was the general Kyrgyz Christian that the research wanted to focus on. The lay-believer becomes the 'average' believer where the bulk of the 'faithful' are located. It is from these that the author will be best able to draw conclusions that are more truly reflective of the

group or community (for further discussion on choosing to interview leaders and/or 'ordinary' people or the general population see Plummer, 2001:134-136).

Another concern is that these gatekeepers can significantly influence the research process (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983:73, Neuman, 2003:373) by directing the researcher to meet with only those people that have the approval of the gatekeeper – these may be the gatekeepers own networks such as family, other trusted leaders, or those who may give the correct ideological story. In negotiating with these leaders the only stated reciprocal requirement was that the author would try to make available the results of the research when the thesis had been completed. These are typical constraints when researching groups such as these but any negative influence, or bias, can be controlled through the role of active participant taken by the researcher.

Access to Kyrgyz Christians as a deviant group occurred primarily through introductions by trusted people, networking and the use of various informants to introduce or refer me onto others. The Kyrgyz Christian translators were also a helpful source of access to the community, not only by gaining access to their personal social networks, but also, because of their role as translators, they had links across wide sections of the Kyrgyz Christian community. All of the interviewees were introduced through someone who was known and trusted by them. Without this introduction of trust the author did not engage or involve people in the data gathering process. This was true also for those who appeared to be gate-keepers in the community.

Building rapport is an essential element in both participant observation and in the interview process (Gray et al., 2007, Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). Issues related to building rapport are addressed in more detail in the discussion below on the place of 'power' in the research process and the steps taken by the researcher to limit potential negative effects such as age, gender and nationality. These same steps were important in establishing and maintaining rapport with all those involved in the research process, be it the respondents who participated in the research, the translators and transcribers who worked with the author, or the gate-keepers. Over the time spent living in Kyrgyzstan the researcher was able to learn and understand cultural cues that facilitated rapport, especially the importance of developing meaningful relationships with Kyrgyz Christians and their families.

The extended time in which the research took place provided the opportunity for what Neuman refers to as 'normalising research' (2003:378-379). Normalising research is the process by which the target subjects come to feel comfortable with the research process. This occurs when the subjects of research are able to move from a feeling of strangeness or wariness about what is happening to a feeling of knowing, security and predictability. This was as important for the translators as it was for those who were interviewed. The more normal it was for translators, the more normal they were able to communicate the research process for those being interviewed. There is no prescribed amount of time that should be taken in the research process recognising that this will be guided by the context, the kind of methodology used and ethical issues involved (Marshall and Rossman, 1999, Neuman, 2003:60-61). The field research for this thesis took place between August 2004 and December 2008. The complex and extensive nature of the research context and the methodologies

undertaken were important factors in the length of time taken to undertake the research. Factors influencing the time taken, apart from direct research factors, included issues such as residency, the time given to requirements associated with the responsibilities with the NGO the author received his visa with, and the responsibilities associated with the education of the author's children. Apart from the PhD research the author was able to conduct under the auspices of the NGO the author also held various administrative roles in coordinating the activities of the NGO and its staff. Parents of students were required, as part of admission, to commit to work for five-to-ten hours per week at the international school that his children were attending. This involved, for the author, recess yard duty, teaching physical education and drama classes, and helping to organise major school musical productions.

3.4.2 Semi-structured interviews

3.4.2.1 Design

After a twenty one month engagement in field research the second stage of conducting interviews took place. As the research was still exploratory in nature it was decided to utilise a semi-structured or semi-standardised structure (Berg, 1998:61). A structured interview approach assumes that the researcher knows what it is they are going to discover, that their pre-set questions will give that information and that the subjects that are the focus of the investigation understand clearly what is being asked of them. The unstructured interview assumes that the researcher is seeking to discover something new, does not have pre-set questions in mind, and expects each subject will potentially find very different meanings in the questions

being asked. The semi-structured interview falls between the two and was better suited for this research.

There was a general set of themes that were of interest and after ongoing research a number of more pre-determined questions and topics were developed within those themes (see Appendix #4). The four main sections were: Biographical (personal/family/social) background information, Religious background, Conversion experience, and Kyrgyz ethnic identity. However, the researcher saw these questions and topics as a springboard to explore deeper the experiences and meanings of the respondents and wanted the freedom to diverge to other related issues that might arise from the interview (Berg, 1998:61, Lofland, 1971:81, Marvasti, 2004:21ff).

Interviews are helpful tools in digging deeper to ascertain the meanings and varied nuances that individuals give to their experiences. The semi-structured approach gave room for the author to begin informally to establish rapport, ask indirect questions, put the respondent at ease, and allow time to draw the respondents out (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984:77). The open-ended nature of the questions also facilitated the semi-structured interview format (Neuman, 2003:277).

The differing education and experience levels of the respondents also meant that the ability to comprehend and express information about their experiences varied. Most of the respondents were mostly unfamiliar with the interview process and this required the author to probe and re-word where appropriate in order to draw out responses. This was especially evident early in the interview when respondents typically would give brief responses to the questions. The flexible, interactive nature

of this kind of probing also afforded the opportunity to reword and re-explore issues as insight was gained through the various interviews, encouraging the respondents to give further details about their experiences and the meanings that they give to them (Babbie, 2005:314, Denzin, 1970:129, Lofland, 1971:81-85, Taylor and Bogdan, 1984:92, 96ff). One example of this was a repeated experience that many respondents referred to regarding a paralysing "presence" or "spirit" variously referred to as *albasty* or *basyryk*. As it became clear that this was a pattern in the experiences of the respondents it provided an opportunity to explore this phenomenon with the respondents in both their pre and post conversion experiences. When it was not referred to by a respondent, the researcher was able to introduce the topic to gain further data. Many identified the ceasing of the experience or the ability to have power over it as directly related to their new Christian faith.

Whilst the interview process had a "flexible framework" the underlying premise was a desire to understand the phenomenon under discussion from the subject's perspective (Berg, 1998:112-118, Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983). The semi-structured interview facilitated this well. In-depth qualitative interviewing has been described as 'repeated face-to-face encounters between the researcher and informants directed toward understanding informants' perspectives on their lives, experiences or situations as expressed in their own words (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983:113, Taylor and Bogdan, 1984:77).' Elsewhere it is described as those kinds of interviews that go beyond mere 'yes and no' response formats but rather encourage '"thick" descriptions...[and] produce *elaborated* and *detailed* answers' (Rapley, 2004:15). This was the process used for this research. Although no person was interviewed more than once, each of the interviews was quite lengthy ranging from between one

to three hours each.

An approach that gathers data only from Kyrgyz Christian respondents has limitations. By not gathering data from the non-Christian Kyrgyz community this thesis does not give non-Christian Kyrgyz an opportunity to express their views and interpretations about Kyrgyz conversion, about Kyrgyz Christians, about the interpretations that Kyrgyz Christians have given to Kyrgyz identity and their place in the wider Kyrgyz community. There were three main reasons for not including non-Christian Kyrgyz respondents. First, the research question is focused on understanding the phenomenon of Kyrgyz conversion from the perspective of those who are engaging in it, that is Kyrgyz Christians, and therefore data was gathered from that source. Second, there was also recognition that conversion is a sensitive topic and the act of engaging in conversion in the Kyrgyz community is considered non-normative or deviant and a focus on Kyrgyz Christians allowed the author to build extensive levels of trust and rapport essential for investigating the research topic. Third, there were issues related to resources. It was beyond the author's capacity for time, finances and personnel to be able to extend the research further.

3.4.2.2 Administration of interviews

There are some differences between the way 'participant observers' go about their research with informants and the way the interview style does. Participant observers do so in the midst of the natural settings in which people go about their lives and activities, whereas interviewers organise particular settings for this to take place. The times, places and contexts were arranged ahead of time, in conjunction with the

respondents. Interviews for this research took place in such diverse locations as people's private homes, in the researcher's office, in the researcher's home, a private room of an internet cafe, in the city and in the village. So while the participant observer watches what is happening first-hand, the interviewer is dependent on the accounts of others (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984:78).

While the data for this research was gathered in this form, the researcher was engaged in participant observation with the Kyrgyz Christian community generally, and with some of the informants personally, so that there was a heightened awareness and familiarity of the context and the experiences of those being interviewed. This familiarity with the Kyrgyz Christian community enabled the researcher to design an interview guide to provide a framework to conduct the interviews (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984:92). This process also involved interaction with the author's PhD supervisors at the Flinders University in Adelaide, Australia, while the author was on the field in Kyrgyzstan. This interaction was invaluable, in particular the extended advice and feedback in the development of the themes, questions and structure of the interview schedule.

After the themes/topics/questions were put together these were then translated and back translated into both Kyrgyz and Russian languages by different translators.[21] Prior to this translation the purpose, content and description of the research was discussed in detail with the translators and how the author wanted to conduct it. Some translators tend to give literal translations and others too simple. The author was after the communication of meaning in translation rather than a word for word

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[21] Available from the author.

literal approach. It was recognised that during the course of the interview itself the questions may not be literally asked as they were given to translate, or that new questions, not prepared beforehand may arise out of the interview, nevertheless, it was a helpful process to help clarify culturally specific words and meanings. The translated topics/questions were important when negotiating with gatekeepers concerning the interviews and what the author was likely to cover. The author was not always able to use the translators who did this initial translation for conducting the interviews and so this material was also used for training the translators who helped in the research.

While the author became conversant in the Kyrgyz language during the research period the fluency level was not at a place to be able to do in-depth research in the Kyrgyz language. The author wanted a high degree of accuracy and understanding of the meaning from the informants and so chose to employ local interpreters (at the standard hourly wage rate) when conducting interviews. As the author engaged in participant observation he was able to identify several interpreters (Brislin et al., 1973:62) who were recommended and regularly used by NGO's, churches and the missionary community. The author heard them interpret and asked other locals and expatriates about their interpreting ability. The interpreters who were used were themselves Kyrgyz Christians, whose occupations were as interpreters, and who had fluency in Kyrgyz, Russian, and English languages. This was recognition of the fact that some Kyrgyz are more confident, or proficient, in the Russian language than in the Kyrgyz language. This would often be the case when a Kyrgyz had been primarily educated in Russian language/educational institutions and/or was raised in a highly urbanised setting where the Russian language was the common medium of

communication between mixed ethnic communities. It was also quite common for a person to prefer one language as a primary medium but occasionally intersperse the narrative with words or phrases from the other language. A handful of respondents were themselves fluent English speakers and preferred to be interviewed in that language, in which case the researcher conducted the interview alone.

The author chose interpreters who were Kyrgyz and who were Christians so that the informants would feel at ease to be as open as possible during the interview. Respondents may be less likely to do so if the translators were non-Kyrgyz and non-recognised Christians. When research was conducted in the south of Kyrgyzstan, or in more conservative locations, the author used a female interpreter to interview female respondents and a male interpreter to interview male respondents. This provided an environment where respondents would feel more comfortable in their sharing. This was evident when one female respondent openly shared a life threatening event and potential physical abuse. Both the female interpreter (who was also from the southern Kyrgyzstan region where the interview took place), and author, were taken aback by the intimacy of the sharing.

Before every interview an attempt was made to put the respondent at ease (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984:101), especially as the researcher did not have a personal relationship with most of those being interviewed. This would usually take the form of some greeting and general introduction. Some refreshments such as tea and local snacks were also present. The interpreter would sit to one side of the researcher with the recording instruments placed appropriately between the researcher/interpreter and the interviewee, usually on a table. The interviews took place sitting on either a chair

or on the floor, whatever was appropriate to the particular setting in which the interview was taking place.

The researcher also took time to introduce himself, his family, his relationship to the Kyrgyz Christian community, highlighting relationship links to the respondent, as well as a general introduction to the interview. For every interview the author presented copies of a general information sheet about the interview (Appendix #5), an introduction from the PhD supervisor on university letterhead (Appendix #6), a consent form that outlined their willingness to participate in the interview and description of how the interviews and transcripts would be used, together with guarantees of confidentiality and anonymity (see Appendix #7). All the interviews were recorded by both audio tape and Mp3 recorders and this was communicated beforehand to the respondents. These were both small and unobtrusive and none of the respondents objected or appeared to be significantly affected by their presence. The use of both forms of recording provided a back-up in case one didn't work (which occurred on occasion during the course of the interviews when either a power source stopped or when the author was unaware that the tape had come to an end). It also allowed the researcher to focus on the interview without unnecessarily disturbing the respondent or himself by having to take notes detailed notes during the interview (Schwartz and Jacobs, 1979:43). It also helped in the transcribing of the interviews if one form of recording was not very clear or portions had been lost for some reason (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984:102-103).

Most of the interviews were transcribed by the interpreters who also translated for the interviews (two interviews were transcribed by someone other than one of the

author's interpreters). This had a double function. It not only kept the information confidential, which was important given the close-knit community, but also because the person interpreting was a part of the interview process they found it relatively easy to transcribe. The interpreters and transcribers that were used all signed confidentiality forms as part of the work agreement with the researcher. The researcher also helped to transcribe the English versions. The interviews were randomly checked by another translator. Once the interviews were transcribed in full every effort was made to locate those who had been interviewed to verify the transcripts for themselves.[22] Interviews were conducted in a number of locations around Kyrgyzstan and unfortunately, in a few cases it was not possible to locate all those who had been interviewed to show the transcripts. Some people had moved to an unknown address. One person was a 'stolen bride'[23] after the interview and now lived in a remote area of the country.

3.4.2.3 Life-history narrative approach

Two specific steps were implemented to limit the effect of the potential influence of pre-formatted presentations of testimonies, especially those testimonies heavily influenced by things such as ideology. The first step was the conscious monitoring of the interviews for 'conversion formatted stories'. These were identifiable by some trademark lines, for example, "I became a believer on the ...[specific date]...',

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[22] Thirty-nine out of forty-nine respondents could be located and who were able to read the transcripts of their interviews and sign forms indicating that the transcripts were true copies of the interviews that were conducted.

[23] A cultural phenomenon where a woman is taken, mostly without consent, by a man and his friends and/or relatives to his home where pressure is put to bear on her to accept the 'marriage proposal'. The cultural/social shame of returning home without accepting the proposal is often enough for the girl/woman to accept.

followed by their 'testimony'. At these moments the interviewer would re-direct the interview away from 'the format'. The second step was the life-history narrative framework used for the interviews. The respondents 'conversion story' was shared in the context of their 'life story' not the starting point of the discussion thus enabling a more natural telling of the events, memories and experiences related to the phenomenon under discussion (Liamputtong and Ezzy, 2005:138). Other researchers (Wohlrab-Sahr, 1999, Zebiri, 2008) engaged in studies of religious conversion have also found this helpful. Denzin (1970:220) defines life history as 'the experiences and definitions held by one person, one group, or one organization as this person, or organization interprets those experiences...[and] that throws light on the subjective behaviour of individuals or groups.' While the research here is addressing the individual, the focus of the life-history narrative is on understanding 'sociological questions about groups, communities, and contexts through individuals' lived experiences' (Marshall and Rossman, 1999:123, Denzin, 1970:227-228). It has also been pointed out that the conversion narrative, communicated in the interview format, 'private, informal and interactive', is less likely to be found to be premeditated or 'packaged' (Zebiri, 2008:56).

For the purposes of this research an 'edited' life-history/autobiography form was used during the interviews.[24] This form, as an alternative to what Denzin calls 'comprehensive and topical autobiographies' (1970:226), allows the sociologist to intentionally monitor the respondent's accounts by choosing particular materials to expand, while overlooking other parts. At the same time it is recognised that the sociologist will inevitably always put their mark on an interview as it is they who

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[24] See also Helling's description of 'life history as means' as opposed to 'life history as a topic'. HELLING, I. 1988. The Life History Method. *Studies in Symbolic Interaction,* 9**,** 211-243.

question and prod the respondent to articulate more or less on their lives and the meanings they give it. Ultimately the focus was not simply on a general life history, but investigating the phenomenon and place of religious conversion to Protestant Christianity in the light of that life-history, not simply as an isolated event/process. Combining the principles outlined by Young, Lemert and Denzin (in Denzin, 1970:234-236), the following general guidelines were used: eliciting standard personal-societal data on the subject and their significant others, the natural history of the respondent including important memories and/or events, social participation with particular reference to the religious, events leading up, during and following the process of conversion and the meanings given to them, and societal reaction to the respondent (especially given the deviant label associated with conversion to Christianity).

In keeping with the semi-structured interview design (see page 16), different types of questions were employed in drawing out the conversion narrative of the respondents. An intentional attempt was made to avoid addressing the issue of conversion early on in the interview. The interviews generally began with a few biographical questions regarding such things as the person's age, marriage status and immediate family. The interview then progressed with a series of descriptive questions (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984:89) that elicited a narrative of their life story focusing on such topics as where they grew up, significant events or memories of their lives, the extent of their education and/or work experience, world view issues, their life before (if they were old enough) and after the Soviet Union, and the attitude of their family towards religious issues for an example of the kinds of the topics and kinds of questions that were generally followed with the interviews). At some point in that narrative the

events and consequence of their conversion experience would unfold but it did so in the context of their life story, in a natural way. This approach proved useful. There were several occasions when the person being interviewed immediately struck out on their conversion story as if this was an opportunity for them to share their testimony of salvation even though the author had carefully explained when the interview began that author would also be asking them to talk about their live story. The narrative strategy enabled the author to redirect the conversation away from immediately focusing on how respondents became Christians, and therefore away from pre-formatted version of their conversion.

While the author became aware of many of the religious terms and phrases, experiences, and behaviour of the Kyrgyz Christians (through participant observation), the author made it a point, during the interviews, to ask respondents, through probing, to explain for themselves what these were and meant (Lofland, 1971:81). In this regard, Schwartz and Jacobs (1979:42) comment:

> The respondent knowing his own life history, the ins and outs of the cultural milieu of which he is a part, has an "ethnographic context" in which he decides both what to say to the interviewer and the precise meaning and significance of what he is saying (as seen by the insider). Unless provision is made for it [such as participant observation and probing during the interview itself] the interviewer does not have an ethnographic context within which to interpret what the respondent means, (as opposed to what he says) and decide how to follow up leads, what is important and unimportant, or whether he is getting the official, versus the actual, version of the information sought.

It has been pointed out that precise causal inferences are difficult to draw from narrative data, but narratives do afford the opportunity to gain insight into an understanding and explanation of social reality from the point of view of the members experiencing the phenomenon (Neuman, 2003:448, Denzin, 1970:220). As interviews take place with increasing numbers of people, patterns may emerge that lead to further enquiry (Schwartz and Jacobs, 1979:62). Although there is an inherent tension in accepting a respondent's story (and their construction of it) as being true there is equally a danger in presuming that the researcher's interpretation of the same events (and their construction of it) is accurate. Schwartz and Jacobs (1979:72-73) argue, aware of the criticism of other social scientists, that as much as possible one should 'believe what you are told...[and that this policy can lead] to impressive discoveries', after all, the researcher is seeking to describe the phenomenon in question from the respondent's viewpoint. This thesis takes a position similar to that of Miller and Glassner (2004) which moves beyond the objectivist (information as fact) versus constructivist (information as constructed) debate and seeks to glean from both views in the understanding and interpretation of the data gained through field research and interviewing. As Sanders comments,

> [w]e do well to heed the cautions offered by postmodern ethnographers...[t]here is considerable difference between being sceptical about the bases of truth claims while carefully examining the grounds upon which these claims are founded (a conventional interactionist enterprise) and denying that truth – as a utilitarian orientation – exists at all (in Miller and Glassner, 2004).

3.4.3 Survey/questionnaire

As a follow through from the in-depth interviews a questionnaire was designed and administered (Appendix #8).[25] Quite different from the qualitative approaches already discussed this method was specifically aimed at identifying how widespread some of the main features drawn from the interviews were in the wider Kyrgyz Christian community. The questionnaires provided important demographic data allowing the researcher to understand better the general features of the Kyrgyz Christian community. Finally the data gained information afforded the opportunity to develop some broad generalisations regarding the phenomenon of Protestant Christianity among the Kyrgyz. While the intention of administering the questionnaire was to gain greater depth and insight to the data collected from the interviews it was also seen as an opportunity to compare some of the issues raised in the interviews with a wider group of respondents.

3.4.3.1 Design

The questionnaire took approximately thirty minutes to complete and was made up of thirty questions with 104 possible responses and covered four broad themes: religious background and socialisation, including the process of conversion - questions one to fifteen, Kyrgyz identity - questions sixteen to twenty, family and community responses to conversion- questions twenty-one to twenty-five, personal background (socio-demographic information) – questions twenty-six to thirty. Questions relating to biographical information included identifying the location

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[25] Kyrgyz and Russian language versions available from the author.

where they grew up, where they presently live, gender, marital status, age, occupation and education. This not only was valuable information about the socio-demographic make-up of Kyrgyz Christians but also become independent variables (Neuman, 2003:149) in further analysis of the data as it relates to the social phenomenon under investigation. Information gained from the questionnaires on issues related to previous background and attitude towards religion, the process of conversion, pre-conversion experiences, post-conversion changes and Kyrgyz identity can be compared and analysed with these socio-demographic variables to give a broader indication of possible relationships and patterns and differences. For example this can be used to give a comparison between male and female respondents, those from different life-cycle age groups, and those from different educational backgrounds. This information also was able to help identify possible general characteristics of the community under investigation such as age, gender, and education levels. Responses of family and community towards the Kyrgyz Christian relate to issues concerning both the conversion process and Kyrgyz identity.

Most questions were closed questions with fixed answer options for each question. It was decided that the interviews provided enough qualitative data for there not to be open-ended explanations. The author also wanted to limit the amount of data collected and analysed with this method. There were four exceptions. Three questions offered an 'other' answer with a small space provided to a very short explanation (a few words). These were #1, 12, 18 - to identify a church denomination not listed, personal problems not listed, important Kyrgyz characteristics not listed. The fourth question offered a space to indicate the profession of the respondent.

The process of the formulation of the questionnaires took place in a similar way to the design of the themes and questions used for the semi-structured interviews. Once the questions, order and structure of the questionnaire was decided upon in English the questionnaire was then given to two translators to translate into Kyrgyz and Russian. These two versions were then shown to a third translator who recommended a final translation that incorporated the best elements of both. Emphasis was given to the most accurate and easiest to understand version as the survey was to be self-administered and those reading it will be of different literate and education levels. Careful consideration was given to the meaning of particular words and the wording of the questions in Kyrgyz and Russian with an understanding that words in one language cannot be literally translated into another (Brislin et al., 1973:56). As has been shown through other cross-cultural research the most important dimension of translation is the equivalence of meaning (Brislin et al., 1973:50-52). Instead of a literal or 'linguistic equivalence' this approach attempts to focus on the functional, conceptual or 'source-target meaning' for the research tools. What is important in the cross-cultural research process is that the intended meaning is communicated and understood by the target respondents and this often does not occur when literal translation takes place. In one example concerning the questionnaire that was administered the term 'religious authority' was replaced with the word 'mullah' (title for the person who had religious authority in the mosque) in one of the questions. This better reflected the information that was being sought through the question and was immediately understandable to the respondents, whereas the original term created some ambiguity. The final version was then shown to several Kyrgyz Christians for ease of reading and understanding.

Once this was completed a pilot test was undertaken for the first eighteen interviews (Neuman, 2003:267). As a result of this two changes were made. An extra category 'extended family' was added to question #25a and #25b. The original word 'family' was not clear enough and needed to be separated to show the respondents immediate family (parents and siblings) and the extended family (beyond the immediate family). The option 'other' with room for comment was removed in all questions except for #36 and #39 for practical reasons to reduce the amount of information being asked for. After forty two questionnaires were completed two other changes were made. In questions #10a and #10b the options never/one or two times/ a few times/often were collapsed to three options, never/sometimes/often as it was felt the difference was not considered important. In question #25a and #25b the word 'religious leader' was replaced with the word 'mullah' as this made clearer sense to the Kyrgyz when reading the questionnaire. From questionnaire number forty-three to 427, no further wording changes were made.[26]

3.4.3.2 Administration of questionnaires

Four interpreters were primarily used for the interviews and these same four were also used as research assistants to help administer the questionnaires and were paid the standard wages for this work. Some individual training was given by the researcher to the translators regarding the administration of the survey to encourage consistency and accuracy in the data gathering process (Neuman, 2003:267). As with

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[26] There were two formatting versions of the questionnaire that did not affect the wording, order or meaning of the survey. The first format had listed thirty questions with numbers 10, 11, 16, 21 and 25 having parts (a) and (b) For ease of computing answers and final analysis a second version was designed which listed every possible answer as a separate question, one hundred and four possible answers in all.

the interviews the survey was conducted all over Kyrgyzstan. Kyrgyz Christians in seven of the eight *oblasts* or provinces participated. Most were conducted in the major towns of the provinces but on a few occasions the survey was also completed in village locations. In group settings verbal communication was given to explain what the questionnaire was about and how to fill it in (Mann, 1968:132). While most respondents were able to fill in the questionnaires a number of participants who were much older still found some questions difficult to understand and fill in. In these cases the interpreter would verbally explain the particular question and the procedure for how to mark the responses.

One of the first group settings was a large church in the south of Kyrgyzstan. After the church service, over thirty people volunteered to complete the questionnaire. The experience of filling in a survey like this was new to most of the people. The author had one interpreter cum research assistant at the time and found that it was too large a gathering to work with effectively even though it was possible to get a large number of respondents in one location. After each person completed the questionnaire, which would take approximately thirty minutes, either the research assistant or the author would check to make sure all the questions had been completed. A number of respondents had not completed all the questions because they were unfamiliar with having to answer questions both vertically (i.e. down) and horizontally, and in those cases they were then asked to complete all the questions. After this experience the author tried to limit the administration of the survey to smaller groups of ten people or less, although it meant that it took longer to complete the survey.

As the questionnaires were collected and returned to the author the details were entered into a computer by the researcher and added to an Excel spreadsheet. Each answer had a separate code and numbered according to the potential responses available. These were totalled using formulas from within the Microsoft EXCEL programme and later transferred into IBM SPSS 18 software for analysis.

3.5 Ethical considerations

In advance of the administration of the interviews and survey ethics approval was gained from the Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee of the Flinders University of South Australia. Issues of confidentiality and anonymity have been covered briefly in the administration of the research methods. Before each of the interviews the researcher provided written documentation about the interviews and research project for every respondent. This included a formal introduction from the researcher's supervisor, a brief description of the research and a consent form. After allowing the respondent to read these, or have them read by the interpreter when requested, the researcher verbally went over the same material. The author explained the purpose of the interviews, the themes that would be covered by the interviews, and how the information given in the interviews would be used by the researcher. It was communicated that the respondent was free to indicate any time in the interview if they did not want to answer any question or continue with the interview. Both confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed by the researcher. Actual names would not be used at any time when the author referred to the respondent or their interview. Only those people authorised by the respondent in the consent form would have direct access to the interviews (tapes/Mp3 recordings/transcripts) and these

would remain in the possession of the researcher and the university (Flinders University of South Australia) he is associated with. The interpreters and transcribers used by the researcher also signed confidentiality forms. Once the interviews were transcribed, every effort was made to locate the interview respondent for them to read through the interviews and then sign the consent form to indicate that it was a true record of the interview.

The questionnaires were treated in a similar fashion. No personal identification was indicated on the questionnaire. Identification was noted only by a number indicated, the date of the interview, the location of the interview, the province (or state) of the respondent's parents, and the name of the researcher/research assistant who checked the returned questionnaire. Lastly, on the top of every page of the questionnaire it was clearly marked 'confidential'. The questionnaire were collected and kept in the possession of the researcher.

There are limitations with the field research/participant observation approach. It is dependent on the sensitivity and integrity of the researcher and their ability to understand fully the social processes concerned and the meaning attributed to it by the subjects or respondents. The need to be involved and yet detached is a necessary but not easily managed skill (Schwartz and Jacobs, 1979:48). It is also dependent on the ability of the researcher to be aware of the effect they have had on the research context as an outsider, and to locate any bias that they may bring to the research process - how they interact, observe and interpret. The researcher, in that sense is never 'neutral' (Neuman, 2003:364). Rambo states that in conversion studies 'assessments are *always* made from a values orientation [and when researchers

are]...explicit and candid about their own values and biases [this] can help make the assessment as fair as possible and allow the reader to bear these biases in mind...' (Rambo, 1993:142, 144).

Another related area that has the potential to negatively impact the research is the issue of power and status of both the researcher and the researched (Babbie, 2005:301, Neuman, 2003:397). The background of the researcher and the subjects being researched including areas such as gender, race, nationality, education, class status, marriage status, age, religious attitude, and group status (a leader or a subordinate). Each of these factors will have an effect on field research (Neuman, 2003:371, Miller and Glassner, 2004:127). It is essential that the researcher take this into account in the way they enter the field, engage the research subjects, and interpret the data collected. The research is also dependent on the accuracy and credibility – the openness and honesty - of the information gained from the subjects under consideration (see later discussion on validity and reliability).

One of the ways the issue of power was taken into account was in the way interviews were conducted with women. In the northern area of Kyrgyzstan the people are generally less conservative with reference to the role and status of women. Here, while the author did use both male and female translators, those interviewed came from both sexes. However, in the south of Kyrgyzstan, where society is generally more conservative, the author used a female translator to interview women and a male translator to interview men in order to provide the most conducive environment for the respondents to share their conversion story. As much as possible due consideration was given to the interviewees preference for where they would like to

be interviewed in order to create a situation where they had some control over the interview environment. Issues of the researcher's foreignness could never be completely dispelled. Neither could the researcher have control over past experiences (positive or negative) or attitudes of the target subjects towards an Australian or foreigners who may be associated with Australians. This is where participant observation strengthened the methodological approach. Some of the ways the researcher addressed this included engagement in a process of learning the Kyrgyz language, the use of Kyrgyz translators, accommodation and respect for Kyrgyz culture – appropriate behaviour when relating to Kyrgyz, the clothes the author wore and the way the author received and participated in traditional hospitality.[27] So, while there are concerns about power relationships and its effect on the research process, when these are appropriately taken into account by the researcher, this method offers the opportunity to gain rich insights into social phenomenon (Schwartz and Jacobs, 1979, Babbie, 2005).

3.6 Reliability and validity

Qualitative research, like quantitative research must be rigorous, ethical and valid. Issues of validity (the truth or accuracy of the interpretation of the social phenomenon under consideration) and reliability (the level of consistency noted by

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[27] Within the first year of living in Kyrgyzstan the researcher's family was invited to live with a Kyrgyz family for a short time. One of the privileges of an honoured male guest is to be presented with a whole sheep's head to be eaten down to the bone. While half of the head may be generously shared with others the other half is supposed to be consumed *in toto*. The author somehow managed to do this. The point of course was not to show off the researcher's prowess at eating exotic food. The story about how the author ate the sheep's head to the bone was repeated to many Kyrgyz (not by the researcher) over the four to five years that the author resided in Kyrgyzstan and positively presented an image of the researcher's identity as an outsider who respects and appreciates Kyrgyz people and culture.

the researcher across separate situations or interviews) are necessary for *quality* qualitative research (paraphrase of Hammersley in Silverman, 2005:209-210). Issues of reliability can be problematic for field research. The researcher relies on the information communicated by the target respondents, referred to as 'internal consistency and "integrity"' (Schwartz and Jacobs, 1979:62) and on the ability of the researcher to effectively understand and reflect on the information given. This raises the question of how credible the *person* giving the information is and how credible is that *information.* Individuals selected for interviewing were introduced to the researcher by trusted informants within the Christian community. While this did not completely remove the possibility for error it did reduce the likelihood of an inappropriate or non-credible respondent. The biographical/life-history approach utilised in the interviews helped to minimise the constructed nature of conversion narrative (the information being given by the respondents) as it directed the respondents away from focusing on the conversion events and allowed them to tell their story as a natural progression of their life.

One important question to consider related to issues of deception (Schwartz and Jacobs, 1979:62): Is there any reason that the respondent would deliberately seek to hide or mislead their true responses? Douglas (1976:57) speaks of informants using misinformation, lies, evasions and fronts to do this (see also Plummer, 2001:155). Factors that may influence this include things such as the location of the interview, the presence of other people during the interview, fear of revealing sensitive information or information that would reflect badly on others, fear of how the information would be used by the researcher, or answers that reflect the ideology, or correct versions, of the group that they may be a part of (Neuman, 2003:388-389).

The researcher needs to take into account what factors may hinder the respondent from communicating reliably or feeling at ease to respond naturally and freely. These include previous discussions on the affect that the characteristics of the researcher may have on the respondent such as their age, gender, class, nationality, and in the case if this particular research, attitude to religion. The researcher also needs to be careful not to deliberately prod or exaggerate certain elements of the respondent's interview into fitting previously held assumptions or theoretical frameworks (Plummer, 2001:156, Babbie, 2005:322, Neuman, 2003:298).

Plummer (2001:157) points out that all sources of bias cannot be completely removed from the research process. The responsibility of the researcher is not to eliminate all the factors, but rather to seek to openly identify potential bias, and state how they may affect the process and the results. Recognising these issues the researcher did take steps to reduce some of the factors that may negatively affect the interview process. There were forty-nine people interviewed for the research so each case required individual attention. Each interview took place in a private location agreed to by the respondents. Except for the presence of an interpreter, every attempt was made for the interviews to take place when no other person was present. The few exceptions included the presence of a spouse. The respondents were informed that if they did not want to answer any question they did not have to. Except for a few cases where the respondents were not able to be found again, the transcribed interviews were shown to the respondents who then signed their agreement as to the accuracy of what they had said. One respondent (a prominent lawyer) was surprised at how open they had been about their lives and questioned me again about who would have access to the interview. After assuring them of confidentiality and the fact that no

interview would be accessible to the public they agreed to sign. Some respondents were not bothered by this at all and were quite happy for their real names to be used. However, for consistency with the research anonymity was maintained for all respondents.

At its basic level the researcher needs to take into consideration both the account and the context in evaluating the reliability of the information given and any potential biases that may influence it. As it has been pointed out by others (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983:107, Miller and Glassner, 2004:124ff), in the sense that the data gained through interviews reflects both information about the subject (the respondents experience of conversion) and a social construction (context), the data gathered need to be seen as both 'resource and topic' and some degree of perspective is required when analysing the data. It cannot always be clear where real information and constructed information takes place or the mixing of the two.

Another method for measuring validity is through the collection of data from different vantage points referred to as triangulation (Marvasti, 2004:114). As mentioned earlier this has been a strategy of this research project. Interviewing a large number of respondents provided an opportunity to compare and contrast the interviews and issues raised. Themes and patterns that have arisen out of the interviews were developed into a questionnaire which was administered to 427 respondents. The results of the analysis of these questionnaires were used to add depth to the results of the interviews. Likewise, personal observation by the researcher during the field research, and which continued throughout the field research period, added insight to the results of the interviews. There is potential bias

that the researcher brings to the analysis and interpretation of the data as well as the administration of the research tools. An essential component that adds weight to validity in the research is the willingness of the researcher to be up-front if these potentially exist, allowing others to bear these in mind when analysing the researcher's conclusions.

The practice of referring only to a few highlighted examples, in the researchers interpretation of the data, referred to as anecdotalism (Silverman, 2006:211) is also a further danger. To limit the effects of this attention has been given in the thesis to the use of repeated examples, extensive quotations of those being interviewed rather than simply paraphrasing (Seale, 1999:148), acknowledgement when examples do not fit, and the exploration of alternative explanations (Silverman, 2005:110-222, Marvasti, 2004:114).

3.7 Analysis of data

3.7.1 Semi-structured interviews

The assumptions behind the analysis of the data were based from a broadly phenomenological approach which seeks to understand the context and meaning from the respondents point of view (Marvasti, 2004:4). As the narratives were conducted and analysed through comparison identification of common themes, patterns and ideas in relation to the conversion process emerged. This became the basis for the development of the self-administered questionnaire and the interpretation of the data. The author's approach has been similar to that of Zebiri (2008:7) who investigated the lives of British Muslim converts. In her research

Zebiri also identified two main approaches to conversion studies: the functional approach and discourse analysis approach. The functional approach considers what conversion means in the context of a person's life, and discourse analysis considers how conversion narratives are constructed and produce the desired result (Liamputtong and Ezzy, 2005:262). Zebiri suggested that combining these two approaches gives a fuller picture of conversion. The author has used a similar approach which is evident in the contextual approach that undergirded this research - the biographical or narrative format used in the interviews, and in the analysis of the interview data to understand how Kyrgyz Christians constructed issues related to Kyrgyz identity.

The analysis of the interview transcripts was a process that took place from the first interviews that were conducted, although initially it was a superficial analysis (Babbie, 2008). The focus was on identifying themes that were consistent through the interviews. Once the interviews were completed and transcribed a more detailed and thorough analysis took place. The interviews were initially coded on the basis of some of the research questions developed for the research. Later, as the interviews were analysed in detail, other themes and patterns that emerged were added and also used as codes, often referred to as thematic content coding or thematic analysis (Marshall and Rossman, 1999:151-152, Kellehear, 1993:32ff, Liamputtong and Ezzy, 2005:270). As further analysis took place coding was administered over all the interviews. On Crabtree and Miller's continuum of ideal-type analysis strategies (Marshall and Rossman, 1999:151-152) this would also be identified as 'template analysis.' In a process which included examination, comparison between interviews, conceptualisation and categorisation, understandings of the material began to emerge

and an attempt to explore these throughout the interviews was undertaken with due care given to their relevance to the research questions and the social phenomenon that was being investigated (Marshall and Rossman, 1999:157, Corbin and Strauss, 2008).

While some manual coding and categorisation was done the researcher also made use of the computer software programme NVIVO. NVIVO was a helpful tool to relatively easily code across the forty-nine interviews. It eased the time consuming work of marking, cutting, pasting, and collating copious amounts of interview transcripts (Bryman and Burgess, 1994:221). This did not take away the need for the researcher to be immersed in the transcripts or the concentration and effort required to code and analyse the data in the gathered material. But all the coded sections could be brought together in a single document within a very short period of time. Likewise key words and phrases and various levels of contexts could be located and highlighted in a similar manner. These were then grouped together in themes through the interviews and analysed.

3.7.2 Survey

The following section considers the analysis of the survey results. Respondents marked their answers to the survey by either ticking or crossing the boxes next to the questions using either a pen or pencil supplied by the author or research assistants. After completing the surveys either the author and/or the research assistants collected the completed surveys and returned them to me where I collated the returned surveys and stored them for analysis. The Microsoft EXCEL programme was initially utilised for inputting and analysing the data. The questionnaire had 104 responses that

needed answering. Each possible answer was coded with a number between 1-10 except for the responses to #36, #69, #102 and #103.[28] The answers were inputted into EXCEL by the code number. This process revealed a number of different errors that required some data cleaning. In fifty-four of the questions some respondents gave more than one possible answer when only one answer was asked for, or answered in written form when a simple indication for one response (allowing for a numerical answer) was required. After this was completed all the questions were then put in a numerical form that matched the coding for the survey. Formulas within the EXCEL programme allowed for a comparison between questions and between different variables. EXCEL formulas allowed for these to be analysed and quantified in terms of the numbers of respondents who answered and percentages compared to the complete survey sample (N=427). At a later point the data from EXCEL was transferred into IBM SPSS for more detailed statistical analysis which included identifying statistical significance through Pearson Chi-Square test, One Way ANOVA, correlation between variables, and T-Test pair samples.

3.8 Summary

As is evident from the complexity of the research questions, the field research site, and the lack of available data regarding the phenomenon under study, it was appropriate to use a mixed-method approach in investigating Kyrgyz conversion to Christianity. The interviews conducted with forty-nine respondents allowed for in-depth probing into the experiences and meaning of conversion from the respondent's

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[28] #36 and #69 gave opportunity to write answers other than those listed in a category 'other'. #102 was for the year of birth and #103 allowed for respondents to input their own occupation. These categories allowed for more than 10 possible answers.

point of view. From these interviews a survey instrument was developed and administered, with 427 responses, to gain further information regarding the socio-demographic make-up of the wider Kyrgyz Christian community, as well as data concerning issues related to the process of conversion and identity issues. The socio-demographic data indicate that the Kyrgyz Christian community in this study is reasonably representative of the general Kyrgyz community including age groups, education, employment and marital status. The one data that stands out is that there is a 2:1 gender ratio between female and male Kyrgyz Christians.

The socio-demographic-economic data does not appear to give any clear indications which would explain the phenomenon of Kyrgyz conversion to Protestant Christianity. The one factor related to urban and rural issues do highlight the fact that the urban environments, particularly of the bigger towns/cities provide the opportunity to be exposed to new religious [Christian] ideas, to come into contact with Protestant Christians, and the greater freedom to experiment with and practice Protestant Christianity. A detailed analysis of the interviews and the non-socio-demographic data from the surveys is therefore necessary to draw out this information. While the research uncovered a great deal of information regarding the Kyrgyz conversion process the dominant theme to emerge was that of Kyrgyz identity – what constitutes Kyrgyz identity; how Protestant Christianity and Christians were viewed through these lenses; how conversion to Protestant Christianity was understood; how the wider Kyrgyz community responded to that conversion; and, more particularly, how Kyrgyz Christians have engaged these issues and reconstructed their sense of ethnic identity. The following two chapters will

analyse the data from the survey (Chapter Four) and the interviews (Chapter Five)

noting common threads and patterns that begin to emerge in relation to this theme.

CHAPTER FOUR - Analysis of quantitative data - the survey

4.1 Ethnicity, family and religion in Kyrgyz conversion

Religious conversion is a process of changing ultimate allegiance, or loyalty, from one source of religious authority to another with the resulting changes in attitude, values and behaviour (Gillespie, 1991:125-126, Köse, 1996, Snow and Machalek, 1983a:264, Travisano, 1970:600). In other words, it entails a fundamental shift in identity based on religious grounds especially when it involves conversion between major religious traditions. As stated in Chapter Two, while there has been acknowledgment of religious revitalisation in Kyrgyzstan and of religious conversion among the Kyrgyz in the post-Soviet era there has been scant research done to understand the dynamics and consequences of this phenomenon.

Conversion has typically been explained as the result of alienation or anomie, the tension at not being able to meet up to or attain societal expectations, or the result of socio-structural issues such as those related to status, age, education or gender, or more broadly as through the effect of globalisation. Others have considered it to be the result of psychological or emotional deprivations in which the conversion ideology/organisation offers religious solutions. Role learning theory contends that changes in conversion are the result of learning and living out roles in the process of socialisation into a religious group and suggests changes in this context are merely temporary and outward. Network theories propose that the influence of trust

attachments (relationships) is a primary factor in recruiting and sustaining conversion.

Another suggestion looks to an economic model and views conversion as something which occurs when one religious group loses its religious monopoly. In the process of de-regulation a competitive religious market place ensues with the more active groups gaining religious adherents at the expense of other groups. Out of the broader economic model the idea that people will make religious choices based on social, cultural and religious capital has been developed. This latter model draws on various elements of both social/cultural and rational choice theory which are appropriate to this investigation. This approach helps to explain how people make religious choices and how conversion becomes a means of identity transformation or reconstruction. While drawing on aspects of the various approaches mentioned above, this thesis will focus on this latter approach.

This thesis considers how Kyrgyz Christians have come to reconstruct their identity, particularly, ethnic identity, through religious conversion. Arguments have been put forward that support the primary agency of the individual in the construction of identity, while others stress the importance of the social environment (Zebiri, 2008:89). Here I consider how conversion is a dual process whereby individuals find and construct new identity through religious change but in the context of the social and cultural community (Berger, 1991, Castells, 2004, Ellison and Sherkat, 1990, Epstein, 1978, Johnson, 1977, Oakes, 1996). Given the sudden rise of Kyrgyz conversion to Protestant Christianity when none previously existed, and given the

strong link between religion and ethnic identity among the Kyrgyz, this chapter also seeks to identify potential factors that have contributed to Kyrgyz conversion.

In the case of religious conversion the social community with which an individual identifies can mean both the community from which they originated (e.g. the wider Kyrgyz community) as well as the new religious community into which they have committed themselves (e.g. the new Protestant Christian community). Berger and Luckmann (1966:174ff, cf. Jones, 1977:61) refer to the new conversion community as a 'plausibility structure' that serves as the social vehicle of transformation. While individual conversion can *take place* without the need for a conversion community the ability to *maintain* a conversion identity requires the recognition and affirmation of a conversion community (Köse, 1996:132ff). In the Kyrgyz Christian conversion there is a clear sense in which the conversion community is represented both by a localised community (specific local church community) and also by the broader or global Christian community.

Social relationships are foundational for conversion and a sense of identity (Snow et al., 1983b, Stark and Bainbridge, 1980, Stark and Finke, 2000). In the case of close-knit societies, such as the Kyrgyz, where there is a high degree of social integration the role of social relationships would appear to be especially important in the process. This thesis investigates the notion that for there to be successful 'societal innovation', such as the establishment of new religious identities, there must be some positive social reinforcement from the innovators (the religious converts) and from the social group in which the innovation has taken place (the wider Kyrgyz community) (cf. Barth, 1969a:32-35). In bringing change religious converts will seek

to find ways to uphold social and cultural continuity. Kyrgyz Christians attempt to engage with the wider non-Christian Kyrgyz community in such a way that the innovative, some would consider 'deviant', presence of Kyrgyz Christianity gains acceptance, or at least tolerance, allowing for the possibility of further growth..

The context of Kyrgyz identity is particularly linked with idea of ethnic identity referred to in Chapter One. An important element in ethnic identity is the idea of boundary maintenance – definitions of who is in the community, and the 'Other', and who is not in the community. Barth identifies the fact that ethnic markers are made up of those things that can be changed – diacritical signs - (dress, language, religion etc) and those that cannot (e.g. skin colour) (1969a:14). Over time it is possible that one or more the diacritical signs become so embedded in the community that they become defining markers of ethnic identity. This would support the idea that identity is largely a social construct, a dynamic phenomena, that has the potential for change and transformation, rather than a fixed, unalterable given (Jones, 1977:60, Zebiri, 2008:89). This is an important issue that is fundamental to the argument of this thesis which will be developed in this chapter, and in the following chapters.

As described in Chapter One the Kyrgyz are identified as one such ethnic group that have come to identify and distinguish themselves from other ethnic groups. Apart from distinguishing physical markers such as their strong Asiatic features the Kyrgyz have been identified and understand themselves as having an essential, even absolutist, Muslim identity. It has already been pointed out that a common refrain in Kyrgyzstan is, 'to be Kyrgyz is to be Muslim.' Kyrgyz social and ethnic identity is

intimately linked with an overarching Muslim identity (Haghayeghi, 1996, Hilgers, 2006, Manz, 1998). Kyrgyz religious conversion challenges this accepted construct.

Issues of social and cultural identity are at the heart of Kyrgyz conversion. But if religious identity is coterminous with ethnic identity for the Kyrgyz what happens in religious conversion? It has been suggested that conversion is most likely to occur in a situation which allows for continuity with social, religious and cultural capital (Stark and Finke, 2000, cf. Sherkat, 1991, Sherkat and Wilson, 1995). This chapter will begin to consider whether or not a shift in religious allegiance in Kyrgyz conversion to Protestant Christianity has resulted in a disjunction from or continuity with their socio-cultural-religious context. Is there a rejection or affirmation of Kyrgyz ethnicity and if so what form does this take?

This chapter will investigate notions of Kyrgyz ethnicity, family closeness, and religiosity as key elements in Kyrgyz identity and in Kyrgyz religious conversion from Islam to Protestant Christianity. As mentioned above, ethnic identity is often defined in contrast to the 'Other' [non-Kyrgyz] and that one of the essential ethnic identity markers for the Kyrgyz is that they are Muslim. In the present research context Kyrgyz are converting to what is considered the religious 'Other' – Christianity. This chapter will investigate issues related to the understanding of the 'Other' - Kyrgyz Christians' knowledge and attitudes towards Christianity and Christians, and the Kyrgyz community responses to conversion, as indicated by Kyrgyz Christians. These themes will be considered in light of pre and post conversion understandings to note possible changes that have taken place. The data for this chapter comes from the survey and will highlight key findings in the

conversion of Kyrgyz to Protestant Christianity and in the process of identity construction. The survey data and analysis focuses on the Kyrgyz Christian community. It does not reflect the wider Kyrgyz community as whole. Though the findings may identify similarity in the wider Kyrgyz community, the data collected and analysed came only from Kyrgyz Christian respondents.

4.2 Ethnicity and Kyrgyz culture – Muslim or Christian?

The findings (Table 4.1) show that the important[29] characteristic for Kyrgyz Christians in defining their ethnicity was that they were born in a Kyrgyz family (76%), followed by one who practices important Kyrgyz values (74%), and speaking the Kyrgyz language (73%). While it may be stating the obvious that being born in a Kyrgyz family clearly marks you as being Kyrgyz, blood (family) identity is crucial to the idea of *inherent* Kyrgyzness (*kyrgyzchylyk* - Kyrgyz identity).

Kyrgyz Christians identify what they consider to be inherent or essential characteristics to identify one as being Kyrgyz *other* than being Muslim. Family/blood bonding is the crucial 'nature' or unalterable marker in ethnic identity for Kyrgyz Christians. It connects a Kyrgyz to their immediate family and to the ancestors - very important to the self-awareness of the Kyrgyz as a people. Other characteristics mentioned relate to the idea of 'nurture' – things that we are socialised into – language, values, traditions, and religion. However, in the Kyrgyz context, it is assumed that Muslim religious identity is also inherent to Kyrgyz ethnicity and

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[29] These percentages were calculated by collapsing the answers for both 'very important' and 'important' responses.

identity. As will be discussed further in Chapter Five, it is commonly understood by the Kyrgyz community that you are 'born Muslim'.

Table 4.1 The level of importance given to Kyrgyz cultural characteristics by Kyrgyz Christians

LEVEL OF IMPORTANCE	CULTURAL CHARACTERISTICS				
	Born in Kyrgyz Family	Speaks Kyrgyz Language	A Muslim	Attends important family events	Practises Kyrgyz values
	Valid percent (Frequency)	Valid Percent (Frequency)	Valid Percent (Frequency)	Valid Percent (Frequency)	Valid Percent (Frequency)
Important[30]	76[31] (323)	73 (310)	16 (66)	56 (176)	74 (314)
Not important	20 (83)	25 (104)	77 (326)	37 (156)	22 (93)
Unsure	4 (19)	2 (9)	7 (30)	6 (25)	4 (18)
Total	100 (425)	100 (423)	100 (422)	100 (424)	100 (425)

Using analysis of variance (ANOVA) with SPSS software an investigation was made to identify whether there were any relationship between gender, age and education[32] of the survey participants and the various cultural characteristics set out in Table 4.1 (see Tables 4.2a and 4.2b below).

Table 4.2a Descriptives for 'Born in a Kyrgyz family'

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error
Born in a Kyrgyz family	< 26	99	1.62	.752	.076
	26-40	192	1.45	.750	.054
	41-55	91	1.86	.914	.096
	>55	22	1.64	.848	.181
	Total	404	1.59	.808	.040

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[30] Very important and important categories have been collapsed.

[31] All numbers have been rounded off without decimal point so the percentages reflected in the total columns are occasionally below or above 100. This is true for all tables used in this chapter.

[32] Due to the volume of the data only those tables which included data showing statistical significance are included here. Additional tables are available from the author.

Table 4.2b ANOVA analysis for 'Born in a Kyrgyz family'

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Born in a Kyrgyz family	Between Groups	10.200	3	3.400	5.371	.001
	Within Groups	253.226	400	.633		
	Total	263.426	403			

The findings showed there was high statistical significance between age and the Kyrgyz characteristic 'born in a Kyrgyz family' (p = .001). While there is a general positive relationship supporting this Kyrgyz marker it is strongest for the adult age group (26-40 years) and weakest for the middle age group (41-55 years).

There are still many Kyrgyz in Kyrgyzstan who do not speak the Kyrgyz language, or do not speak it fluently. Nearly 25% of the respondents indicated that Kyrgyz language was 'not important' as a characteristic to be identified as a Kyrgyz. This seems very high when one realises that language has a strong connection to ethnic identity and the promotion of language promotes cultural solidarity (Laitin, 1998). However, it is comparable with the general Kyrgyz population. Many Kyrgyz were raised in urban centres such as the capital city, Bishkek, educated in the Russian language, and found employment in the Soviet system which required primary use of the Russian language (see also Pelkmans, 2007). While there is recognition among the Kyrgyz that there are Kyrgyz who do not speak the Kyrgyz language or do not speak Kyrgyz well, these people are at times put down for their lack of or weak Kyrgyzness.

One of my Kyrgyz informants explained it to me like this: If Kyrgyz are more Russian speaking or educated in Russian education systems they are sometimes

differentiated from other [pure] Kyrgyz by being called *Kirgiz* (kir-geez – the way Russians pronounce the word) as opposed to the more authentic *Kyrgyz* (ker-gerz – the way traditional Kyrgyz prefer to say the word). Since independence the Kyrgyzstan government has tried to implement a strong pro-Kyrgyz language policy in the country, reflected in the fact that only a person fluent in Kyrgyz language can be the President of the country. However, the very fact that within the Kyrgyz there are variations of what is considered 'Kyrgyz' raises the spectre or possibility of [multiple constructs of] Kyrgyz *identities* as opposed to a singular identity.

What stands out in the data from Table 4.1 is that 76% of the respondents indicated that being a Muslim was *not important*. While this may be an obvious observation given that the topic under consideration is religious conversion, nevertheless, in the context of the long held bond between Kyrgyz ethnicity and Muslim identity, it is recognition that for Kyrgyz Christians, that bond has been largely severed. There is significance between age and 'a Muslim' Kyrgyz marker (Tables 4.3a and 4.3b below). The youngest respondents (<25 years) rejected the 'Muslim' characteristic more strongly than the oldest age cohort (>56). This difference reached a statistical significance (p = .024). The idea that 'to be Kyrgyz is to be Muslim' is therefore less important for youth than the elderly. This may reflect the fact that identity formation is most malleable or fluid for the young and most set or difficult to change in those who are oldest in age. However, there was a generally high negative relationship between the first three age categories (<25, 26-40, 41-55 years) which the bulk of Kyrgyz Christians are made up of, therefore, it can be argued, that for Kyrgyz Christians generally Muslim identity is not important as a Kyrgyz ethnic marker. In other words it is not inherent to being a Kyrgyz, and so becoming a Christian does

not negate their legitimate or authentic Kyrgyzness. This makes sense when one understands that the research is focused on religious conversion from being a Kyrgyz Muslim to a Kyrgyz Christian.

Table 4.3a Descriptives for 'Muslim' characteristic

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error
A Muslim	< 26	93	2.85	.416	.043
	26-40	193	2.73	.621	.045
	41-55	82	2.80	.508	.056
	>55	22	2.45	.858	.183
	Total	390	2.76	.577	.029

Table 4.3b ANOVA analysis for 'Muslim' characteristic

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
A Muslim	Between Groups	3.129	3	1.043	3.190	.024
	Within Groups	126.215	386	.327		
	Total	129.344	389			

It is significant, nevertheless, in the overall context of Kyrgyz identity. If, as it has been pointed out, that religion is the essence of Muslim identity, and for the Kyrgyz generally that 'being a Kyrgyz is to be Muslim', then some major identity reformation or reconstruction has taken place. Based on the survey data the concept of 'a Muslim' - be it cultural, orthodox or popular - is no longer seen as part of the essence of Kyrgyz ethnic identity by Kyrgyz Christians. This signals both a change from the Soviet categorisation of 'Muslim' Central Asians, including Kyrgyzstan, as an ethnic or cultural category, and 'Muslim' as a religious categorisation associated with either orthodox or popular Islam.

If being a Muslim is no longer important for Kyrgyz Christians in terms of Kyrgyz

identity the question needs to be asked: what cultural markers are important for Kyrgyz Christians? The answers to this question will indicate the kinds of identity construction that is taking place for Kyrgyz Christians in conversion. The survey asked respondents to identify the level of importance for various cultural factors *for* a Kyrgyz Christian (Table 4.4 below). When the percentage for 'important' and 'very important' are collapsed some conclusions can be made. 'Practices important Kyrgyz values' (82%) is seen as the cultural factor that is most important for Kyrgyz Christians, with reasonable importance to participation in funeral rites (68%), wedding attendance (66%) and circumcision (61%).

The data from Table 4.4 (below) clearly show, that for the Kyrgyz Christian respondents, cultural practices associated with popular Islam or traditional Kyrgyz spirituality (fortune-tellers, shamans, visitation of sacred places) are not important (91%). This strong negative relationship was true across gender, age and education. This strengthens the previous finding that Kyrgyz Christians do not associate being 'Muslim' as being important for a Kyrgyz. It also makes sense in the context of religious conversion where respondents have communicated that they have engaged in religious change which, by its very nature, requires the rejection of at least some aspects of formerly held identities (religious or other, e.g. atheist).

Table 4.4 The level of importance of cultural factors for Kyrgyz Christians

LEVEL OF IMPORTANCE	CULTURAL FACTORS					
	Circumcision	Wedding attendance	Funeral attendance	Visiting fortune tellers, etc	Traditional Kyrgyz practices	Practises Kyrgyz values
	Valid Percent (Frequency)	Valid Percent (Frequency)	Valid Percent (Frequency)	Valid Percent (Frequency)	Valid Percent (Frequency)	Valid Percent (Frequency)
Important[33]	62 (262)	67 (282)	69 (290)	5 (22)	36 (153)	82 (348)
Not important	33 (142)	29 (124)	27 (116)	92 (388)	59 (249)	14 (58)
Unsure	5 (21)	4 (19)	4 (17)	3 (12)	5 (22)	4 (18)
Total	100 (425)	100 (425)	100 (423)	100 (422)	100 (424)	100 (424)

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[33] Very important and important categories have been collapsed.

While some cultural practices seem to have clear religious/spiritual associations for respondents (i.e. Islamic or occultic) and are considered 'not important' (i.e. should be stopped) for Kyrgyz Christians there appears to be some ambiguity with reference to other cultural practices. For instance, while there is reasonably strong indication that Kyrgyz traditional practices, such as *Nooruz* (fire festival and associated rituals), were considered 'not important' (58%) over one third (36%) of respondents thought it was 'important'. It can be argued that cultural factors that can be aligned or find continuity with their new Christian faith can be affirmed, adapted and followed while those that are seen as being against the Christian faith or that are highly associated with their former religious allegiance should not be followed. This appears to be a dynamic process where some aspects find significant agreement while others are still in a process of flux.

The response given to circumcision, wedding, and funeral attendance also highlight the importance, for Kyrgyz Christians, of participation in social events that maintain networks of relationships and strengthen social capital, especially within the near and extended family. For two thirds of respondents the newly embraced Christian religious identity is seen not as a cessation of family or cultural (ethnic) identity but an innovation within it. The fact that roughly one third of the respondents indicated that these were not important indicators of Kyrgyz identity suggests that there are social issues that present some difficulty with maintaining family connections either from the Kyrgyz Christian side or from the wider Kyrgyz family/community. This will be taken up later in the chapter in a section looking at community responses to Kyrgyz conversion as well as in Chapter Five.

Religious conversion is a multi-faceted phenomenon. Cross-cultural and inter-religious dynamics play an important role in how well a new faith is accepted and integrated into the lives and thinking of the people. This raises questions: Is there much difference between how Kyrgyz Christians view Islam and Protestant Christianity in terms of continuity to Kyrgyz culture? Do Kyrgyz Christians see their Kyrgyz culture as being closer to Islam or Protestant Christianity? A strong affirmative answer towards Islam would indicate that conversion to Protestant Christianity is seen conversion *away* from Kyrgyz cultural identity. A strong affirmative answer that Kyrgyz culture is closer to Protestant Christianity would indicate that conversion was seen as conversion *within*, or at least in parallel, to Kyrgyz cultural identity. Table 4.5a below gives the responses to the question in the survey which directly addressed this issue.

Table 4.5a Compatibility and comparison between Christianity, Islam and Kyrgyz culture as understood by Kyrgyz Christians

RELIGIOUS COMPATIBILITY TO KYRGYZ CULTURE	Frequency	Valid Percent
Christianity *more* compatible than Islam	230	54
Christianity *as* compatible as Islam	42	10
Christianity *less* compatible than Islam	55	13
Unsure	99	23
Total	426	100

Of those that did give a response to the three main choices there was a strong indication that they found Protestant Christianity closer to Kyrgyz culture (54%) than

Islam (13%). This is consistent when independent variables gender, age and education groups are taken into consideration although there tends to be a stronger positive relationship for men than women. There is high significance (p = .004) for age and significance (p = .038) for education[34]. There is a stronger positive relationship for the adult (26-40 years) and middle age (41-55 years) groups than youth (<25 years) and the elderly (>56 years). In relation to youth and the elderly a couple of comments are pertinent. Firstly, the elderly, who are more likely to have a stronger connection with Muslim identity because of extended life span and greater accumulated social and cultural/religious capital, will tend to have a higher inclination (though still a negative relationship) to link Muslim religion and culture. Secondly, while youth also showed a slightly less positive response to linking Christianity and culture they also showed the highest response rate to 'unsure/don't know' (nearly 30%). This may be because of a generally weaker awareness of religion and culture related to shorter lifespan, and therefore weaker accumulated social and cultural/religious capital. Or it may represent a general lack of developed religious/cultural identity through lack of interest or low priority compared to other youthful pursuits such as education.

Table 4.5b Christianity, Islam and Kyrgyz culture as understood by Kyrgyz Christians

Chi-Square Tests with Age

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	23.961[a]	9	.004
Likelihood Ratio	22.160	9	.008
Linear-by-Linear Association	10.479	1	.001

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[34] For Chi-Square test results see Table 4.5b and 4.5c below.

N of Valid Cases	424		

a. 2 cells (12.5%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum
   expected count is 2.38.

**Table 4.5c Christianity, Islam and Kyrgyz culture as
understood by Kyrgyz Christians Chi-Square Tests with
Education**

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	13.309[a]	6	.038
Likelihood Ratio	12.409	6	.053
Linear-by-Linear Association	2.136	1	.144
N of Valid Cases	418		

a. 1 cell (8.3%) has expected count less than 5. The minimum expected
count is 4.02.

In regards to the significance regarding education, the data suggests that although all
education categories showed a positive association with Christianity and Kyrgyz
culture it was those in the completed high school/some tertiary studies category who
are more likely to make this association. Nearly one third of those who did not
complete high school indicated a 'not sure' response. This was higher than the other
categories for the same response. Of all the questions in the survey this was the one
received the most responses to the 'not sure category'. This suggests that education
does have a role in responding to this question in the survey with those with
completed high school education or higher able to more clearly understand and
decide which category they preferred. This question did require some degree of
sophistication in terms of the concepts employed in the question – compatibility,
comparison and culture. The larger 'unsure' response from the 'not completed high
school' category perhaps reflects the difficulty of those without higher education
from knowing how to understand or decide a clear answer to the question.

Nevertheless, it can be said that most Kyrgyz Christians generally view conversion to Protestant Christianity as culture affirming or retaining cultural affinity with their sense of Kyrgyz identity. Further, Protestant Christianity is seen to have *more* affinity with Kyrgyz culture [identity] than Islam. While cultural values are retained the overtly religious has been changed. Therefore conversion to Protestant Christianity would appear to be seen to be conversion within or at least parallel to Kyrgyz culture but away from association with Muslim religion. As will be discussed in Chapter Five this suggests that for a majority of Kyrgyz Christians respondents Islam is seen as the more foreign religion for Kyrgyz people than Protestant Christianity.

Data was not collected from the non-Kyrgyz community to compare directly with Kyrgyz Christians but literature available on Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia generally (Glenn, 1999, Haghayeghi, 1996, Gross, 1992, Gunn, 2003, Privatsky, 2001) show that while there is acknowledgment of the presence of pre-Islamic influences that there is a strong association with the Muslimness of cultural traditions. A reasonable number of respondents (23%) answered this question with an 'unsure/don't know' response. Two possible reasons are that respondents could not decide how to respond - perhaps they saw elements of both Islam and Protestant Christianity in Kyrgyz culture (even though the first possible response would cover this), or perhaps the question was not clear to them. In acknowledging the importance of culture characteristics and cultural markers in ethnic identity one must also consider the role that religion plays especially when the basic identification statement for the Kyrgyz is that they are Muslim. The next section considers the role that religion plays in the lives of Kyrgyz Christians and its potential effect on their sense of Kyrgyz identity.

4.3 What kind of religion and what level of religiosity?

It has been noted that religion (Islam) is the essence of Muslim identity (Hassan, 2002:39) and that this fact applies to Muslims regardless of which part of the world they are from, whether from the more religious societies such as Pakistan or Egypt, or the more secular such as Turkey and Kazakhstan, or indeed Kyrgyzstan (cf. Hilgers, 2006 - Uzbekistan, Privatsky, 2001 - Kazakhstan). Further, religious commitment is seen as 'both the evidence and the expression of Muslim identity.' The difficulty of course is to come to some common agreement as to the nature and content of religious commitment (religiosity) in order for a person to be deemed a true member of the Muslim faith. Hassan's (2002) cross-Muslim-societal study (Indonesia, Pakistan, Egypt, Kazakhstan) showed that even among Muslims there were many definitions as to what was considered 'religious', with equally as many dimensions.[35] Being religious appears to be a combination of one of more of what one believes, what one does, what one is born into (family), or the cultural or socialised elements that one identifies with and this differs from location to location and people to people.

When Kyrgyz refer to themselves as being religious this means identification with orthodox Muslim practices especially fasting during the holy month of Ramazan (*roza*), habitual engagement in ritual prayers (*namaz*), reciting the Quran regularly, mosque attendance,[36] keeping a beard (men), and the kind of clothes that you wear (men and women). Popular Muslim religiosity involves participation in non-orthodox

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[35] The author recognises that a similar diversity of what it means to be religious or the identification of being a Christian is also true within Christianity as a religious tradition.

[36] Although mosque attendance was severely limited during the Soviet era when there were few mosques and attendance was officially discouraged by the authorities.

rites such as visiting fortune-tellers and sacred sites, practicing ancestor rituals and superstitious practices (e.g. warding off the evil eye). The responses show that only about one third (35%) of the respondents considered themselves to have been raised in religious families (Table 4.6 below). Gender has significance (p = .023). Female Christian converts are more likely to have come from religious families than men. Age has high significance (p = .002). The older the respondent the more likely they are to have been raised in religious families. Two thirds of respondent families (67%) followed Muslim/Kyrgyz traditional or popular religious practices. This was true regardless of gender. However, both age (p = .000) and education (p = .001) show high statistical significance. The older the respondent the more likely their family were to be involved in Muslim/Kyrgyz traditional religious practices and the more educated the respondent the less likely are their families to be involved in Muslim/Kyrgyz traditional religious practices.

Table 4.6 Religious (orthodox Muslim) family background of Kyrgyz Christians (N=427)

	Response	Frequency	Valid Percent
Valid	Strongly agree	99	23
	Agree	51	12
	Not sure	25	6
	Disagree	86	20
	Strongly disagree	161	38
	No answer	5	1
	Total	427	100

In terms of personal religious background prior to conversion (Table 4.7 below), only one quarter of the respondents considered that they had been religious. Notably, of these, only 11% of those identified themselves as practicing Muslims. There was significance (p = 0.016) in relationship to age and personal religiosity. The younger

the respondent the less likely they were to be religious[37]. The other important

element in the results was that the question was written from the perspective of

identity. As a Kyrgyz reading and responding to this question only about half of the

respondents identified themselves as being Muslim, practicing or not, before

conversion. There is an analytical issue that may affect this answer in that

respondents are *post*-conversion reflecting on how they saw themselves before-

conversion and therefore their responses may be influenced by time and the impact

of Christian teaching. Even given this, the survey does show that pre-conversion

Muslim religious identity was not strong.

Table 4.7 Self-reported religiosity of Kyrgyz Christians before conversion

		Frequency	Valid Percent
Valid	Practising Muslim	45	11
	Non-practising Muslim	159	41
	Religious but not Muslim	59	15
	Not religious	86	22
	Atheist	44	11
	Total	393	100
Missing	No answer	34	
Total		427	

The data indicates that some form of Muslim identity was present for nearly half the

respondents. The label 'Practising Muslim' has a religious association and the 'non-

practising Muslim' label has an ethnic cum cultural association. The survey data

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[37] Research undertaken in Uzbekistan show that Islamic belief was also weaker among the younger age groups and stronger among the older age groups in the general population suggesting that this finding may be true in Kyrgyzstan generally and in Central Asia as a region LUBIN, N. 1995. Islam and Ethnic Identity in Central Asia: A View from Below. *In:* RO'I, Y. (ed.) *Muslim Eurasia: Conflicting Legacies.*

suggests that 'Muslim identity', for Kyrgyz Christian respondents, is perhaps best understood as a sense of general 'Muslimness', or general cultural/ethnic identity associated with Kyrgyzness, rather than Muslim religiosity – attention to orthodox or popular Islam. Kyrgyz Christians were largely 'cultural' or 'nominal' Muslims in much the same way that some Europeans and North Americans and other westerners consider themselves 'Christian'. Not because they themselves are particularly religious but because Protestant Christianity has been associated with either their cultural or family histories. Privatsky (2001:78) makes a persuasive argument for recognising the distinction between cultural and religious identification in the context of Kazakhstan, Central Asia, through the use and understanding of the terms 'Muslimness' and 'Islamic'. In relation to the Kazakhs (the closest ethnic group to the Kyrgyz) Privatsky comments that Muslimness refers to the localised way of life as a Muslim people; 'Islam' and Islamic' refer more to correct religious faith and observance which has been much weaker among the Kazakhs as it has been among the Kyrgyz. In this regards Kyrgyz Christian respondents appear to have had a minimal sense of the scripturalist 'Islamic' nature of Kyrgyz Muslim identity as opposed to their 'Muslimness' - the particularised Kyrgyz traditional way of lslam (cf. Geertz, 1971).

Since two thirds of respondents said that their families were involved in Kyrgyz traditional or popular Islamic practices it is important to identify how often they engaged in specific practices (Table 4.8 below) before conversion *and* after conversion. The answers to these questions would also give information that would identify the kind of changes that have taken place to this form of religiosity through conversion. The difference between the pre and post-conversion questions in the

survey were that in the post-conversion context two further options were given to the respondents – seeking help from a Christian pastor/leader and attending church services/bible studies. The assumption was that these two clearly Christian religious practices were similar in efficacy but offered new alternatives to what Kyrgyz Christians had known before conversion. In addition, conversion involves incorporation, to one degree or other, into a conversion community. These two further options allow for some measurement for the amount of religious activity and involvement into that new community.

The results, before conversion, show that about half of the respondents engaged with popular (non-orthodox) religious practices, however, without strong indicators – no popular Muslim practice received more than 34% for an 'often' response. Almost half of the respondents *never* went to mullahs for help, never went to a traditional healer or visited sacred places (*mazars*). The strongest indicator of involvement from the survey respondents was for the preparation of food for or praying to the ancestors (34% said that they 'often' did this) otherwise respondents only sometimes engaged in the listed activities. While there is an inclination towards popular Islam this was only reported by roughly half of the respondents suggesting a generally low pre-conversion level of religiosity of any form, orthodox or popular, among Kyrgyz Christians. This would indicate that low levels of personal religiosity and low levels of family religiosity are factors that predispose Kyrgyz Christians to conversion to another religion such as Christianity.

Table 4.8 Frequency of participation in popular religious practices by Kyrgyz Christians – Pre-Conversion

	POPULAR RELIGIOUS PRACTICE											
	Seeking help from Mullah		Seeking help from fortune tellers, shaman		Seeking help from traditional healer		Visiting mazar (sacred place)		Praying to God directly		Preparing food for ancestors	
FREQUENCY	Frequency	Valid Percent	Frequency	Valid Percent	Frequency	Valid Percent	Frequency	Valid Percent	Frequency	Valid Percent	Frequency	Valid Percent
Often	57	14	80	19	51	12	47	11	107	25	144	34
Sometimes	155	37	199	47	175	41	185	44	159	40	157	37
Never	207	50	144	34	198	47	189	45	107	26	122	29
Total	419	101	423	100	424	100	421	100	420	101	423	100

Women more than men 'often' participated in the above religious activities, especially seeking help from fortune tellers and traditional healers (cp. Basilov, 1987). This would support the oft repeated understanding that women tend to be more religious or engage in spiritual activities than men (Köse, 1996, Sherkat and Ellison, 1999, Stark, 1997), although the context here is focused on popular as opposed to orthodox religious participation. There is a general positive increase in religious participation as the age of the respondents increased (Basilov, 1987). Youth were generally engaged in religious activity less and the elderly generally more so, similar to earlier findings stated above.

The survey gives stronger responses in the behaviour after conversion (Table 4.9 below). Analysis with SPSS using T-Test Paired samples show a high positive statistical significance ($p = .000$) in the change of religious activity from pre to post conversion across all religious activity indicated in Table 4.9. Over 90% of respondents said that they never sought help from a mullah, fortune teller or traditional healer, or visited sacred places (*mazars*). The results for preparing food for, or praying to, the ancestors, were slightly less (86%). Religious conversion has brought considerable change in religious behaviour. While before conversion only 25% of the respondents prayed directly to God after conversion this rose to 86%, showing increased level of personal piety/religiousness. The results also reveal a reasonably high level indication that after conversion respondents did seek out Christian Pastors/Christian leaders for help (53% 'sometimes' and 33% 'often', youth less than older age groups), replacing the role or providing a role that previous Muslim religious/spiritual specialists had fulfilled/or potentially filled. In particular a large number, nearly 75%, often attended Christian religious meetings (holding true

across gender, age groups and education), again showing a high level of religious participation in Christian activity, and therefore of integration into the conversion community.

For Kyrgyz Christians, religious activities associated with either orthodox or popular Islam are rejected in favour of new Christian religious activities but with greater frequency of participation, and therefore increased religious commitment. After conversion there was a marked increase in personal religiosity in terms of engagement with the Christian religious community, practices, and in personal piety – a heightened sense of relationship with a personal God characterised by increased levels of direct personal engagement in prayer to God (from 25% before conversion to nearly 86% after conversion). This is further illustrated in responses to two questions related to the respondent's personal sense of connection to and communication with God. When asked which statement best reflects how they feel about God 80% of respondents said that God is 'often' closely involved in their lives, and over 90% said that it was 'very important' (99% if the 'important' option is included), as a Christian believer, that 'God loves them.'

Table 4.9 Frequency of participation in popular religious practices by Kyrgyz Christians – Post-Conversion

FREQUENCY	POPULAR RELIGIOUS PRACTICE							
	Seeking help from mullah	**Seeking help from fortune tellers, shaman**	**Seeking help from traditional healer**	**Visiting mazar (sacred place)**	**Preparing food for ancestors**	**Praying to God directly**	**Seeking help from Pastor/Chris tian leader**	**Attending Christian meetings**
	Valid Percent (Frequency)	Valid Percent (Frequency)	Valid Percent (Frequency)	Valid Percent (Frequency)	Valid Percent (Frequency)	Valid Percent (Frequency)	Valid Percent (Frequency)	Valid Percent (Frequency)
Often	1 (5)	1 (3)	1 (2)	1 (3)	2 (9)	88 (367)	33 (141)	75 (319)
Sometimes	6 (25)	7 (31)	5 (21)	5 (22)	10 (42)	5 (21)	54 (226)	20 (87)
Never	93 (396)	92 (392)	95 (403)	94 (399)	88 (369)	7 (31)	13 (55)	5 (21)
Total	100 (426)	100 (426)	101 (426)	100 (424)	100 (420)	100 (419)	100 (422)	100 (427)

In Kyrgyz conversion Protestant Christianity appears to have generated high levels of religiosity and interest among Kyrgyz Christian respondents. Kyrgyz Christians have a heightened rejection of previous religious affiliation and increased sense of personal religiosity indicated by the significant increase in praying to God directly (praying 'often' only 25% before conversion and praying 'often' 86% after conversion). The frequency of seeking help from Christian leaders/pastors and of participation in Christian religious gatherings is much higher than any previous involvement with orthodox/popular Muslim religious figures or activity.

The data suggests that Kyrgyz Christians have rejected previously held ethnic identity constructions that associate being a Muslim or 'Muslimness' with Kyrgyz ethnic identity (Kyrgyzness). The question remains if, in the process of conversion, Kyrgyz Christians now associate Kyrgyzness with their newfound religious identity, Protestant Christianity. I return to this issue later in the chapter. What is missing from the survey data is further clarity as to the process and construction of this identity change among Kyrgyz Christians. Chapter Five will consider this further in light of the data gathered from in-depth interviews which explore these issues in some detail.

In relation to issues of religiosity and identity it became clear[38] that a widespread spiritual experience among Kyrgyz Christians[39] before conversion was an experience with an oppressive spirit referred to as the *basyryk* or *al barysty* in the in the Kyrgyz language (Table 4.10 below). This experience often occurs at night or in a semi-sleep state in which a dark, oppressive spirit enters the room in which the person is lying

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[38] During participant observation, and when conducting in-depth interviews.

[39] Anecdotally, this appears to be a phenomenon throughout the Kyrgyz community.

down.

Table 4.10 Kyrgyz Christian frequency of experience with the oppressive spirit (Basyryk/al barysty)

FREQUENCY	EXPERIENCE OF *BASYRYK/AL BARYSTY*			
	Before conversion		*After conversion*	
	Frequency	Valid Percent	Frequency	Valid Percent
Many Times	113	27	24	6
Few times	156	37	154	36
None	157	37	248	58
Total	426	101	426	100

The *basyryk* or *al barysty* slowly overshadows the person, paralysing the limbs, pressing down on the body, and then begins to choke them. It is normally an extremely fearful event, although some interpret this as an experience that brings material blessing. Nearly two-thirds of the respondents claimed to have experienced this phenomenon before conversion, with over 25% indicating that it had 'frequently' occurred.

This experience of the *baysryk* occurs across gender and educational background. Age has high significance in relation to the *baysryk* experience pre-conversion (p = .001) and significance post conversion (p = .014). Pre-conversion, the younger the respondent (<25 years) the less likely one is to have had this experience (close to 50% indicating that they had never had an experience with the *baysryk*). The older the respondent the more likely one is to have had this experience. Post-conversion, the older the respondent the less likely one is to have this experience. After conversion, there was a clear reduction in experiencing the *basyryk/al barysty*

generally with all groups with only 6% experiencing it frequently and nearly 60% who have not experienced it at all. When analysing this with T-Test pre and post conversion comparison there was a high level of significance (.000) indicating a clear change has taken place.

The experience with the *basyryk/al barysty* is viewed as a Kyrgyz ethnic phenomenon – a kind of Kyrgyz 'familiar spirit'. For many Kyrgyz Christians the reduction and/or ceasing of this experience are viewed as evidence of the 'power' of the Christian God over evil 'spiritual powers' in their life. One of the important factors related to this issue is that the Kyrgyz have a strong belief in, and are generally very open to, experiences with the spirit world. This is reflected both in their propensity to engage in popular Islamic practices (such as accessing spiritual power for healing, and telling the future), their acceptance of dreams and visions (often understood to be initiated by or from their ancestors), as well as in these experiences with 'spirits'. Religiosity, or spirituality, is not simply measured by institutional religious phenomenon. Protestant Christianity appears to be recognised as having elements of both orthodox cum institutional religion and traditional religious efficacy (such as accessing spiritual power for healing, the power and reality of dreams and visions, and addressing spiritual forces), or certainly as viable alternatives to meeting the needs that these religious/spiritual expressions have fulfilled for the Kyrgyz in the past. Conversion to Protestant Christianity is therefore seen, not simply as an institutional religion with relevant religious beliefs and rituals, but as spiritual power to confront and have power over Kyrgyz spiritual realities.

So far this chapter has considered the role of culture and religiosity in the self-

perception of Kyrgyz Christians before and after conversion. In order to more carefully evaluate the role of Protestant Christianity in the potential reconstruction of ethnic identity among the respondents, it is necessary to establish what knowledge, experience and understanding Kyrgyz Christians had of Christians and the Christian faith before and after conversion. The next section investigates this further.

4.4 Attitude towards Christians and the Christian God

I have identified, in Chapter One, Kyrgyz Christianity as a hybrid religious expression. It is both an old institutional or established religion, Protestant Christianity and, at the same time, a new religious movement. As has been discussed in the same chapter, historically, Protestant Christianity had virtually no presence and little if any contact with the Kyrgyz. Post-socialism, however, Protestant Christianity became a religious option not previously known or available to most Kyrgyz. The survey sought to identify what pre-conversion knowledge Kyrgyz Christians had of Christianity. An understanding of this will indicate what Kyrgyz Christians thought they were converting to – something alien or something familiar to Kyrgyzness. In the survey, the concept of Christianity was divided between an understanding of Christians as people, and Christianity in terms of religious faith - who is the God of the Christians?

The survey showed varied results concerning Kyrgyz Christian knowledge or understanding about Christians before conversion. One of the main patterns is the significant numbers of respondents (18-38%) who indicated the 'I don't know' option and the 50% who said that they did not know anything about Christians.

Clearly, for large numbers of Kyrgyz (about half of the respondents) there was little or no knowledge regarding Christians before conversion. This highlights the fact that when Kyrgyz Christians first came into contact with Christianity, especially Protestant Christians, it really was very new for them. Many Kyrgyz Christians had not met Protestant Christians before conversion, perhaps had not even heard about them. They almost certainly had no personal relationship with any Christians. At the same time, half of the respondents (50%) associated Christians with Russian ethnicity or to a lesser extent with people called 'Baptists' (36%). 'Baptists'[40] were people engaged in strange and immoral religious sect activities. Both categories tended to have negative and certainly non-Kyrgyz connotations. There was a positive relationship between education and the association of Christians with 'Russian' ethnicity (p = .001). The higher the level of formal education completed the more likely respondents were to associate Christians with 'Russian' ethnicity. This may also be because much higher education was located in major urban centres, such as the capital Bishkek in the north of the country and the city of Osh in the south, and therefore there was more interaction with non-Kyrgyz and with wider access and exposure to broader knowledge and media.

As has been stated already, the common ethnic self-understanding among the Kyrgyz was that if you were Kyrgyz you were Muslim. The assumption the survey took in regards to this was that it was an ethnic attachment to religion. If this was so, then the Kyrgyz are likely to view the 'Muslim God' as belonging to the Kyrgyz people. Other ethnic groups will therefore, be considered as having their own God. This may be the 'Muslim God' or it may be a different God. As has been noted in the previous

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[40] For further discussion on the Soviet stigmatisation of 'Baptists' see Wanner (2003).

section, for those Kyrgyz who had some knowledge of Christians most associated Christians with Russian people/ethnicity. Therefore it is assumed that, for the Kyrgyz, the 'Christian God' is viewed as the 'God of the Russians' and is *not* the same as the 'God of the Kyrgyz'. This discussion has relevance because this thesis considers Kyrgyz conversion not just as a change of religious perspective but as a change of identity. If 'God' is strongly associated with ethnic identity, what happens, therefore, when a [Muslim] Kyrgyz converts to Protestant Christianity? Does 'God' switch ethnic allegiance or do people switch 'God' allegiance?

There are clear differences pre and post conversion for the way respondents answered questions related to these issues. A T-Test Paired samples analysis indicated it has high significance (p = .000) in the change of answers for all three categories. Both pre and post conversion data show a strong negative response to the idea that the 'God of the Christians' was the same as the 'God of the Muslims' (Table 4.11 below). Notably, after conversion, there is an increased negative response from 62% to 79% with a very strong relationship concerning age (p = .016). The younger the respondent the more clearly the respondent was likely to give a negative response. While the older respondents still largely responded negatively to the idea that the 'God of the Christians' was the same as the 'God of the Muslims' there was clearly more hesitancy to do so than for younger Kyrgyz Christians. Younger respondents were more willing to make clearer breaks with past religious/ethnic identification with 'God' suggesting that attachment to previous 'Muslim' identity was not as strong or as deeply embedded in identity as it was for older Kyrgyz Christians.

Table 4.11 Kyrgyz Christian Understanding of the Christian God

RESPONSES	CHRISTIAN GOD					
	Same as Muslim God		**Same as Russian God**		**God of All Nationalities**	
	Before conversion	*After conversion*	*Before conversion*	*After conversion*	*Before conversion*	*After conversion*
	Valid Percent (Frequency)	Valid Percent (Frequency)	Valid Percent (Frequency)	Valid Percent (Frequency)	Valid Percent (Frequency)	Valid Percent (Frequency)
Yes	16 (64)	13 (55)	60 (253)	4 (17)	27 (111)	98 (415)
No	64 (265)	82 (336)	25 (107)	93 (384)	51 (211)	2 (8)
Don't know	21 (85)	5 (20)	15 (64)	2 (10)	22 (92)	0 (1)
Total	101 (414)	100 (411)	100 (424)	99 (411)	100 (414)	100 (424)

Nearly 60% of respondents answered positively that the 'Christian God' was associated with Russian ethnicity pre-conversion but post-conversion there was a large negative response (90%). There was a strong pre-conversion positive relationship with education and to lesser degree with age. The higher the formal education completed (p =.004) and the older the respondents (p = .012) the more likely they were to hold the association that the 'Christian God' is the same as the 'Russian God'. There was also a major change in the response to pre and post conversion answers to the question regarding an understanding of the Christian God as the God of all nationalities - from a negative 79% to a positive 97%.

As with the earlier questions concerning Kyrgyz Christian understanding of Christians prior to conversion, questions relating to how people remember their thinking in a past context has some limitations due to distance in time, memory recollections, and post-conversion influences. Nevertheless, there are strong indications of the reality of those perceptions.

Clearly this was not the case with post-conversion answers which show a minimal 'don't know' response rate. This may be because it is dealing with the present, but it also could be because the respondents were certain about their opinion concerning the issue to which they were asked to respond.

The responses to all three statements show that before conversion Kyrgyz Christians had an ethnic identification with God – the Muslim God [of the Kyrgyz] and the Christian [Orthodox] God of the Russians. They were not the same God and did not belong to the same people. However, after conversion the ethnic association with

'God' has been largely replaced with a supra 'God of all nationalities' – God is the God of the Kyrgyz *and* the Russians, and for that matter, all ethnic groups. A de-ethnicitisation of God has taken place where religion has been uncoupled from ethnic identity. God, apparently, does not belong to one ethnic group, but is above ethnicity – the 'God of humanity' as it were, rather than the Kyrgyz or Russian God. This would explain why, for the first statement, there was a strong negative assertion that the God of the Christians was not the same as the God of the Muslims. Pre-conversion, the response was constructed in ethnic terms - [the Christian] Russian God is not the same as [the Muslim] Kyrgyz God.

There are two potential explanations for the stronger post conversion negative response. The first explanation, and this seems to fit with the way the other statements were answered, is that responses were seen in non-ethnic 'pan-ethnic/humanity' terms as stated above. A second explanation, which can be seen in conjunction with the first explanation, is that there was a negative *religious* reaction following conversion. In other words, as a result of conversion, instead of viewing God in ethnic terms there was a rejection of the 'Muslim' God as the true God, in the same way that there had largely been a rejection of cultural behaviour/traditions that were seen to be directly associated with Islam. This would suggest that while Christianity was considered alien to Kyrgyzness prior to conversion some process has taken place post-conversion in which the Christian perspective has reoriented perceptions of the Christian God, at least as enunciated by Protestants, from something alien to something familiar, something that has roots in Kyrgyzness. While the survey alludes to this process Chapter Five takes this further and discusses in deeper analysis how Kyrgyz Christians have reconstructed this perception.

An understanding of the culture and religion, and the Kyrgyz Christian perception of Christianity enables one to identify the content of ethnic identity and religious change. On the other hand, the dynamics of social integration, the way Kyrgyz Christians now view their Kyrgyz community and the way the community responds to this new Kyrgyz identity construct, albeit a non-normative or 'deviant' construct, will enable us to further identify how successful this change has been (Sherkat and Wilson, 1995:998ff). The next section considers how Kyrgyz conversion has been socially structured.

4.5 Kyrgyz Christian relationship to, and response from, non-Christian family and community

If conversion to Christianity is seen as conversion to Russianness, or at least to non-Kyrgyz identity, how have the family members and wider Kyrgyz community responded to Kyrgyz Christians? The answer to this question will indicate the level of animosity or seriousness with which the Kyrgyz community viewed conversion to Christianity and will give some insight into the growth of Kyrgyz Christianity. The assumption is that the stronger the animosity is towards Kyrgyz Christianity, the more likely there will be opposition and reluctance for Kyrgyz to become Christians. Questions in the survey looked at whether there had been opposition at the time of conversion and at the time the survey was administered and whether this had changed over time (Table 4.12 below). It also looked at the attitude of the Kyrgyz community, as perceived by Kyrgyz Christian respondents, towards Kyrgyz Christian identity, and a sense of closeness to the respondent's family.

Table 4.12 Opposition from different members of the community towards Kyrgyz Christians as perceived by Kyrgyz Christians

Responses	OPPOSITION TO CONVERSION							
	Close/immediate family		**Extended family**		**Neighbours**		**Friends**	
	At conversion	*After conversion*	*At conversion*	*After conversion*	*At conversion*	*After conversion*	*At conversion*	*After conversion*
	Valid Percent (Frequency)	Valid Percent (Frequency)	Valid Percent (Frequency)	Valid Percent (Frequency)	Valid Percent (Frequency)	Valid Percent (Frequency)	Valid Percent (Frequency)	Valid Percent (Frequency)
Yes	65 (276)	33 (142)	52 (210)	37 (150)	51 (215)	29 (123)	58 (246)	30 (127)
No	35 (148)	67 (283)	48 (196)	63 (257)	49 (210)	71 (299)	42 (178)	70 (297)
Total	100 (424)	100 (425)	100 (406)	100 (407)	100 (425)	100 (422)	100 (424)	100 (424)

Responses	OPPOSITION TO CONVERSION							
	Community Leaders		**Mullahs**		**Strangers**		**Government Officials**	
	At conversion	*After conversion*	*At conversion*	*After conversion*	*At conversion*	*After conversion*	*At conversion*	*After conversion*
	Valid Percent (Frequency)	Valid Percent (Frequency)	Valid Percent (Frequency)	Valid Percent (Frequency)	Valid Percent (Frequency)	Valid Percent (Frequency)	Valid Percent (Frequency)	Valid Percent (Frequency)
Yes	25 (108)	18 (78)	30 (165)	30 (129)	48 (204)	35 (148)	25 (106)	17 (72)
No	74 (313)	82 (345)	70 (257)	70 (295)	52 (219)	65 (277)	75 (316)	83 (351)
Total	100 (421)	100 (423)	100 (422)	100 (424)	100 (427)	100 (425)	100 (422)	100 (423)

At the time of conversion most of the respondents experienced some opposition from the Kyrgyz community especially from immediate family members. Other opposition came from the extended family, neighbours and friends. There appeared to have been relatively little opposition from government officials, community leaders and mullahs (religious leaders). Those people closest to Kyrgyz Christians were most affected by the conversion, from both a personal and community stand-point, and understandably opposed it.

At the time of the survey, there had been a significant reduction in opposition from all community categories (A T-Test Paired Sample analysis showed high significance across all categories, p = .000). It was noticeable that those who most opposed Kyrgyz Christians at the time of conversion had nearly halved their level of opposition over time. Opposition from immediate family and friends showed the greatest reduction. Both these groups were more likely to have the greatest amount of interaction with Kyrgyz Christians, the greatest amount of opportunity to observe change, and the greatest investment in maintaining social capital.

There is unexpectedly low opposition from mullahs to conversion. One possible explanation for this is the fact that the role and authority of mullahs in the Kyrgyz community is still developing. During the Soviet period there were few recognised mullahs and often no mosques and so there was weak religious authority and institution. Based on the in-depth interviews conducted as part of this research it would appear that some 'mullahs' had little or no official religious training (Froese, 2008:117-118, Poliakov, 1992:107) but were members of the family or community who could recite Quranic verses or have some idea of how to perform *namaz* (ritual

prayers). These 'mullahs' were invited to recite the Qur'an at appropriate community or family events. Without a strong religious authority and institution the family and community become upholders of social and religious cohesion and solidarity.

The relatively weak religious institution of the mullah and the mosque go some way to explain the low level of perceived opposition from mullahs indicated by Kyrgyz Christians. The low opposition from government officials is an indication of an environment of legal religious freedom (liberal constitution after independence, see Chapter One for a brief description) and low level attention given to religious activity, in contrast to Soviet era policies where there was a high level of accountability, restriction, control and punishment.

As to how Kyrgyz Christians felt the wider Kyrgyz community viewed them in terms of their Kyrgyz identity, only about one third of the respondents indicated that they felt fully recognised as Kyrgyz. The wider non-Christian Kyrgyz community still had serious questions about the new religious identity Kyrgyz Christians had embraced and whether it could be accepted as legitimately a Kyrgyz identity expression. This was clearly felt by Kyrgyz Christians as they lived out their conversion experience. Overall though, Kyrgyz Christians still felt accepted, or at least tolerated within the Kyrgyz community, even though Kyrgyz Christians appeared to have lost one of the most important ethnic markers – being a Muslim. The general acceptance or tolerance of Kyrgyz Christians within the Kyrgyz community has other consequences. It appears that maintaining family or close relationship connections is more important than issues of religious conversion away from Islam for both the Kyrgyz Christians and the Kyrgyz community.

The survey also measured the closeness with which Kyrgyz Christians felt towards their family members, how open Kyrgyz Christians were with them regarding their new religious faith, and if other family members had also become Christians. The assumption is that the greater the closeness with which Kyrgyz Christian feel towards their family members the greater the general acceptance and tolerance of them by those same members. If closeness of relationship is maintained with the family, if the family appears to still accept and tolerate their new Christian faith, a further assumption is that there is a greater likelihood that other family members would consider becoming Christians too. Group solidarity and integration is a high value in the Kyrgyz community and this appears to be true for Kyrgyz Christians as well. While there are clear differences in religious content there is an emphasis on keeping relational, familial and ethnic links between Kyrgyz Christians and the wider Kyrgyz family and community. When this does take place it becomes a source of strength in affirming the new religious orientation for Kyrgyz Christians while at the same time maintaining family and community connections, and therefore connections with their sense of ethnic identity – their Kyrgyzness.

Three quarters of respondents (75%) indicated that they felt close to their family, and of these, about half felt a 'strong' closeness to their family. Along with these figures, a large percentage of the respondent's immediate family (93%), extended family (64%) and friends (75%) know that they have become Christians. The new religious affiliation of most Kyrgyz Christians is not hidden or unknown but rather, whether through personal initiative, or the closeness of relationship networks, it is widely known.

Further, nearly eighty percent of respondents said that other family members were also Christians. In fact, close to one third (28.8%) of respondents said that there were over six members of their family who were Christians (see Table 4.13 below).[41]

Table 4.13 Number of Kyrgyz Christian family members who are Christian

		Frequency	Valid Percent
Valid	1-5 people	218	64
	6-10 people	55	16
	More than 10 people	68	20
	Total	341	100
Missing	System	86	
Total		427	

The presence of family members who are Christians may also be a reason for the continuing sense of closeness felt by Kyrgyz Christians with their family. Strong opposition, with few family members who are Christians, could well be a deterrent for family closeness. However, it is also a reflection of the importance of family bonds regardless of religious affiliation.

The survey data shows that when Kyrgyz become Christians many face initial opposition especially from their immediate family members. However, after some time this opposition appears to significantly reduce in severity. Good relationships, especially with their immediate family and friends, are maintained, and are largely

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[41] If one were to take a median number for those who indicated 1-5 members (i.e.3), 6-10 members (i.e. 8) were Christian, and then used a conservative number for those who indicated more than ten members of their family (i.e. 12) one would have a figure of around 1910 (816+440+654) family members who were Christians from among the respondents or about 4.5 family members per respondent. This figure cannot be taken too strictly as there is a good chance that more than one family member are represented or overlapping in the survey sample. Nevertheless, the figure does indicate a strong growth of Kyrgyz Christians among family members.

allowed to continue. There follows a general acceptance and tolerance of Kyrgyz
Christians in the wider Kyrgyz community even if the community are not in
agreement with the religious choices Kyrgyz Christians have made. The survey data,
however, only partially tells this story. Further insight is required into the
circumstances and responses of both Kyrgyz Christians and Kyrgyz community at
large. This will be discussed in Chapter Five through an analysis of conversion
narratives that will show how maintaining continuity of family and community
relationships affirms ethnic identity and this in turn provides fuel and opportunity for
the development of a new Kyrgyz identity construct – being Kyrgyz and being
Christian. If maintaining social continuity has been a feature of the reconstruction of
Kyrgyz identity for Kyrgyz Christians one assumes that it also played an important
role in the early conversion process itself. The next section, therefore, considers the
role that family and social relationships played in the recruitment process into
Protestant Christianity.

4.6 Kyrgyz conversion process – family and ethnicity

Conversion literature suggests that conversion commonly falls along relational lines
of trust or intimacy (Lofland and Stark, 1965, Snow et al., 1980b, Stark and
Bainbridge, 1980). In other words people seem to convert through the direct
influence of others that they know and trust rather than by strangers or people that
they have little relational knowledge about. The survey (Table 4.14 below) sought to
measure the level of influence that various relational elements had on the conversion
process among the Kyrgyz.

Table 4.14 Influential people in Kyrgyz Christian conversion

RESPONSE	INFLUENTIAL PEOPLE IN CONVERSION							
	Close/immediate family	**Extended family**	**Classmate**	**Workmate**	**Neighbour**	**Teacher**	**Friend**	**Member of a Christian church[42]**
	Valid Percent (Frequency)	Valid Percent (Frequency)	Valid Percent (Frequency)	Valid Percent (Frequency)	Valid Percent (Frequency)	Valid Percent (Frequency)	Valid Percent (Frequency)	Valid Percent (Frequency)
Yes	47 (199)	14 (58)	8 (34)	11 (45)	13 (55)	3 (14)	26 (111)	53 (220)
No	51 (214)	83 (351)	90 (377)	87 (368)	85 (357)	95 (399)	72 (303)	44 (195)
Unsure	2 (10)	3 (12)	2 (10)	2 (9)	2 (7)	2 (8)	1 (6)	3 (13)
Total	100 (423)	100 (421)	100 (421)	100 (422)	100 (419)	100 (421)	100 (420)	100 (418)

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[42] This category refers to people who do not fit the other categories, i.e. they are Christians but not close family members, extended family members etc.

The survey shows that the strongest responses regarding people who influenced Kyrgyz Christians to convert came from members of a church (52%), immediate family members (47%), and friends (26%). Eighty to ninety percent of respondents said that other kinds of people had some, but only minimal, influence in their conversion.

Correlations were conducted with data from the survey on major factors leading to conversion and the three most influential kinds of people who influenced Kyrgyz Christians to convert – members of a Christian church, close family and friends.[43] This analysis indicates that there are four factors that were most associated with the influence of 'members of a Christian church' on the lives of Kyrgyz Christians. In order of significance they were dreams/visions (p = .012), the convincing words of someone (p = .014), major problems/crises (p = .019) and deliverance from evil spirits (p = 0.046). Similarly the role of close family members with Kyrgyz Christians was highly significant in regards to three factors - deliverance from evil spirits (p = .001) and healing (p = .002), and significant for the example or changed life of a Christian believer (p = .013). For friends there was significance at the .05 level for the example/changed life of a Christian believer (p = .032) and dreams/visions (p = .043). No single factor stands out for any of these three groups, but rather, a combination of different factors - experiential factors (deliverance from evil spirits, dreams/visions, healing) and relational factors (the example/changed life of a Christian believer, convincing words) work together to positively influence the conversion process.

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[43] The full table can be available by the author.

'Deliverance from evil spirits' and healing also stood out as major conversion factors with close family members and this bears out with the interviews conducted as part of the research. When a close family member experiences healing or 'deliverance from evil spirits' the impact will be the greatest as it is someone a person has known well over many years. If there has been clear positive change in a person's condition, such as some physical infirmity, close family members will know if it has occurred or not.

Likewise it is noteworthy the place that 'convincing words' had with church members and 'the example/changed life' had with immediate family members and friends. Church members are people one is likely not to know as well, and therefore it is their words that are likely to be the important conversion influence. Whereas close family members and friends are people that one has close or intimate knowledge of, and changes in their lives because of their Christian faith, will be the most visible, and have the greatest impact.

A comparison between those in the Kyrgyz community who opposed Kyrgyz Christians the most regarding conversion and those who influenced Kyrgyz Christians the most towards conversion reveal an apparent paradox. 65% of respondents indicated that they had received opposition at the time of conversion from their 'close family' and yet nearly 47% also indicated that it was 'close family' members who influenced them towards conversion. Is this a contradiction or is there an explanation for this apparent discrepancy? Two factors are helpful towards resolving this issue. The first factor involves another look at the wording of the two questions:

Question: Did any of the following influence you to become a Christian believer?

Possible answers included among others (Responses #46-53)[44]: A close/immediate family member/extended family member?

Question: Did you encounter any opposition from the following people when you became a Christian believer?

Possible answers included among others (Responses #84-91): Close/immediate family member/extended family member?

The intention behind the questions was to identify who (which categories of people) had influenced Kyrgyz Christians to convert, and who (which categories of people) they had received opposition from. The answers given by the respondents would indicate that at least *some people* from this category had done so, as opposed to the possibility that *all members* of the category *in toto* had done so. The importance of this clarification is reflected in the paradox that the close/immediate family category was *the source* of *both* positive influence towards conversion and opposition at the time of conversion. If the category 'close/immediate family' was understood to mean all members *in toto* then there would be a contradiction. If respondents understood this to mean some members within this category it can be easily explained. Using a mixed method approach to this research, which included conducting in-depth interviews, allows for further insight that supports this explanation. When respondents spoke about those people who were instrumental in their conversion to Protestant Christianity or about those who opposed them it was always about individuals or small groups of individuals from their close families who impacted their lives. It was a brother, a son/daughter, or a parent who was influential towards

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[44] See Appendix #8 - The format of the survey

conversion...not the whole 'close family'. While the brother may have influenced

positively toward conversion, the father may have opposed it. Both people

represented 'close' family' but both also represented opposite kinds of

influences/reactions.

Other data from the survey indicate that the majority of Kyrgyz Christians (63%)

heard about Protestant Christianity in someone's home, most often in their own home

(35%) rather than in public locations. That Kyrgyz conversion largely appears to

take place in places of trust, the home, and with people who are trusted - family

members and friends would seem to validate the common understanding in

conversion literature, indicated above, that conversion largely falls along relational

lines of trust or intimacy. A question is left open regarding the influence of 'church

members'. If these people are put into the 'trust' category on what basis would this

be so? The data is not conclusive about this because but it does not indicate whether

these church members are also family members, friends, or people that they know

well who go to church, or strangers whom they have had little previous relationship.

However, a further assumption that the researcher takes, based on participant

observation, is that these church members are also, for the most part, of Kyrgyz

ethnicity. Trust, is therefore, not simply about closeness of relationship (maintaining

social continuity) but also about ethnicity (cultural continuity). And, it is suggested,

that this is key in the identity project undertaken in Kyrgyz conversion.

4.7 Summary of survey data

The results of the survey have raised several points in relation to issues of ethnicity,

identity and family in the conversion process of Kyrgyz Christians. There is a strong, positive, pre-conversion link between a sense of Muslim identity or affiliation and ethnicity– 'to be Kyrgyz is to be Muslim.' Christianity, in the Russian Orthodox tradition,[45] on the other hand, is mostly associated with Russianness – or Russian identity. However, post-conversion there is a strong negative link between Muslim affiliation and ethnicity – 'to be Kyrgyz is not *necessarily* to be Muslim, but also to be Christian.' Traditional ethnic markers (boundaries) have apparently been removed and redefined by Kyrgyz Christians as their religious affiliation has changed. Family connections, cultural values, and Kyrgyz language are now of primary importance. Muslim religious beliefs and practices (orthodox or popular) have been removed as ethnic markers. In conversion, Kyrgyz Christians make a strong break from the religious/spiritual culture associated with Islam/the traditional Kyrgyz past and show a turning to new religious professionals (the Christian pastor/leader) and religio-spiritual places (church meetings) and communities as replacement solutions. However, there has also been an attempt to re-interpret social and cultural values and traditions in light of conversion. While there has been a rejection of some aspects of culture associated with Kyrgyzness (pre-conversion religious connections with Kyrgyz identity), at the same time, solidarity or continuity with other aspects have been retained. New religiosity has brought new meaning or affirmation to past traditions. Kyrgyz Christians would challenge both the association of Muslim religious content with Kyrgyzness as well as the previous Soviet depiction of 'Muslim' as a cultural/ethnic identification or Kyrgyz people.

In Kyrgyz conversion, there is a strong effort to maintain continuity with family and

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[45] Recognising that this was the only form of Christianity that the Kyrgyz were really aware of.

cultural heritage. While this may be an attempt to diffuse tensions and the charge that Christianity is a foreign religion a majority of Kyrgyz Christians now see Protestant Christianity as being closer to Kyrgyz culture than Islam, even though it is a new Kyrgyz expression. At the same time a second, internationalist, element has been introduced to the changing sense of identity for Kyrgyz Christians. Kyrgyz Christians affirm their identity in terms of local identity (being Kyrgyz) but also as part of a global religious identity – a faith for all nationalities. A common factor among Kyrgyz Christians was a distinct lack of orthodox religiosity in their family backgrounds. An inclination to popular Muslim/Kyrgyz traditional spirituality sentiment appears to show an openness/affection to the supernatural, or at least for other-worldly solutions to life situations. This would be generally true of the wider Kyrgyz community as a whole and not unique to Kyrgyz Christians. In general there was an overall lack of religiosity to either orthodox or popular religious traditions prior to conversion. One key difference between those who became Christians and those who didn't appears to be the opportunity to come into close contact with Christians who, because of relationship and life example, become social vehicles of religious transformation.

A further factor in the conversion process, therefore, included the roles played by 'members of a Christian church',[46] immediate family members and friends. While it is not stated clearly in the wording, an assumption is made that those 'members of a Christian church' were most likely to be Kyrgyz as well. Kyrgyz conversion, if this was the case, was not only conversion to the faith of their immediate family members and friends but also to that of fellow Kyrgyz. If we were to remove immediate

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[46] One of the categories of people who influenced conversion in Table 4.11.

family, friends, and [Kyrgyz] members of a Christian church we are left without strong relational indicators for conversion. For these Kyrgyz, conversion is a solution to a person's life situations which is affirmed by remaining attached to trusted [Kyrgyz] relationships, one which also affirms ethnic heritage. Post-conversion Kyrgyz Christians indicate a high level of participation in their 'plausibility' or 'conversion' communities. These communities, especially where other Kyrgyz are present, both affirm their new conversion experience and their sense of ethnic identity. They can be Christian and Kyrgyz without having to completely give up either identity.

The majority of Kyrgyz Christians have experienced opposition from the wider Kyrgyz community especially among immediate family members. However, this is usually followed, after some time, by a level of acceptance. This acceptance or toleration appears to provide space for Kyrgyz Christians to continue in their Christian conversion trajectory – a trajectory considered not normal or 'deviant' in the Kyrgyz community. Respondents feel a high degree of closeness with their families, are normally open about their new religious orientation and include other family members as fellow Christians. Familial and societal toleration (freedom)[47] appear to support the opportunity for religious innovation and growth. In other words a lack of major attachment to and regulation from a strong religious authority allows for religious innovation.

The reconstruction of identity in the Kyrgyz conversion project is not merely a process of adaptation/adoption/rejection/affirmation/reinterpretation of Kyrgyz

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[47] I would include legal toleration as well. At the time of independence a new constitution was introduced which provided fairly widespread freedom of religious belief and expression.

traditions and cultural values but also of the metaphysical association with Kyrgyzness. It is not a complete dismissal of the religious from Kyrgyz identity – it is a reorienting of what is understood by the religious and its connection with Kyrgyz identity. God is not completely removed from the identity equation rather God is 're-understood' in relationship to the Kyrgyz. For Kyrgyz Christians God has been involved in Kyrgyzness as God has been involved in the ethnicity of all peoples.

The data from the survey tell a story of Kyrgyz identity reconstruction as part of the conversion process for Kyrgyz Christians. A major shift in ethnic boundary markers by Kyrgyz Christians has resulted in Kyrgyz Christians navigating and negotiating a new pathway within Kyrgyz cultural identity. While informative the survey data only partially explains how Kyrgyz Christians have gone about reconstructing their Kyrgyz identity, especially given the strongly negative associations of Christianity with Russian [the antagonistic 'other'] identity, and in what ways they have found continuity with their Kyrgyzness. Understanding meaning behind the raw information requires an ability to explore the nuances of the conversion story. This is possible through an analysis of the in-depth interviews conducted as part of the methodology for this research. The rest of the thesis focuses on the analysis of the interview data as it continues to unravel and describe the story of Kyrgyz Christian reconstruction of Kyrgyz identity.

CHAPTER FIVE - Analysis and interpretation of the qualitative data

5. 1 Religious conversion and the re-construction of ethnic identity

The analysis of the survey data in Chapter Four has already identified a number of changes that are taking place through the conversion process and identity transformation for Kyrgyz Christians. Particularly this is so in the importance of maintaining continuity along social and cultural lines and in the reconstruction of identity that follows as a consequence of conversion. While there was a sense of Muslim identity pre-conversion there was at the same time a low level of self-reported religiosity, a low level of religious upbringing, and low level of attachment to religious institutions.

It is clear that Kyrgyz Christians have begun to negotiate new pathways in Kyrgyz identity, however, it is not clear how they have constructed these pathways. Chapter Five unravels this process in greater detail through an analysis of forty nine in-depth interviews. It seeks to investigate in what ways Kyrgyz Christians have reconstructed their sense of ethnic identity and to what degree this reflects social, cultural and religious continuity and discontinuity. It is recognised that the narratives reflected in the interviews have taken place post-conversion. They reflect the thinking and reflexivity of Kyrgyz Christians who have been impacted by their conversion experiences, the 'plausibility' or conversion communities that they have been a part

of, and the interpretation that goes hand-in-hand with this process. Recognition also needs to be given to the fact that the very interview process itself has an effect on this construction, as it engages with and causes Kyrgyz Christians to find words to describe remembered events and experiences.

Conversion to Christianity, for the Kyrgyz, is conversion to a 'deviant' identity, that is, an identity not normative or indeed existing in any visible form in the Kyrgyz community prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union[48]. Protestant Christianity is a new religious and cultural phenomenon in which 'space' has been created in the Kyrgyz social fabric. This space has allowed significant numbers of Kyrgyz to dis-identify themselves from a Muslim ethnic identity and to embrace a new Kyrgyz identity - one which affirms Christian belief, practices and meaning. It is acknowledged that identity is not static and immovable, but is a dynamic, on-going process for both individuals and communities (Syrjänen, 1984:61). It is also one that necessarily involves a process whereby individuals and communities engage in negotiating the 'artefacts of conversion'. The 'artefacts of conversion' (ideas, experiences, language, material matter, emotive attachments, cultural practices/traditions, social structures and networks) represent the tools, the materials, by which religious converts engage in conversion, and therefore in identity transformation (Syrjänen, 1984:63). It also includes the appropriation and interpretation of artefacts new (introduced) and the old (familiar). Identity construction does not take place in a vacuum or with individuals in isolation.

As stated in Chapter Four, people identify and align themselves in relation to others

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[48] At least one that has not existed since the 14th century (see Chapter Four).

in a social context. We influence and are influenced by our social environment and the social categories by which we make sense of ourselves and our community. This affects what one believes, values and does in lived experience. It also affects how one interprets oneself, one's context and experiences, and in turn become the tools by which one constructs identity. Côté and Levine (2002) speak of a similar process when they discuss the role of culture and agency in the development of adult social identity. They refer to Swidler's (1986:273) definition of culture, which builds on the work of Geertz (1973), as that which consists of 'symbolic vehicles of meaning, including beliefs, ritual practices, art forms, and ceremonies, as well as informal cultural practices such as language, gossip, stories, and rituals of daily life' (Côté and Levine, 2002:122). They develop this idea further by introducing the role of human agency. Côté and Levine suggest that in itself, culture does not have a mainly deterministic function in creating identity, but rather, again referring to Swidler, that it becomes a kind of 'tool kit of resources from which people can construct diverse strategies of action...investing them with particular meanings in concrete life circumstances' (Swidler, 1986:281). Individuals construct and provide meanings in formulating identity but this takes place within the confines of the resources – the social and cultural context – within which individuals find themselves and to which they are exposed. Chapter Five explores how Kyrgyz Christians have done this in the context of conversion.

In Chapter One a description was given outlining the context in which Protestant Christianity entered the social milieu of Kyrgyzstan. This included the collapse of the Soviet Union and the evolution of independence of Kyrgyzstan as political nation state. This in turn led to what has come to be called a developing 'religious

marketplace' (e.g. McBrien, 2006, Pelkmans, 2006). Old and new forms of religious expression were suddenly available for Kyrgyz, and indeed all Kyrgyzstan citizens, whatever their nationality. There was relative freedom to try out and to choose various religious options, somewhat like shopping in a supermarket for consumer items. However, for Kyrgyz, adopting Protestant Christianity is not simply about choosing one new religious item, not previously available in the religious marketplace. Adopting Protestant Christianity touches the heart of Kyrgyz ethnic identity and challenges normative identity constructions – it 'accuses' you of becoming the 'Other'. When asked how becoming a Christian affected someone being a Kyrgyz, one respondent put it this way:

> Well, when you are Muslim…*no one tries to question you*, your 'Kyrgyzness', right? [But] When you become [a Christian] believer people say, 'Oh, you accepted the Russian God. And you have become Russian' [italics mine] [male, 32 years, married, translator].

No one questions identities that people take for granted, things that fall within a normative framework. But, as this Kyrgyz Christian found to his frustration, when you make choices outside of the normative framework, such as conversion to Christianity, others challenge the core of one's identity – one's claim to Kyrgyzness.

5. 2 Challenges to Kyrgyz Christians from the Kyrgyz community

Conversion to Protestant Christianity challenges and reformulates ethnic identity boundary maintenance markers. One of the main factors in stimulating identity reconstruction for Kyrgyz Christians has been the attitude and response of the

general Kyrgyz community towards Kyrgyz Christians and Christianity. In particular, the challenges and accusations from the community which highlight the differentness, the 'deviance' associated with conversion to Christianity. These responses can be summed up in 4 statements[49]:

1. <u>You have 'betrayed', 'sold out', your faith, your family, your community, and your ancestors; you have become a '*kapyr*'</u> – (33/49[50], 67.4%). These various terms were used as synonyms to describe a person who has committed form of treason (Peyrouse, 2004a:663), one who has violated Kyrgyz identity and brought shame on the community (16/49, 32.7%). The term, *kapyr* [*kafir* in Arabic], is a Muslim term referring to an apostate, one who has deliberately turned their back on the faith. The expression 'sold out' has a two sided meaning - a figurative and a literal meaning. Figuratively, it expresses the idea that one is a betrayer, a kind of 'Judas', like the disciple of Jesus; and literally, that it is believed that Kyrgyz who convert to Protestant Christianity have been paid money by foreigners to convert. The attached meaning implies that a person must have accepted a bribe of some kind to convert to Protestant Christianity because no normal, right-thinking Kyrgyz would do so (see also McBrien and Pelkmans, 2008).[51]

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[49] Through a process utilising NVIVO and thematic analysis of the interview data.

[50] These figures show that 33 out of the total of 49 respondents raised this issue.

[51] One respondent did specifically mention that his first interest in attending a Christian meeting was because of financial need. A Kyrgyz workmate invited him to go to a Christian meeting in Bishkek, and he asked them, 'It is a Russian God why do you go there?' The workmate responded by saying she gets lots of money because she prays to God and doesn't he also have financial need. He replied, 'Everybody needs money, let's go.' It was only later in his story that the respondent goes on to say that though he was going through a difficult time (there were also many problems other than financial) he was also disillusioned with the behaviour of mullahs, that he was seeking the true God, that he knew inside that there was a power, and that he did not know who that was, and that he needed something to rely on like the [Communist] Party.

2. <u>You were born Muslim</u> – 'To be Kyrgyz is to be Muslim.' This was referred to directly or indirectly in nearly all the interviews as part of the community's response to Kyrgyz Christians. It challenges the Kyrgyz Christian core sense of being.[52]

3. <u>You have become Russian</u>, converted to Russian religion, and are following the Russian God (45/49, 91.8% - Christianity is a foreign religion and Jesus is a foreign God) (see also Pelkmans, 2007:885, Werth, 2000:500). It does not belong to the Kyrgyz. This was either said by the community or indeed was the belief or understanding of Kyrgyz Christians before they became Christians.

   Well…the only thing I knew is [Christianity is] not mine. It is something…that belongs to Russians, Russian God and Russian religion. And I am Kyrgyz and I am supposed to be a Muslim…If you are Kyrgyz and say *Iisus Hristos* [Russian for Jesus Christ] and ask, 'what is in your mind right now?,' they would say 'crosses and icons' that they saw among the Russians here[53] [male, 32 years, married, translator].

4. <u>You have become 'Baptist'</u>. This word is used as a derogatory term and is associated with Christians. The rumours were that 'Baptists' were a weird cult/sect like group engaged in brainwashing, immoral sexual relations, and cannibalism (killing and eating babies) (16/49, 32.7%). The label 'Baptist' with its negative association seems to have its roots in Soviet propaganda

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[52] There are "Tengirianic Kyrgyz" who also do not accept the belief that 'To be Kyrgyz is to be Muslim' holding that Kyrgyz were believers in 'Tengir' (The God of Heaven) before they were Muslims.

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

against these non-traditional Christian groups (Wanner, 2003:277, 280, 284). Each one of these accusations highlights the perception that Christianity is foreign or not belonging to Kyrgyz identity, and as being Russian, or 'Other'. They also show that conversion to Christianity is seen as a violation of normative Kyrgyz behaviour and identity. The label 'Russian' for a Kyrgyz Christian is not simply about being 'Russified', one who accepts Russian ways and thinking, it is a term that implies one has forsaken one's core identity.

Kyrgyz Community responses to Kyrgyz conversion show that the consequences for Kyrgyz Christians for changing their Muslim religion/identity, will affect the past, the present and the future. In regard to the past, Kyrgyz Christians were told a curse will come upon their family that will go back seven generations (4/49, 8.2 %), which, according to one version will mean that all the family to the 7th generation will go to hell; it will break the connection to the ancestors. In regard to the present, shame that will fall on the family – immediate family within the extended family; and the immediate and extended family within the wider Kyrgyz community, and the threat of social ostracism (10/49, 20.4%). In one case a Kyrgyz Christian was told in no uncertain terms that she had brought filthiness upon the land by becoming a Christian and that she should not come among her people. Her brother-in-law threatened her further with the words, 'I will clean your footsteps and put petrol on your house and burn it.' The imagery was clear. Conversion to Christianity was a blot, an infection on the Kyrgyz community and needed to be cleansed, to be removed to keep the community pure.

In regard to the future, the threat is that a Kyrgyz Christian will not be buried in the

family/Kyrgyz cemetery, and that no prayers or sacrifice will be offered for them at that time (12/49, 24.5%). The funeral rite, perhaps more than any other cultural tradition or practice, holds the greatest significance and symbolic meaning for Kyrgyz identity. To be refused burial rites, to be refused burial in the Kyrgyz cemetery is to be cut off from the Kyrgyz community, the living and the dead. Each of these threats represents social or community controls that maintain normative behaviour in regards to religious identity. One can claim to be a Kyrgyz and not be religious in belief or practice. One can claim to be a Kyrgyz and yet violate Muslim laws such as the drinking of alcohol, but one does not forgo one's Muslim identity. Each of the issues highlights the social nature of these controls – they seek to bind an individual to their link to their ancestors, to the living community, and to the gateway to successful entrance to their own part in the ancestral community - the successful completion of burial rites.

The new 'religious market' after socialism, the accusations from the wider Kyrgyz community towards Kyrgyz Christians, and the threats of social punishment form the starting point for the analysis of the interview data. In response, Kyrgyz Christians offer discourses to counteract these threats and accusations. At the same time these discourses include an affirmation, a critique and a reinterpretation of Kyrgyzness revealing the strategic role that religious conversion plays in the process of identity reconstruction. These discourses will be summarised under the following themes:

1. The Kyrgyz Christian understanding of Kyrgyz identity – what is a true Kyrgyz?

2. Kyrgyz Christian attitudes towards Kyrgyz culture and traditions.

3. Post-Conversion Attitude to Culture, Religion and the Community.

5.3 Kyrgyz Christian understanding of Kyrgyz identity (Kyrgyzness) – What is a true Kyrgyz? Discourses on the legitimacy of a Kyrgyz Christian identity

As has already been pointed out, one of the great challenges for Kyrgyz Christians is when they are faced with accusations of betrayal of their ethnicity, their religion, their family, their community and their ancestors, summarised as: "To be Kyrgyz is to be Muslim." To *be* anything else is to challenge the heart of what a Kyrgyz is supposed to be. In Chapter Four it was pointed out that one aspect of ethnic identity has to do with the maintenance of boundaries between the 'in-ethnic group' and the 'out-Other'. Religion, in the sense of one's Muslimness, has been understood to be an ethnic boundary marker for those who are considered to be Kyrgyz. Religious identity and ethnicity has been seen as a natural fusion. The challenge of religious conversion in a community such as the Kyrgyz is that it is an intra-ethnic change. It is change within the Kyrgyz community. Is it possible to 'unfuse' or disaggregate religious and ethnic identity, or indeed to 'infuse' or combine a new religious identity into ethnic identity? Can ethnic boundary markers be moved, removed or replaced? The following is a discussion on the various ways Kyrgyz Christians have negotiated through the challenges and accusations that to be Kyrgyz is to be Muslim and that to convert to Christianity is to betray their Kyrgyzness. In doing so Kyrgyz Christians have attempted to re-construct previously held ethnic boundary markers.

Individual Kyrgyz Christians may offer one or more of the different negotiated categories (see below) in their narrative discourses. Within each section an indication is given regarding the number of respondents who have used these particular

discourses in their narratives. The interviews were not structured and therefore the same questions were not asked of every respondent. As the interviews were analysed thematically it became clear that issues related to the reconstruction of ethnic identity was an important aspect of the overall Kyrgyz conversion narrative. The seven discourses utilised by the respondents represent the most repeated discourses used in identity reconstruction. It is the author's assumption[54] that, were these discourses specifically discussed with every respondent, many more would have agreed with those respondents who specifically mentioned each one, and indeed, would have further elaborated upon them. However, for the accuracy of numbers the responses are limited to those who actually referred to the particular discourse under discussion. The order of discussion is based on the discourses which were included the most times by the respondents with the exception of the last global discourse that did not directly involve the Kyrgyz cultural/social/religious context.

5.3.1 Muslim religious symbols and Kyrgyz behaviour

The first way that Kyrgyz Christians address the challenge of the Kyrgyz-Muslim identity dialectic is to interact directly with Muslim religious symbols and Kyrgyz behaviour (15/49, 30.6%). Specifically Kyrgyz Christians build on biblical representations in the Qur'an, claim to be 'true Muslims', and challenge the authentic Muslimness of the Kyrgyz. Some Kyrgyz Christians appeal to the fact that there is continuity between the Christian and Muslim traditions as a bridge building opportunity. As a form of apologetic, common prophets (*paigambar*) and stories within the Qur'an and the Bible are utilised to build bridges of communication, to

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[54] Supported by the analysis of the survey data in Chapter Four which was administered after the interviews, and in the interaction which the author had during participant observation.

move a discussion *from* the Qur'an *to* the Bible. By finding continuity with some

religious language and meaning Kyrgyz Christians seek to reduce the distance

created by conversion and use terminology that has some resonance with the Kyrgyz

worldview. It is not just that Protestant Christianity is close to Kyrgyz culture,

traditions and the ancestors, but there are also connections with Muslim religion.

Protestant Christianity is different, but close, close enough, apparently to dialogue

and diminish the intensity of its potential difference or foreignness.

> [My grandmother] also knew about Jesus. Her grandparents had told her about the
>
> prophets...Maybe she would have not received him if she heard something like *Esus*
>
> *Kristos* in Russian but when she heard Jesus the prophet *Isa paigambar*[55] she was
>
> able to receive because it was something that she had heard before [male, 37 years,
>
> married, Christian professional].

> ...I started from these things in the Qur'an because in the Qur'an it talks about Adam
>
> and Eve. There are many stories from the Bible...a lot of Kyrgyz know about Adam
>
> and Eve...I told them about Jesus in the Qur'an. Jesus is a prophet. Because Muslims
>
> believe that he is a prophet but I explained that he is also God [female, 35 years,
>
> single, Christian professional].

Respondents react to the challenge that a Kyrgyz is supposed to be a Muslim by

appealing to what they refer to as 'the true meaning of Muslim'. They suggest that

those Kyrgyz who call themselves Muslim do not know what the real meaning of

'Muslim' is. If they did know what the real meaning of 'Muslim' is they would

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

realise two things: firstly, that they themselves are really not Muslims, and therefore should not judge or accuse Kyrgyz Christians of betraying their community; and secondly, that Kyrgyz Christians are in fact 'true Muslims' and can more rightly be called Kyrgyz than most Kyrgyz, if indeed a Kyrgyz is supposed to be a Muslim.

> People don't understand what the word 'Muslim' means... But a Muslim means one who is subject to God. And being subject to God means that you don't drink, you don't smoke, and you don't do bad things. When people say that you have betrayed your religion when a person is supposed to be a Muslim I respond by saying, 'If you are a Muslim what are you doing? You are not subject to God. You are doing bad things [drinking vodka, smoking, lying etc]. *I am a true Muslim* because I am doing all the commandments of God and I am subject to God' [female, 42 years, married, teacher]

A true Muslim is one who is submitted to God and who does not do 'bad' things. The Kyrgyz Christians claim that they do not do bad things, that they are morally upright, and that they are submitted to God, much more, apparently, than the Kyrgyz Muslim who is challenging the legitimacy of their Kyrgyzness and their right to be called a Kyrgyz. In other words the Kyrgyz Christian is claiming that if Muslimness is how a Kyrgyz should be identified then they have more right to be called a Kyrgyz than their Kyrgyz accuser. In this discourse rather than rejecting outright the assumption that 'to be Kyrgyz is to be Muslim' Kyrgyz Christians appropriate the expression and redefine the meaning behind the words. The term 'Muslim' here is defined in both religious and moral behavioural terms. The religious element is to claim for themselves the title – 'one who is submitted to God.' This is the meaning of the term *Islam* in the Arabic. The Kyrgyz Christian believes that they have been submitted to

God and this is exemplified by their upright moral behaviour. In that sense Kyrgyz Christians understand that they have upheld the religious and/or moral imperative implied in Kyrgyz identity, in Kyrgyzness. Re-stated, the true meaning of what is meant by the expression 'to be Kyrgyz is to be Muslim' is 'to be Kyrgyz is to be one who is submitted to God, and by their behaviour, one who upholds divine moral standards'. With this meaning Kyrgyz Christians situate their identity squarely in the centre of true Kyrgyzness.

The example of drinking alcohol, in particular vodka, is a symbolic representation of breaking Islamic rules of acceptable behaviour as well as the accommodation of Russian ways by Kyrgyz Muslims. Vodka is the Russian drink, and is widely drunk in Kyrgyzstan (as it is throughout the former Soviet Union (Lewis, 2000:29) among many Kyrgyz especially for weddings and other festive occasions. Alcoholism is a major problem generally in Kyrgyzstan[56], and it is clear that vodka is not simply drunk at festive occasions. It has been the author's own observation that in many neighbourhood kiosks[57] (small general stores), alcohol is one of, if not *the*, most prominent and visible consumer item and is often sold by the glass over the counter.

The common practice of many Kyrgyz alcohol is a reversal of the accusation that the Kyrgyz Christian is the one who has become Russian. Accordingly, the implication is that it is the Kyrgyz Muslim who is accused of being Russian.

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[56] For one example see Pomerleau et al (2008).

[57] Photo reference: http://www.flickr.com/photos/bretton1963/2937232139/in/photostream/ downloaded 30/10/2010

Picture 5.1 Kyrgyz side-street kiosk – vodka bottle and glasses in the foreground

Nearly half (24/49) of the respondents raised the issue of drinking vodka in their narratives. Drinking vodka was representative of the past life of Kyrgyz Christians as a non-Christian (true of men *and* women) and their changed life as a Christian - 'we do not serve vodka at Kyrgyz Christian (Protestant) weddings'; the fact that they were not bad people (did not drink vodka) before conversion; and of the general behaviour of the Kyrgyz community (one respondent claimed that 40-50% of Kyrgyz Muslims drink vodka). One respondent claimed that she began to read the *Injil* (Quranic term for 'the Gospel' given to Jesus and used by Christians when referring to the New Testament) when she saw that her son, who had become a Christian, did not drink, lived in a good way and showed respect, *unlike* other Kyrgyz boys his own age. Another spoke of the opposition her husband gave when she became a Christian. He ran out onto the streets shouting out to the community 'She is a Baptist. I am not a Baptist. Give me vodka, I drink vodka.' A third told a story of a Kyrgyz who after becoming a Christian himself, revealed that one day he and some friends had come to burn down the house of these Christians but ended up spending the money they had brought to buy petrol by buying vodka instead and became too drunk to carry out

what they had planned to do.

5.3.2 History as content and history as discourse

A second way that Kyrgyz Christians have answered their critics has to do with *history* (13/49, 26.5%). History is utilised as a tool in the affirmation and reconstruction of Kyrgyz Christian identity. History has two parts. Firstly, history has to do with what happened before Islam came to the Kyrgyz and secondly, history has to do with who the Kyrgyz were before Islam came to the Kyrgyz. As a traditionally nomadic people the Kyrgyz have a tendency to look back to their past rather than to look forward to the future when forging their sense of ethnic identity. History has to do with continuity with the traditions, values, and significant events that make up Kyrgyz identity. They also have to do with the ancestors who are the ones from whom those things have been passed down to the present generation. What is important for Kyrgyz Christians is that before Islam came to the Kyrgyz the Kyrgyz, and by implication, their (distant) ancestors, were not Muslims, and their religion was not Islam.

> Islam only began to come in [to Kyrgyzstan in] the 6th century [sic – this occurred later[58]] but here it came…we received it. In Islam it is told you have to speak Arabic because the Koran is written in Arabic. If Muhammad was Kyrgyz and the Koran was written in Kyrgyz then we could say that. But Kyrgyz and Arabs are completely different nations. It is why you can say the Kyrgyz had got something before this religion, before we received Islam. We know from the history we were shamans

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[58] While the first impact of Islam in Kyrgyzstan came in the 8th century it was only really between the 17-20th centuries that Islam became a more dominant feature of Kyrgyz life (Filonyk 1994; Soucek 2000).

before, we were like Mongolians before. But it is not written in history that Kyrgyz were Muslims [male, 37 years, married, Christian professional]

Islam came centuries ago *but before Islam we were Kyrgyz.* You mean…trying to say that before Islam we were not Kyrgyz? [laughing]. This is illogical and we can't think about it. We [the Kyrgyz] were existing before Islam, so if some person said that Kyrgyz means Islam, Muslim, you mean that before Islam there were no Kyrgyz?...this does not make sense. Before Islam, we were Kyrgyz. We worshiped the sun, we worshiped mountains, we worshiped some things from nature and we were Kyrgyz. And then Islam came, okay, it's a religion and…because for centuries and centuries we were in Islam, so that's why to be Kyrgyz it means to be Muslim. But there are so many Kyrgyz that are not Muslims and this does not...make them not Kyrgyz...[male, 32 years, married, translator].

History apparently offers a challenging critique and justification to Kyrgyz identity for Kyrgyz Christians. While there is acknowledgement that Islam has had a place in Kyrgyz history the emphasis is on its relatively recent engagement with the Kyrgyz people. 'Centuries ago' before Kyrgyz were Muslims, they were still Kyrgyz, but they were shamans with some affinity to Mongolia – this was closer to their spiritual/religious roots (cf. Lewis, 2000). An appeal to the Kyrgyz nomadic roots was also an appeal to the Kyrgyz traditional character, one that was independent and free from political or religious institutional control. In this case, from the political and religious control of the Muslim Khanates of the Ferghana Valley (in what is now Southern Kyrgyzstan/Uzbekistan). The appeal to Kyrgyz independence and freedom are symbolic of the Kyrgyz Christian claim that Kyrgyz can now be free and independent from the claims of Islam, just as their forefathers once were.

It is also noteworthy that the association is made between Islam and Arab people, culture and language as a point of differentiation from Kyrgyz people. The association implies that Islam was a foreign intrusion into the Kyrgyz and not originally or essentially a part of who the Kyrgyz were as a people. If the Qur'an was written in Kyrgyz and if Muhammad was a Kyrgyz maybe the situation would be different, 'but Kyrgyz and Arabs are completely different nations.' The implication is that if Kyrgyz were not always Muslims but were nevertheless Kyrgyz, then it is possible for Kyrgyz Christians to still be Kyrgyz even though they are not Muslim.

> Interviewer: People have said Musa *baike* (older brother) has betrayed his people though he is a Kyrgyz himself. What does it mean for you to be a Kyrgyz?
> Respondent: I told the mullah, I wasn't born as an Arab. I wasn't born English. I was born Kyrgyz. And I was in Kyrgyzstan in the mountains. That's why God is for me here. If God created me Kyrgyz then he understands Kyrgyz. It's no use for me to memorise words in Arabic. There is no need for me to grow beard. I can't grow beard, that's how God created me. If God created me like that I should stay like this [male, 49 years, married, social worker]

When faced with the accusation that he had betrayed his people this respondent became somewhat emotional and responded in no uncertain terms. No one can accuse him of being anything else other than a Kyrgyz. The references to his birth, to the mountains (the symbolic geographical representation of the Kyrgyz homeland), and to his lack of being able to grow a beard, are references to his Kyrgyz identity. The reference to language as a medium of divine communication is also important. If God created him Kyrgyz then God should be able to understand him when he prays in Kyrgyz, he should not have to pray in Arabic (or in English for that matter) or

memorise a language that was not his own. The association that has been made is that Islam is deeply connected to Arab culture and ways, not to Kyrgyz culture and ways. It is a theme that continues through a number of the interviews and in particular to the use of Arabic or Kyrgyz language in religious rituals - for worship or prayer. Nine of the respondents (18.4 %) specifically mentioned the importance of being able to pray in Kyrgyz and not in Arabic as one of the key reasons affirming their decision to convert to Protestant Christianity. In almost every occasion when a respondent referred to a time when the Qur'an[59] was used or when Muslim prayers [in Arabic] were given it was accompanied by the comment, 'but I didn't understand what it/what was being said.'

Both from the comments above, and in discussion with other Kyrgyz Christians during participant observation, it becomes clear that for many Kyrgyz Christians the Kyrgyz language expresses ethnic sensitivity and the language that they would like to use when communicating with God. When asked what the difference was between Kyrgyz Muslims and Kyrgyz Christians one respondent replied, 'When they (Kyrgyz Muslims) pray in Arabic they do not understand what they are saying but we (Kyrgyz Christians) speak whatever is in our hearts.' The use of Kyrgyz language in prayer and worship is seen as both a symbolic representation of Kyrgyz identity and a vehicle of expressing true Kyrgyz religious expression. In the words of one respondent, 'This is true Kyrgyz religion.' Another respondent shared her conversion story. In it she described a conversation with a person she later came to find out was a Kyrgyz Christian. In the narrative she was explaining to this Kyrgyz that she had been faithfully praying *namaz* (Muslim ritual prayers) in the hope that her daughter

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[59] When the Qur'an was available in the Kyrgyz language it was usually a transliteration of the Arabic using Kyrgyz script rather than a translation of the Arabic into understandable Kyrgyz.

would be healed. The person responded:

> 'Are you Kyrgyz? Then why do you have to pray to God in Arabic? And I said, 'This is right, this is Arabic. But how will I know how to pray to God in Kyrgyz?'...She said, '...Don't memorise and don't pray to God in Arabic I will take you to the place where people [Christians] pray to God in Kyrgyz' [female, 56 years, married, occupation unknown]

If you are Kyrgyz why are you praying in Arabic? The question hits right at the heart of identity. Or least that is the challenge the Kyrgyz Christian seeks to make. In one sense the very question turns on its head the accusation of betrayal that many Kyrgyz Christians face. The reply is startling, 'But how will I know how to pray in Kyrgyz?' The indirect claim is that it is not Kyrgyz Christians who have betrayed their people, or who have turned away from their Kyrgyz identity, it is Kyrgyz Muslims who cannot or are unable even to pray to God using their own language but have need to use Arabic, a foreign language that they do not even understand. By claiming to be the place where Kyrgyz can learn to pray to God in the Kyrgyz language, the implication, and the stated claim of at least one respondent at least, is that Kyrgyz Christianity is representative of true Kyrgyz religion.[60] As has been earlier pointed out, the use and development of Kyrgyz language continues to be an important element in government strategy in the development of a Kyrgyz national identity.

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[60] As was pointed out in Chapter Four some Kyrgyz Christians, indeed, some Kyrgyz generally, are more conversant in Russian language than Kyrgyz. Usually the more urbanised, these Kyrgyz have been raised and educated in Russian. These Kyrgyz Christians have no difficulty attending Christian meetings where Russian is the main language used or in singing Christian songs in Russian. As also pointed out in the methodology it was necessary to have a translator who was fluent in Kyrgyz and Russian for the same reason. So while the Kyrgyz language discourse is significant for many Kyrgyz it does not hold for all Kyrgyz Christians. Further, it would be true to say that some Kyrgyz, as opposed to more nationalistic Kyrgyz, actually think that being Russian or Russified is not a bad thing.

Kyrgyz Christians see themselves very much in the centre of that developing national identity not on the periphery, and not as outcastes or as 'deviants'. In light of Kyrgyz independence and the need to construct a national identity that seeks to build a strong civil sense of social solidarity out of the ashes of the Soviet demise it is not surprising that Kyrgyz Christians seek to do the same thing, an issue that is further developed in Chapter Six.

It is not just that Islam only came to be identified with Kyrgyz in recent history, nor that before Islam came to Kyrgyzstan the Kyrgyz had a strong association with shamanism, many Kyrgyz Christians also hold claim that history shows that *Kyrgyz ancestors were in fact Christians before they were Muslims* (14/49, 28.6%)[61]! For Kyrgyz Christians to remain closely tied to their ethnicity it is necessary to find and maintain continuity within their social and cultural context. Their social context includes both their connections to living family and Kyrgyz community and to their dead ancestors.

Kyrgyz identity is intimately related to the connection with the Kyrgyz ancestors. Though their ancestors are dead, these ancestors are understood to be a kind of 'living dead', who continually visit the living Kyrgyz community. Honour and blessing (for this earthly life and for the afterlife) depend on the mutual recognition between the living and the dead – and it is at the heart of Kyrgyz identity. As mentioned in this chapter conversion to Christianity, as seen by Kyrgyz Muslims, represents a betrayal of the Kyrgyz community – the living and the dead. To remain within the Kyrgyz community Kyrgyz Christians must therefore negotiate pathways

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[61] Not all respondents said this. Two to three respondents said that it either was a foreign religion or that Christianity only came recently to Kyrgyzstan in the 1990s.

that affirm the authenticity and legitimacy of their new religious allegiance within their sense of Kyrgyzness and this includes negotiating continuity with their ancestors.

Kyrgyz Christians have found ways to affirm the fact that their ancestors were also Christians and that Christianity is intimately linked with the Kyrgyz people, culture, language and traditions. The argument is this: if Christian legacy is in Kyrgyz culture then it must have come through the influence of their Christian ancestors. If their ancestors were Christians then they can be Christians today as well. How have they done this? They point to historical evidence that the Christian church existed in history in Kyrgyzstan before Islam arrived. They find similarity between Kyrgyz traditions and Biblical traditions, they find Biblical meaning in important Kyrgyz symbols, and they find Christian words in the Kyrgyz language.

> I don't think [that Christianity is]… more foreign than Islam. And to be honest our ancestors first met Christians and then Muslims, so we had Kyrgyz Christians in the past. Messages on Historic Stones were written in Kyrgyz Scriptures; all monasteries [ancient ruins] in Chui and Issyk-Kul regions were Christian [in origin]. [male, 46 years, married, translator].

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

> …My Mum said, 'You were born in a Muslim family, so you have to be Muslim.'

...but when I look into the history I say, well, you know Arabs came a lot later, and when my mum told me that, I said, maybe I am the betrayer of my faith, of my family,... maybe Kyrgyz people even, because I am taking this foreign belief, foreign faith and believing in foreign God... I actually started to study the history of the church, the Christian church [in Kyrgyzstan]. And what I found out that the first Christian missionaries... came here a lot earlier than Islam came with the Arabs and I realised that Muslim is not being a part of Kyrgyz...original history... In fact Christianity was here before Islam came, so it [Islam] cannot be a part of our heritage, it cannot be a part of our identity as a Kyrgyz nation, as a Kyrgyz ethnicity...[female, 24 years, single, translator].

As mentioned in Chapter One there existed a well documented strong Nestorian Christian church within Kyrgyzstan (up to about the 14th Century), as well as in other regions of Central Asian numbering in the tens of thousands. Those included five Metropolitan sees (Dickens, 1999, Baumer, 2006, Klein, 2000, Gillman and Klimkeit, 1999, England, 1996, Foltz, 1999, Rashid, 1994, Vladmir, 2000). Local historical ruins and sites (e.g. Christian artefacts can be found at the famous historical site, the Burana Tower, in Tokmok (just outside of Bishkek), that have Christian origins are held as proof of pre-Islamic Christian history in the region. A discovery of an ancient Christian monastery in the northern Issyk-Kol region of Kyrgyzstan, which some claim to be the burial place of the Apostle St. Matthew, is further seen as evidence of those historical roots (Mitchell, 2008). One young Christian man in his early twenties spoke to the author about this media report when it came out in the local Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan) media. 'If it is true that our ancestors were Christians,' he said excitedly, 'then it is fine for me to be one too.' For some Kyrgyz Christians this shows continuity not discontinuity with the ancestors. In the

words of one respondent, quoted above, 'It is why I think that we do not come to new faith our old faith came back to us. Maybe we even became Christians before Americans.' Protestant Christianity is not seen as a new faith but the faith of the ancestors re-birthed, as it were, in the Kyrgyz community.

The reference to 'Americans' reinforces the idea that Christianity, far from being a foreign or western religion, has more ancient historical roots in Central Asia than America. Another respondent (female, 36 years, married, occupation unknown) affirms this when she comments, 'I think that all Kyrgyz can follow Jesus. If we [the Kyrgyz] knew the true history we would know that Jesus is not far away from us. And if [the Kyrgyz knew that] the gospel of Jesus didn't come from the foreign country but from our ancestors.' The emphasis on 'true' history suggests that the history that the Kyrgyz people have known until now has been changed, or information has been withheld to prevent this knowledge of Kyrgyz Christian origins from being more widely known. Kyrgyz Christians point to the 'facts of history' – those found in books, documents and archaeological artefacts as evidence of the Christian roots in Kyrgyzstan history. These facts of Christian historicity in Kyrgyzstan are not necessarily common knowledge. Though accessible through investigation, and occasionally through media reports (as noted earlier), it has remained largely 'hidden.' It is not clear the reason for this but it is likely that this is due to the emphasis on Kyrgyz Muslim identifications and the overt evidence of animistic/shamanistic origins. Therefore it has required a level of education, training and research. A few individuals have done this, foreigners and Kyrgyzstan nationals, Christian and non-Christian. As the narratives indicate Kyrgyz Christians have actively researched history to find these connections and then included them into

reconstructions of Kyrgyz identity. History becomes both a tool or an artefact, and content in the construction process.

5.3.3 Kyrgyz cultural traditions, language and symbols

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

> I usually say to people, 'You know that you just need to compare the Qur'an and the Bible. You will find more similarity with Kyrgyz culture in the Bible than the Qur'an. And what is described in the Bible is more like us [Kyrgyz] than Russians [male, 44 years, married, Christian professional].

> For example when Jacob wrestled with God, God touched his hip and he became lame. And it's written that since the children of Israel don't eat the tendon of the hip [of a sheep]. And for long a time Kyrgyz also pull off the tendon of the hip…And our parents used to teach us that even if a different person is passing by call him to eat because that might be an angel. And Abraham did the same thing…I think the Christianity belongs to Kyrgyz. …the traditions that Abraham did the Russians don't know. They know Christ but Kyrgyz not only know Christ but also they keep Old Testament customs… Kyrgyz knew about Christ a long time ago. When I was little when my mother scolded me she used to say, 'Why are you sitting in a respected place? Are you *Mashaiak*? [then] sit in a different [less prominent] place.' And Kyrgyz when they love their children they say [in Kyrgyz] '*ailanain, kagilain,*' *w*hich means, 'may I be crucified for you.' And we say, 'may I die instead of you,'

when we love our children. Where did this word came from, 'May I be crucified for you?' Many traditions from Old Testament are being practiced by Kyrgyz people...*Mashaiak* means Christ, Savior. *Mashaiak* means the most powerful and highest one. That means God, Christ [male, 56 years, married, Christian professional].

Old Testament traditions found in Kyrgyz cultural values and traditions were cited as examples of the historic connection between the Kyrgyz and Christianity. The practice of not eating the tendon of the hip of a sheep, Abraham's hospitality in case it may be an angel, the tradition of the *kidir ata*, or travelling wise man who helps people, are just a few examples that are mentioned by the respondents.[62] 'Christian' words and phrases such as *mashaiak* and *kagilain* recognised as part of Kyrgyz language and tradition were mentioned by respondents (11/49, 22.4%) in their conversion narratives. These Kyrgyz phrases/sayings have been directly appropriated and interpreted through a new Christian framework and show, for Kyrgyz Christians, that there must have been Christian origins among their forbears for these phrases to be embedded in the Kyrgyz language. The case cited above regarding the phrases *mashaiak* and *kagilain* is a good example. It is language and tradition. Several of the older (in age) Kyrgyz Christians said they remembered their older family members

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[62] Though not cited by any of the 49 Christians that I interviewed there is also a small Kyrgyz Christian element that claims that the Kyrgyz people were actually one of the 'lost tribes of Israel.' They claim other similarities to Jewish origins such as the famous and revered Kyrgyz *Manas* epic. One example concerns the main character in this epic – the hero Manas. Manas, it is said by these Kyrgyz Christians, is directly related to the Israelite tribe Manasseh. The name of Manas' father was Jakyp (Jacob). Like Jacob did with his grandson Manasseh in the Old Testament story (Genesis 48:5), Jakyp adopts his grandson, Manas to be his own son. One Kyrgyz pastor has gone so far as to claim the title Rabbi, instead of Pastor. A booklet called *Ak Kalpak*, written by an American Missionary, has been influential in this process which seeks to highlight the similarities between the Old Testament and Kyrgyz culture, and between the Manas epic and the Old Testament (see also Pelkmans, 2007:888, 893-894). While many Kyrgyz Christians find similarities with Old Testament traditions and Kyrgyz culture most do not support this position that the Kyrgyz were one of the lost tribes of Israel.

using these expressions when correcting childhood behaviour or communicating familial love. *Mashaiak* is interpreted to mean Messiah, Christ, and *kagilain* is understood to have direct connections to the crucifixion of Christ.[63]

Language, as has been pointed out earlier (e.g. Laitin, 1998), is an important element in ethnic identity construction, so to be able to identity Christian/biblical words/phrases in the Kyrgyz language is a way of affirming Christian religious identity and Kyrgyz ethnic identity as a mutually acceptable construction. Accepting the Christian faith does not have to result in a breaking of Kyrgyz identity, but rather an affirmation of it, albeit in an innovative form. A few Kyrgyz Christians also see continuity between Christianity and their understanding of Kyrgyzness *in contrast* to Russians. The continuity between Christianity and Kyrgyzness can be summed in the statement of one respondent, 'Christianity is not Russian religion and Christ is not the Russian God.' The overall emphasis, however, is not so much that Christianity is closer to Kyrgyz culture than Russian culture, as it is that Christianity should not be associated with Russianness. The distancing of Christian faith from Russian culture and ethnicity is a catalyst for locating Christianity within Kyrgyz identity.

The accusation of becoming 'Russian' and following Russian religion is itself a 'tool' which mobilises Kyrgyz Christians to pursue initiatives which reinforce Kyrgyz identity. The opposition and challenge that Kyrgyz Christians have becoming foreigners in their own land, rather than pushing Kyrgyz Christians away from Kyrgyzness has had the effect of strengthening identity. Kyrgyz identity was an

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[63] This is not to say that all Christians or non-Christian Kyrgyz accept or agree with this interpretation. What is important for the thesis is that it represents an example of how some Kyrgyz Christians re-interpret these linguistic symbols as a way of affirming their Christian faith and their Kyrgyz identity.

accepted fact, something that was never consciously thought about by Kyrgyz Christians. The accusations of betraying Kyrgyzness becomes a catalyst for finding ways to reinforce identity and to challenge the legitimacy of the accuser's so-called Kyrgyz identity. For one respondent it 'makes [me] become more Kyrgyz...makes [me] do more research [in Kyrgyz culture to prove my Kyrgyzness]...[to his accuser] Do you know how to kill a sheep?...No. [but] I know...And you call yourself a Kyrgyz? I am more Kyrgyz than you! This kind of attitude [accusation of betraying Kyrgyzness] makes you work on your Kyrgyzness.' Identity is not simply a social construct imposed from outside individuals but a conscious act of agency in response to opposition.

This can also be seen in a further development among Kyrgyz Christians concerning the term *mashaiak* in the transformation of a Kyrgyz Christian identity. Many Kyrgyz Christians now use the term *mashaiak* when referring to Christ, and the term *mashaiakche* (literally one who follows Christ) in self-identification as Christians in the Kyrgyz language. A deliberate attempt has been made to avoid identity constructions that suggest to others that the Kyrgyz Christian community are associated with Russian ethnicity or with foreignness. Excerpts from two of the interviews illustrate this.

> Respondent: [In the beginning] we would say '*Isa Masih* [for Jesus]. And now it has changed to '*Isa Mashaiak*'...at that time we used '*Isa Masih*' because …I went to Uzbekistan, they [Uzbek Christians] were using that word '*Isa Masih*', [and] in Kazakhstan [Kazakh Christian believers were also] using that word... in the Qur'an it uses *Masih*, so we would use that word and explain...
> Interviewer: And for God, what word were you using, for God?

Respondent: '*Kudai'*, *'Tengir'* ('Lord')*, 'Kudai'...* Sometimes '*Ala-Taalai'*. Because...for Kyrgyz '*Kudai*' is a closer word for [God]...these are words that they [Kyrgyz] know and they …are okay to accept this [male, 32 years, married, translator].

Since we didn't have a special term [for Christian believer] at that time, I was one of first people that came out with term *mashaiakche* [for] the word 'Christian'…also that word was used in the first translation of New Testament [in Kyrgyz]… Later on, I realised first of all that Kyrgyz will be against that [Russian word for Christian]. And that is why we tried to find a Kyrgyz word for it…I think the word *mashaiak* came to Kyrgyz from Nestorian Christians [male, 46 years, married, translator].

There are a growing number of Kyrgyz Christians who now refer to themselves as *mashayakche* (literally 'one who follows the Messiah') or as *eshengen* (literally 'believers' or 'people of faith in' [Christ]). They intentionally do not use the Russian word for 'Christians', *Kristianski*, but rather self-describing themselves with terms that are congruous with the Kyrgyz language, culture and tradition and which seek to disassociate Kyrgyz Christians from Russian ethnicity. They do not see themselves as having left the Kyrgyz community but rather within it they are 'believers'. Rather than refer to Jesus in Russian terms (*Iisus Kristos*) they are believers in the Messiah (*mashaiak*), in *Isa*, a Prophet (*paigambar*) recognised by their Muslim religious tradition. It seems there has been an intentional effort to combine both Muslim and traditional Kyrgyz elements in the addressing of Jesus as *Isa Mashaiak* to show that Jesus Christ and the Christian faith is a person rooted in the Kyrgyz world view.

Isa is the Arabic word for Jesus in the Qur'an, and which has been received as the word for Jesus in the Kyrgyz language. Yet, unlike Christian believers in other parts of Central Asia, they have dropped the Arabic/Qur'anic title for Jesus, *Masih,* in favour of the Kyrgyz word, *mashaiak.* They 'believe' in *kudai* (a Kyrgyz word for 'God', used by all Kyrgyz), otherwise referred to as *tengir* (Kyrgyz word for 'God the Lord', Creator). These terms are steeped in the traditional Kyrgyz world-view and are now incorporated into the expression and understanding of their new Christian faith. It is not so much a different God that they now worship but a different understanding of *kudai* (God) interpreted through their new Christian experience and scripture (the Bible) (Pelkmans, 2007:886). The final comment from the response of the last respondent quoted above, '...the word *mashaiak* came to us from Nestorian Christians,' is revealing in the context of the present discussion concerning the way Kyrgyz Christians find continuity with what they see as their Christian ancestors. It is not simply that this word has Christian meaning but that this word is seen as having origins in their Christian forebears.

While other respondents also refer to themselves as *mashaiakche*, the examples used here are particularly important because these two respondents have had key roles as translators in the early development of Protestant Christianity among the Kyrgyz. The terms and usage are indigenous (they are 'native' terms for the Kyrgyz) but at the same time they have been incorporated and translated into Kyrgyz Christianity through mediators/innovators – in this case through Kyrgyz language translators.[64] The narratives also highlight the role of the interaction between Kyrgyz Christians and other Central Asian Christians (Uzbeks and Kazakhs) and between Kyrgyz

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[64] And also by influential Kyrgyz Christian leaders who accept and promote these 'innovations' in the community.

Christian and non-Russian foreigners. One of the respondents (see previous page) referred to the translation of the New Testament into Kyrgyz. The translation of the Bible allowed Kyrgyz Christians direct access to Christian scriptures in their own language at a very early stage in the growth of Kyrgyz Christianity. This was itself an influencing factor in the development of an 'indigenous' Kyrgyz Christian identity. Those involved in the translation of the New Testament included foreigners and Kyrgyz. The process of the reconstruction of Kyrgyz identity for Kyrgyz Christians reveals a dynamic interchange of language, ideas, concepts and people both indigenous, Kyrgyz and other Central Asian, and foreign, old and new. It is a socially constructed process. This process does not just happen. It is both unconscious and conscious. Innovators are present who translate and seek to bring change through the use and creation of indigenous terms that become used and accepted over time.

However, these innovations are not completely accepted by all Kyrgyz Christians and have received mixed responses, positive and negative.

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

I believe [male, 33 years, married, businessman].

For this respondent the term *mashaiakche* has deep significance and is one that he feels comfortable using with his Muslim boss. It does not associate him with religions considered foreign to the Kyrgyz, and it connects him to his Kyrgyz ancestors. This respondent sees it as a means of maintaining social relationships within the Kyrgyz community, and in this case, his work environment, even though it is not a normative Kyrgyz identity construct. Another respondent, however, was not so positive about it.

> Respondent: We don't say we are [Christians] in Russian language, because they [the Kyrgyz community] associate [it] with Russian Religion.
> Interviewer: And you do not associate with Russian Religion?
> Respondent: No. I associate with Jesus and God. People see Christianity as a Russian belief or that Jesus is a Russian God. He also is Kyrgyz God. I try to explain that Jesus is for everyone. There is no special term for 'Christian'. If you say '*mashaiakche'* people may not understand. And we have to explain to non-believers who we are [male, 23years, single, Christian professional]

This respondent also recognises the difficulty of using the Russian term for Christian with other Kyrgyz because of the meaning associated with its use - Russian religion, Jesus as a Russian God – and does not want to use it. This highlights once again the 'Otherness' of the Russian community for the Kyrgyz and the sense of need of Kyrgyz Christians to find ways to identify their Christian faith that are not seen as Russianness but Kyrgyzness. For this respondent it is better to explain his faith than use a term such as *mashaiakche*, even if it is a Kyrgyz term, which he doesn't think other Kyrgyz will understand. One respondent, however, did say that she did not

have a problem still calling herself a Muslim. For this respondent there was no difference between Christ and Islam because the Qur'an was taken from the New Testament and, 'As long as I am Kyrgyz I say I am Muslim.' When asked what 'Muslim' means to her the response was, 'I don't know the meaning of Muslim.' This suggests that Kyrgyz and Muslim were synonymous for this respondent in the same way that the Soviets referred to Kyrgyz and Central Asians as ethnically Muslim, and in that sense she had no difficulty still referring to herself as Muslim without the need for new terms or new explanations. Another respondent was comfortable calling himself a Muslim to pacify his distressed mother who was upset at him becoming a Christian. Utilising the argument outlined earlier - a Muslim means one who is submitted to God - the respondent told his mother he was fine if she still wanted to call her Kyrgyz Christian son a Muslim.

As well as Kyrgyz traditions and language there are Kyrgyz cultural symbols that are reinterpreted as having biblical origins or at least have strong biblical meaning and association. One example of this re-interpretation concerns the *boz-ui* or yurt which is the traditional nomadic home for the Kyrgyz, and like the Mongolians, made up of large numbers of sheep skins spread over a wooden frame with an opening at the top to let smoke from cooking escape and to allow sunlight to come in. The wooden lattice, the *tunduk*, which comes together over the top of the *boz-ui*, is also represented as the main symbol on the Kyrgyz flag.[65]

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[65] Surrounding the *tunduk* in the national flag are 40 flames that represent the 40 Kyrgyz clans. See pictures below of the *boz-ui*, *tunduk* and national flag. http://www.google.com.au/images?oe=utf-8&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&client=firefox-a&q=kyrgyz+yurt&um=1&ie=UTF-8&source=univ&sa=X&ei=AopxTdLwO4vluAP_neC9AQ&ved=0CEwQsAQ&biw=1280&bih=580 downloaded 5/3/2011.

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

> Even if we take the *boz-ui* [yurt], God commanded to put the sign of the blood at the entrance of the [Israelite] homes to protect the people from His judgment. It is in several places in the Bible with Moses. We still keep this [tradition] because the wood of the entrance of the *boz-ui* is supposed to be painted with red. The *tunduk* [top of the yurt] had three woods [crisscrossed in a lattice design] and symbolises the cross. And also it symbolises the Trinity – God [the Father], Son and the Holy Spirit. It symbolises the three in one God. And light comes through the Trinity. Our women are supposed to wake up early and supposed to open the roof in the morning to receive blessing. And before the sun rises we are supposed to get the blessing. [male, 49 years, married, social worker]

The *boz-ui* – the yurt

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

The Kyrgyzstan National flag

Picture 5.2 The *boz-ui* – the yurt and national flag

Not only does this respondent find parallels between the *boz-ui* and the events of the Bible, he also then goes on to interpret and explain New Testament theology, the Trinity, using those very same symbols. New Testament ideas are utilised as interpretative instruments in explaining and justifying their conversion, as a Kyrgyz, to the Christian faith. This is a personal interpretation by one Kyrgyz Christian.[66] It is highly likely that this interpretation would be unacceptable and potential offensive to many in the wider Kyrgyz community. One researcher took photographs which showed how Kyrgyz Christians utilised Kyrgyz cultural symbols in Christian contexts and showed these to Kyrgyz Muslims. Shocked by what he saw, one of these Kyrgyz Muslims exclaimed, '...it is plain deception [and] abuse of Kyrgyz culture.' It apparently was even worse than becoming a Russian – an Orthodox Christian (Pelkmans, 2007:892). Nevertheless, it does reflect the importance of cultural symbols, and the need to find cultural continuity, in the construction of ethnic identity for Kyrgyz Christians. It also highlights the way Kyrgyz Christians have utilised new or introduced 'conversion artefacts' as interpretative lenses to make sense of their conversion in light of ethnic identity.

The indigenising process and in turn, the re-construction of ethnic identity takes place during religious conversion when members of the existing community take introduced non-indigenous artefacts and 'fuse' them into an identity construction that 'feels their own' and makes explanatory sense. By locating their Christian faith within the symbolic representations of their culture and community Kyrgyz Christians are finding their new religious identity rooted in their Kyrgyzness. To re-

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[66] This idea is also found in the book *Ak Kalpak*, written by an American missionary, mentioned earlier (see footnote#9). It is almost certain that this Kyrgyz Christian was aware of this book or had had some interaction with the American author who wrote it.

quote one of the respondents, 'We do not come to new faith our old faith came back to us.' This construction is clearly embedded and understood, the locale of meaning, within the social context in which it takes place. Though this has occurred within a specific social and cultural context, I suggest that the same processes involved are likely to be repeated in other contexts and among other groups when religious conversion takes place.

5.3.4 Religion is a matter of choice not birth

A fourth way that Kyrgyz Christians respond to those who accuse them is that religious identity is viewed as fundamentally *a matter of choice* occurring after birth (12/49, 24.5%). This view suggests that religious identity is a response people make in life and to their environment not as something constituted or dependent on one's national community or ethnicity (Peyrouse, 2004a:670). Islamic religion, according to this view, is something that people have created and constructed. People choose to believe in religion and people by choice create religion. At some point in history Kyrgyz ancestors chose to accept Islam as a religion and incorporated it into Kyrgyz identity. Kyrgyz Christians now claim the same right to choose a different religious identity challenging any essentialist claims that Kyrgyz are born Muslim.

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

> You know we have freedom. I mean people know everybody changes the[ir] religion themselves. For example, I wasn't born a [Christian] believer I became a [Christian] believer later. It is your growth or your education or your way of life or it is your

choice [female, 25 years, unmarried, social activist - italics author's emphasis].

Lots of people tell me that since I am Kyrgyz I should be a Muslim. But when God created people He didn't create Muslims, and Islam is something *people themselves have created*. Before Islam came to Kyrgyz we were shaman. And the adult people who didn't search the history tell us things like that [that we were born Muslim] [female, 20 years, unmarried, student - italics author's emphasis].

Kyrgyz means that I am a part of a group of people, an ethnic group with common language, tradition, with one history. But I would never say that Kyrgyz should be Muslim…Because religion is something that *people have to choose*. The problem is that Muslim families don't know about eternity and where the idea comes from that Kyrgyz should be Muslim. But I know if Kyrgyz people had *a chance to choose*…it could have been easier…because they *never had a choice*. I think that is why many Kyrgyz have become believers, it's because they had a *choice*. They had a *choice* to believe in Christ or to be a Muslim. And that is a big difference. If I had a chance from the very beginning, I would have *chosen* to follow Christ [male, 23 years, unmarried, Christian professional - italics author's emphasis]

The question of 'freedom' was raised by one of the respondents, 'You know we have freedom.' 'Freedom' is a powerful word with many implications. The question still remains freedom from what, and to do what? Does it mean freedom from social constraints and sanctions, freedom from political or legal constraints? This is not directly answered by the respondent. At the very least it means freedom for an individual to choose religious faith, allegiance and behaviour. For this respondent the fact that she can choose the Christian faith as her religious identity does not negate her own sense of Kyrgyz identity. She says earlier in her interview that she 'is proud

to be Kyrgyz.' This respondent's new religious faith does not take away her sense of Kyrgyzness, it strengthens it. The inference is that religion is not just something that is chosen by individuals, as opposed to something that one is being born with. It is something that only *recently* Kyrgyz have had the ability to choose to accept. 'Kyrgyz never had choice...If I had a chance from the beginning, I would have chosen to follow Christ.' This suggests, for this respondent, that Kyrgyz have not questioned the construct that one is born a Muslim if one is a Kyrgyz, and that previously Kyrgyz did not have the opportunity to choose a religious identity different from the accepted construct. Laitin (1998:19) speaks of the way ethnic identities, however they are constructed, take on a life of their own and which are not questioned by the people who hold them. There is a sense in which 'the power of these identities...seem *natural* to those who hold them' (italics mine). This raises the question in what context the naturalness of Kyrgyz identity, i.e. that a Kyrgyz is naturally a Muslim, has been challenged and reconstructed (at least by a few)?

5.3.5 Divine election – 'God created me Kyrgyz'

A fifth discourse claims that a person is not only born a Kyrgyz, but that divine election is also called upon to justify their Kyrgyz status, 'God created me Kyrgyz' (9/49, 18%). This construction assumes of course that there is a 'divine', a God factor at work in society. Soviet education and ideology did much to remove religious capital in Kyrgyz society. Religious institutions, religious authority, and religious rites were severely weakened through political and social controls. Many Kyrgyz assumed a communist-secular outlook - a Darwinian scientific explanation for the evolution of life, and a religiously-disinterested predisposition. This apparent

lack of interest in the religious did not mean that the religious was completely removed from Kyrgyz thinking. Post-Socialist religious revitalisation has reintroduced the sense of the divine, the transcendental, from the peripheral into a more prominent place in the world view for a growing number of Kyrgyz, either Muslim or Christian. This is certainly the case for Kyrgyz Christians. A twenty-five year old married man who works with a Non-Government Organisation in the south of Kyrgyzstan, had some clear ideas about what it means for him to be Kyrgyz.

> The first important thing is *God created me as a Kyrgyz...* My being is Kyrgyz and *I was created as a Kyrgyz...* Every nation was given by God a special characteristic and there are special characteristics *given by God to Kyrgyz...*I am proud because *Kyrgyz is a nation created by God* and I am among them. And Kyrgyz are ancient people. I am proud because Kyrgyz have a long history. I am proud because Kyrgyz went through many difficult things and even we have a saying "Is there a birch that Kyrgyz didn't hit with an axe? And is there any mountain that Kyrgyz didn't climb?" [italics mine].

The priority and pride for this respondent is that he is created by God to be Kyrgyz. He has divine sanction as an individual to be Kyrgyz. In other words, if God has done this what can people do to question or change it? Further, this respondent sees himself as part of a divinely appointed community. It is not just that this respondent believes that he been created by God as an individual, but that his people, the Kyrgyz people, have also been created by God as a community, 'a nation', of which he is a member. Conversion to Protestant Christianity has reinforced a sense of the divine, of personal religiosity, and in turn strengthened his sense of pride in his ethnic identity. This respondent's identity is closely linked with his people, and this is

communicated through the belief that his community has its origins in the purposes and plan of God. The religious factor implies that identity is not simply a 'secular' or 'this-worldly' phenomenon, made up of race, blood, language, customs, traditions, ideas etc but also involves supra-natural 'artefacts' – the idea of the divine, of a God, who is personally and actively involved.

It is at this point that Kyrgyz Christians begin to part ways with traditional constructions of Kyrgyz identity. For, while Kyrgyz Muslims would recognise the idea of the divine in Kyrgyz identity it is restricted to the view that 'to be Kyrgyz is to be Muslim'. This implies that one is born Muslim[67] as well as Kyrgyz, at least in the common or accepted understanding of the community. The sense in which one is 'born Muslim' is multifaceted. It has a localised cultural sense, Kyrgyz are Muslim because they are, but the meaning behind that identification may have little to do with religion per se. It also has some religious sense in that being born Muslim indicates that one is born into the world of a community that has identified itself as part of the Muslim world. Kyrgyz ancestors were Muslim and in some way the association with Muslim religious identity, albeit a localised or indigenised version of it, is also assumed. This construct suggests a religious or divine essentialist element or absolutist understanding (Syrjänen, 1984:51). A person's Muslim identity is not simply socially or culturally constructed but rather, as Haddad points out, 'grounded in their original and natural being as a Muslim' (Haddad, 2006:44).

Research has shown that conversion to Islam (in the West) is seen by converts as conversion to 'what they really were,' that is, they were born Muslim and conversion

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[67] See also McBrien (2006) who discusses discourses in Kyrgyz Muslim identity, and particularly, the differences between religious and non-religious discourses of 'Muslimness.'

is seen as returning to that reality (Zebiri, 2008:90). Religion, and therefore Muslim identity, is commonly viewed as fixed and unchanging in the construction of Kyrgyz identity. However, in the present context of Kyrgyz conversion to Christianity, circumstances have arisen in such a way that '...the Islamic signification system has retained or lost for its adherents its absolute quality, its notion of transcendence, its signification character as such' (Waardenburg in Syrjänen, 1984:50). In Kyrgyz conversion, the Islamic signification system has been superseded or replaced by a Christian signification system, one which accepts the idea that God is involved in one's birth as a Kyrgyz but rejects the idea that a Kyrgyz is born Muslim. Kyrgyz Christians acknowledge the hand of God in Kyrgyz nationhood, as a community, but they challenge the idea that *religion* as represented by particular human traditions, institutions, religious identities, beliefs or practices, or is something that one is born with.

5.3.6 One is born a Kyrgyz

A sixth way, that Kyrgyz Christians claim that Kyrgyzness is mainly related to one's birth (8/49, 16.3%). One's primary ethnic identity is one that links a person by blood, their genetic make-up, to the people who have the same biological origins, as oneself. These can be summed up in key phrases from different respondents: 'Certainly, I am a Kyrgyz...because *I am born a Kyrgyz.* I cannot be different,' '...and I will die a Kyrgyz,' 'Some people say as long as you are born as Kyrgyz you are Muslim. But I do not agree with this. I say, I was not born as a Muslim I was born as a Kyrgyz.'

To be identified as being in the 'in-Kyrgyz' group is to be born into a Kyrgyz family. The inference is that once you are born into a Kyrgyz family you cannot be unborn out of it. Another respondent considered themself to be a 'pure Kyrgyz' because 'my eyes are blue and my hair is light.' The legitimacy of their Kyrgyz birth is proved by their physical features, they look like a Kyrgyz, not by religious allegiance. There is some sense here in which identity has to do with essentialist qualities - one does not choose one's parents and one's ancestry. What that blood or birth connection *means* depends on a social context but that one was born is not constructed, it is a fact.

5.3.7 The metaphysical, internationalist or global identity - the de-ethnicitisation of God

The seventh way that Kyrgyz Christians have looked at reconstructing identity has been a discourse that focuses not so much on an emphasis on continuity with Kyrgyzness but on the transcendental internationalist or global nature of Christian identity (15/49, 30.6%). This perspective plays down the distinctiveness of Kyrgyz ethnicity in relation to the commonality of all peoples, all ethnicities, all 'nations'. Christ is not an ethnic God or a foreign God – He doesn't belong to Kyrgyz alone, or to Russians, but of all peoples. Accordingly, there is no difference if a person is a Kyrgyz, a Tajik, a Kazakh, a Russian or an American it is who a person is in relationship to God. '...but for me it is not important if I am Kyrgyz or not when I think about myself in front of God,' 'For me it doesn't matter if a person is Kyrgyz or American because we are all God's children,' 'The most important thing is to be God's daughter...God's child...'

Religious conversion provides a reorientation of identity that transcends issues of ethnic identity. Yes, they are Kyrgyz in the flesh, as one respondent put it, but their essential identity goes beyond ethnicity. Religious conversion appeals to a higher authority as the basis for constructing identity. The authority for this 'transcendent identity' is said to come from the Bible which has become the new source or reference point for interpreting identity. 'There is no difference for me... The Word of God says...God created everyone [all ethnicities]...God is the God of all peoples...we all come from one Father...Jesus should be the faith of all mankind.' It has already been pointed out that many Kyrgyz Christians see a divine element in creating them Kyrgyz. In this construct this sense of divine calling is now taken a step further. They are Kyrgyz, but more than Kyrgyz, they are God's children. Further, it is not only the Kyrgyz, but all humanity, all ethnicities who 'are one nation in God.'

The 'internationalist' construct finds some interesting parallels with Soviet, Islamic and Turkic identity constructs. The Soviets attempted to create a pan-Soviet identity that brought together all Soviet peoples. The goal was the creation of a 'Soviet society' and the 'Soviet man' (*sovetskii narod*) (Brubaker, 1994:51) that, while including all national groups, would transform them into one 'internationalist' albeit Soviet identity. While the Soviet project ultimately failed, the nostalgia and sense of Soviet connection still found among the former Soviet population are evidence that it did make some inroads as a construct. It connected one nationality into a larger group that provided a sense of security, of meaning, and of social cohesion in the midst of a global world. Islam has the concept of the *ummah*. The *ummah* is the world-wide community of all Muslims regardless of, and transcends, ethnicity and national

identities (Hassan, 2002:84ff, Shahrani, 1984). The Turkic identity construct is the desire to bring to together those ethnicities, now political states, that have a common linguistic heritage, rooted in the Turkic language – the common linguistic heritage of most of the Central Asia nations (except Tajikistan), and Turkey. Each identity construct has a commonality – an identity that links individual ethnicities with a wider, global identity community. Kyrgyz Christians, have continued this global identity formation but have embedded it in a Christian, non-political framework. Similar to the Muslim *ummah*, Kyrgyz Christians see themselves as part of the world-wide community of Christian believers, made up of people from all ethnicities, and brought together by a belief in a universal God of all peoples.

5.4 Post-Conversion attitude to culture, religion and the community – living out a minority Kyrgyz Christian identity in a majority non-Christian ['Muslim'] Kyrgyz world

It is one thing to construct a new identity as a Kyrgyz Christian it is another to live that new identity out in the broader non-Christian Kyrgyz community. That process is not smooth or easy. As one respondent put it, 'Sometimes I feel chewed up between two cultures.' The feeling of being 'chewed up' is a description of the tension that the new identity faces when it engages with the 'old identity' represented by people, social structures and traditions. Decisions have to be made about whether one tells other Kyrgyz about one's new religious identity, and how you live that new identity out in the community. This is the point at which 'the rubber meets the road.' This next section will consider the ways Kyrgyz Christians have negotiated their understanding of Kyrgyzness expressed through their interpretation and attitude to

Kyrgyz values, culture and religious traditions and through their involvement in relationship with other Kyrgyz in the conversion process.

5.4.1 Kyrgyz values and cultural expressions

The responses of Kyrgyz Christians to questions of what it means to be Kyrgyz primarily focus around themes of Kyrgyz values, particularly hospitality (17/49, 34.7%) and respect for elders (*aksakal*) (27/49, 55.1%).These are important values for the Kyrgyz generally and are affirmed as both Kyrgyz and Christian values and important Kyrgyz identity markers. Others speak of the nomadic heritage of the Kyrgyz expressed through the description of the mountains, yurts (*boz-ui*), pastures (*jailo*), sheep (killing and eating), *Kymyz* (traditional Kyrgyz drink – fermented mare's milk). One respondent spoke of these as characteristic of the freedom that the Kyrgyz feel from imposed authority just as their nomadic forbears were free to roam the mountains and steppes, a quality also associated with independence. This apparently was a historical quality that was exemplified in the Kyrgyz independence from the Khanates (Muslim kingdoms) centred in modern day Uzbekistan and from Islam incursions into the area. As respondent put it, 'The Kyrgyz were not fixed to any religious condition.' The Kyrgyz language and culture expressed through songs, music (and the traditional musical instrument such as the *komuz*, a stringed guitar like instrument), clothing (e.g. the *kalpak* – the traditional Kyrgyz hat made from sheep felt), and literature (especially proverbs), were also highlighted as expressions of their sense of Kyrgyzness.

> I believe that...one example...of being Kyrgyz...is in the language...we have very rich ethnic music...And that is why I say I belong and when someone hears *komuz*

playing they will listen to it just as an extra fine instrument and it's fine. When I hear the *komuz* my whole inside comes out. It is just a thing that you can't explain, it comes from within your mother's milk and when you hear this, you just can't take it, it turns everything inside and that's why I am Kyrgyz' [male, 32 years, married, translator].

Another respondent described her initial conversion experience. The first Christian meetings that she attended were made up of ethnic Russians and Kyrgyz but very soon the Kyrgyz started having their own meetings. She made it a point of describing the difference between the Christian meetings where Russian language and culture were dominant and the Christian meetings she started to go where the Kyrgyz language and culture were stronger. The Russian services used choirs to lead worship. The Kyrgyz worship services were led through the use of the *komuz* as its worship instrument. What was the difference? 'When they played the *komuz* it was close to your heart. You felt like, "It was mine."' The use of mother tongue and the use of a traditional instrument in religious expression confirm to the Kyrgyz Christian that their Christian faith comes from the 'soul of the Kyrgyz'. The yurts remind the Kyrgyz of their nomadic heritage, 'it makes you feel really nomadic, that your ancestors were nomadic.' The *kalpak* or traditional hat worn by many Kyrgyz is another example. The look of the *kalpak* is significant as it reminds Kyrgyz 'of the mountains and the snow', their homeland (Kyrgyzstan is 96% mountainous), but it is also an iconic Kyrgyz symbol that is utilised in affirming Kyrgyz and Christian

identity. [68]

> I think that Kyrgyz people are much closer to God, and I think compared to other
> nations the hearts of Kyrgyz people are more sincere…When I look at the *kalpak* it
> is a Kyrgyz traditional hat, and it looks like a mountain... And [it is] like our God
> [Jesus who] went to the mountain and He prayed there [female, 42 years, married,
> home duties].

Kyrgyz musician playing the *komuz*

A Kyrgyz Man wearing a *kalpak*

Picture 5.3 The *kalpak* and the *komuz*

The *kalpak* reminds the Kyrgyz Christian of their cultural and religious connections.

These examples draw out a further element in the construction of ethnic identity. The

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[68] Photographs of man wearing *kalpak*
http://www.google.com.au/images?q=man%20wearing%20kalpak&oe=utf-8&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&client=firefox-a&um=1&ie=UTF-8&source=og&sa=N&hl=en&tab=wi&biw=1280&bih=580
downloaded 02/12/2010 and musicians playing *komuz*
http://www.flickr.com/photos/67334280@N00/2705460897 downloaded 02/12/2010 - see pictures
above

'tools or artefacts' of identity are not simply material or cognitive 'facts' but also include the emotive or affective attachments that connect people to them and the meanings that are associated with them. Meanings, in the case of religious conversion, are at the same time both cultural and religious. By upholding and affirming Kyrgyz values and cultural expressions as legitimate and symbolic expressions of identity it shows that conversion to Christianity does not necessarily cause a dislocation or division between Kyrgyzness and Christianness, rather it seeks to enhance and enrich both.

5.4.2 'Good' traditions and 'bad' traditions

Kyrgyz Christian identity transformation is not simply about the interpretation of cultural values and traditions in affirming Kyrgyzness. Conversion, as has been mentioned, is a radical re-orientation of religious allegiance. A new religious authority is introduced into the Kyrgyz milieu, a new authority that finds its source in the Christian scriptures. Accordingly, after conversion, Kyrgyz Christians face the task of determining what place they have in the community as both Kyrgyz and Christian. They have to decide what things can be accepted and what needs to be changed as a result of conversion. The history of Kyrgyz Christianity shows a broad spectrum of response ranging from outright rejection of all things Kyrgyz to embracing many of the cultural traditions.

All the respondents interviewed for this research indicated that there were 'good' traditions and 'bad' traditions in Kyrgyz culture. While sociology and related disciplines shy away from making value judgments about social phenomenon

(Hagan, 2005:213) – one seeks to understand, describe and explain, rather than conclude it if it is true, false, right, or wrong - it certainly falls within the realm of religion and theology in which religious conversion finds itself situated. One is therefore not surprised that Kyrgyz Christian have made such value judgments about their own culture and religious traditions. None of the respondents interviewed stated that because a Kyrgyz has become a Christian they must now reject all of their culture. 'Christ saves culture', as one put it. The basis for deciding what was good or bad, however, came down to several synonymous statements: 'Whether the tradition is against or not against the Bible,' 'If the traditions are similar to the Bible,' 'What is for/against God's will, 'pleasing/not pleasing to God,' 'those things that are associated with evil spirits or ancestor spirits or the occult,' 'those things that are Muslim or Islamic [religious practices]'. The basis for interpretation of 'good' and 'bad' Kyrgyz traditions was opposition to what was perceived to be 'the occult' or 'Islamic' and what they understood the Christian scriptures, the new religious authority, said about them.

However, it has to be noted, that the reality of 'what the Bible says' as the means of interpreting good and bad traditions requires some qualification. While there is certainly an element of individual agency at work, 'I need to pray and ask God what is good and bad,' and a religious source of authority – the Bible to judge issues, there is another element where this is done on behalf of Kyrgyz Christians by their church leaders. As churches have grown in numbers and size an increasing religious structure and accompanying authority associated with its leaders has also developed. When the religious leaders say something is not good then, for many new Kyrgyz Christians, it is understood that this is the Biblical position too. 'After we became a

Christian we stopped doing Kyrgyz traditions and Kyrgyz spiritual things...And our pastor K...According to his teaching we are trying to stop these things.' Two of the respondents, who became Christians in the early years after independence when Kyrgyz were first embracing Protestant Christianity, said that, in the beginning some of the leaders in the church (mostly non-Kyrgyz) did not accept Kyrgyz cultural practices. However, later this church teaching was rejected by many Kyrgyz Christians as being wrong. It is unclear the precise reasons for this.

The suggestion, however, is that rejecting all their Kyrgyz cultural and traditions disconnected Kyrgyz Christians from their sense of Kyrgyzness. Many Kyrgyz Christians challenged the 'Russian Baptist's church's traditions as Russian/German culture and not biblical culture. The rejection of Kyrgyz culture and traditions also aroused opposition from the Kyrgyz family and community that many Kyrgyz Christians found increasingly unnecessary, as well as difficult. On a separate occasion one Kyrgyz church leader told the author, in a personal conversation, that this was one of the factors that caused a division in the early Kyrgyz church. Some Kyrgyz stayed with the 'Russian Baptist' churches and others started independent Kyrgyz churches. So while the Bible may be seen as the source of judging what was good and bad it was the religious authority represented by the human religious leader that often interpreted what this actually meant.

Some traditions were deemed to be acceptable, such as certain wedding traditions that included gifts of clothing, traditions when a baby is born and when a child first starts to walk, and the killing of sheep. One respondent stated that good traditions included praying with the hands held out similar to Muslim prayer. His own wife

challenged him on this especially when in the presence of Russian Christians who may be offended by his 'Muslim-like' praying style in public. His replied sternly, 'It's not Muslim, its Kyrgyz. I pray that way.' Some disassociation has taken place between religious forms and cultural forms, the 'sacred' and the 'profane', so that what is cultural is seen to supersede or take priority over the religious. In this case the form used to give religious expression is not seen as 'tainted' by the previous religious tradition and can be legitimately utilised in expressing the new religious tradition as authentically Kyrgyz. The form expresses affective ethnic identity and remains constant, the religious content and meaning is transmutable.

> I will quote from the Bible. I don't remember the place it is written but it says, 'If you were a slave, if you were Greek, if you were Hebrew, stay what you are. So long as I was created as a Kyrgyz I should stay as a Kyrgyz. If we come to the practical traditions many traditions are similar to the traditions in the Bible [male, 25 years, married, NGO staff]

Some Kyrgyz cultural traditions however, were not acceptable. These traditions were overtly connected to what was considered to be associated with superstition, evil spirits, the occult (shamanism) and Islamic religion (37/49)[69] (see also Pelkmans, 2005:891). Traditions associated with evil spirits were those that involved seeking help from fortune-tellers (*kozu achik*), shamans (*bakshy*), traditional healers (*tabip*) and sacred places (*mazar*). Offering food for the ancestor spirits (*arbak*) was also considered unacceptable for Kyrgyz Christians. These cultural practices are associated with evil spirits, with Satan, by Kyrgyz Christians, and considered to be

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[69] Only these respondents specifically mentioned this in their narratives but based on personal interaction with the respondents and other Kyrgyz Christians were the respondents directly asked about these issues the percentage would almost certainly be over 90%.

wrong.

> Interviewer: What is not a good tradition?

> Respondent: It is written [in the Bible] 'Don't worship created things,' because they have started to worship created things. They worship the spirits of the dead. They go and worship at places of the streams or holy places. There are other things, protecting things...[using] pieces of Quranic verses to keep them safe. Things from the tree that they consider are sacred to protect their life. And the *kozu achiks*...Sometimes you will hang a horse shoe in your house...or a thorn to keep the evil eye away. They have different parts of the animals, bones. So when we hang those we believe that it will bring blessing [female, 46 years, widow, accountant].

> After I become a [Christian] believer [70] some relatives came from the different village. They had heard that I was a *kozu achik* [but did not know I was a Christian now]. And when they came they said, 'Oh please heal us we are sick.' I said, 'I am sorry I am not *kozu achik* anymore.' I realised that this is from Satan, but in God's word Jesus healed many people. I don't heal anymore but Jesus will heal…I had to explain that I am not *tabip* or *kozu achik* anymore this is from Satan but Jesus is God and healed everyone. And I shared gospel and I prayed for the old lady. And Jesus started using me to cast out demons and heal sicknesses [male, 37 years, married, Christian professional].

What is particularly interesting about the last narrative is that the respondent not only identified his past activities as a *kozu achik* (fortune teller) as activities to do with Satan but that, now, as a Christian, he *continues* to heal sicknesses and cast out demons but this time he claims that it is not from himself but the power of Jesus

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[70] The literal translation and preferred English translation by Kyrgyz Christians is 'believer' - avoiding associations with the Russian word for Christian - *Krsitianski*.

Christ. The activity (healing and deliverance) is similar to what he used to do as a *kozu achik* but the discourse and source of spiritual authority are different. The reality of a supernatural world and its influence on the natural world are still taken for granted but the interpretation of the dynamics involved has changed. Protestant Christianity has provided a worldview framework that recognises, engages and seeks to transform the spiritual context that many Kyrgyz understand and experience. It facilitates a new 'universe of discourse' (Snow and Machalek, 1983a, 1984) for Kyrgyz Christians to understand, interpret and explain spiritual dynamics around them.

Traditions directly associated with Islam or 'mixed up with Islam' are also rejected. These traditions are focused on the use of the Qur'an, the role of the mullah, and praying in the mosque. For example, the reciting of the Qur'an by a Christian, inviting the mullah to recite the Qur'an on special occasions, such as death memorials or at Ramadan/Ramazan Eid (the festive occasion after the fasting month) or having the mullah come to do the *nike* ceremony for the wedding, or certain of the funeral rites. In religious conversion the three elements listed represent religious scripture, religious authority and religious sacred space. However, it is the recitation of the Qur'an that seems more than anything else to symbolise the religious 'other' for Kyrgyz Christians. It is not surprising that these have been rejected in Kyrgyz Christian identity that claims for itself Kyrgyzness but rejects constructs that include overt Islamic religious identifications. These three religious identifications have been replaced by the Christian Scriptures - the Bible, by Pastors and Church leaders, and by the Church building or Christian meeting place.

Of all the Kyrgyz traditions the one that is viewed as the most important, and the one that is most controversial for both Christian and Muslim Kyrgyz communities, is the funeral. It is in the Kyrgyz funeral that the crux of Christian and Kyrgyz identity issues culminates in religious conversion, the social context in which religious, cultural and social continuity are negotiated – challenged, critiqued, affirmed and changed. It highlights the 'deviant' nature of Christian conversion, the crisis points in community identity, and the possibility of Kyrgyz Christianity establishing itself as a legitimate construction within Kyrgyz identity and community.

The Kyrgyz funeral is a community event which strengthens and reinforces social integration and identity. The immediate family, extended family and local community come together to mourn with the relatives of the deceased, to support the family during the loss of the loved one, and to perpetuate ritually the social and spiritual connection between the living and the dead – the recently dead and those who have died in the past. Even if a person was not a religious person during their life, the participation and attention to funeral rites assures them of a safe path into the after-world, to join the Kyrgyz ancestors. The correct attendance and participation in prescribed rites are essential for maintaining harmony and affirming community and ethnic identity. The rituals involved include the bearing of gifts of money, clothing and food for the family of the deceased, the eating of ritually sacrificed animals and other food provided by the family, the expression of loud weeping for the dead, the gathering in groups to share in the experience (male with male, and female with female), the reciting of Qur'an prayers (*janaza*) by a mullah, or one who has memorised the appropriate Quranic verses, and finally the burial of the body in a crypt in the local cemetery. Other community events can be missed, but it is felt that

every effort must be made to participate in funerals.

The whole dynamic takes on a different perspective for Kyrgyz Christians – for Christians themselves and for the non-Christian Kyrgyz community. Challenges arise when Kyrgyz Christians want to attend funerals and when a Kyrgyz Christian dies and needs to be buried. As has been mentioned, Kyrgyz Christians are commonly understood to have betrayed the faith, family, community and ancestors through conversion to Christianity. One of the major threats for Kyrgyz who become Christians is that they will not be buried in the Kyrgyz cemetery, with the ancestors and with the requisite burial rites - the ritual cutting off of social, cultural and ancestral identity. Of course there is a difference between threats and rhetoric and action. The social reality is that the community responds in a variety of ways. Some Kyrgyz Christians are not invited by family or community to attend or participate in funerals. Some are still invited. Some Kyrgyz Christians still attend funerals, others refuse to go to funerals because they will have to participate in rites that they deem to be demonic or Islamic, and this goes against their conscience or the teaching of the particular church that they are attending. Some Christians are allowed to be buried in Kyrgyz cemeteries others are forbidden to be buried by elements in the community. One particular incident in May, 2008, brought national media attention because of the tensions created by a community's refusal to allow the burial of a 14 year old boy from a Kyrgyz Christian family in the village community cemetery (Pannier, 2008, cf. Murzakhalilov, 2004).

The significance for the present discussion is the general attitude and behaviours Christian and non-Christian members of the Kyrgyz community and the issues it

raises for the construction of identity. In twenty-six of the interviews (53.1%) the issue of funerals were discussed in the narratives. While there was not uniform agreement among Christians about what Christians could or could not do at the funeral almost all of the respondents agreed that Kyrgyz Christians should still go to funerals. Only one respondent said that they would not attend a funeral at all. Some Kyrgyz Christians acknowledged that relatives would not invite them to some funerals because they were Christians, while others were happy to go, pray, comfort, mourn with, eat and join in the final prayers with the family and wider Kyrgyz community. One respondent said that they would not eat the sacrificed food commenting that 'Christians should not eat food sacrificed to idols.' This is a reference to passages in the New Testament (especially 1 Corinthians 8) which some Christians use to prescribe forbidden behaviour related to food prepared for non-Christian religious occasions. Other respondents said that Christians should not pray the Quranic prayers at the funeral, but it was fine to provide food and help serve at the funeral. One respondent said that he would pray in Kyrgyz for the deceased family but not recite any Quranic prayer.

Respondents gave different reasons for attending funerals and what practices they felt they could or could not participate in. What was important was that they felt Christians should still go to funerals because of social continuity with family and the community. If Christians will not go to funerals they will unnecessarily cause offense or bring shame or disrespect on the family. If Christians do not go to funerals people in the community will look badly at Christians as unbelievers (*kapyrs*) and reject them. The family and community will break relationship with Christians and they will be divided from the people. Conversely by attending funerals Christians will

take away potential stumbling blocks from the community's hearts towards Christians. The community will come to understand Kyrgyz Christians better and accept them, they will see that Kyrgyz Christians are still Kyrgyz and can come to funerals. It is also felt that the community will come to see that 'our beliefs are not wrong.' For some it was also a good opportunity to share the 'word of God' and evangelise the community. If they remain detached from other Kyrygz 'non-believers' they will not be able to bring them to Christ. The following narrative brings out several of these issues.

> Interviewer: And when your other family members have funerals do they still invite you to come?
>
> Respondent: Yes, the whole village comes.
>
> Interviewer: So they still accept you?
>
> Respondent: Yes. They go to the good parties or funerals and they are still accepted and have relationship with the community. There is one reason for this. One of my neighbours died and so the whole village was thinking if A. [respondent #49] will come or not. And when I came they were observing me. Because they had heard many times that believers do not go to funerals. Actually some people do not go. But I put on the *kalpak* [Kyrgyz hat] because when you go to funeral you have to have something on your head…And when I went all the neighbours were surprised to see me…When somebody dies and you visit, the Qur'an should be recited two times. So everyone was looking at me and observing. And they said, 'Hey, mullah, would you recite the Qur'an?' I said, "Ok, I will do it in Kyrgyz." They were surprised and said, 'Is there Quranic prayer in Kyrgyz?' And they said, 'Go ahead, do it we want to listen.' I opened my palms and prayed in Kyrgyz and said, 'God you see that a person passed away, please encourage the family members and give them strength.' And I said all the good wishes and said, amen. And everybody said, amen.

Everyone was quiet. And somebody said, 'Oh, this is really good. Would you tell us some more of God's word?' And I started sharing with them God's word. I told about Noah, about the flood. And when the end time will come God will send fire not water anymore. We drank tea. Before we left they said, 'Do your Kyrgyz Qur'an again.' I said, 'Ok', and then we opened our arms again. And I prayed for the people who were sitting there. I said, 'May all the people who are sitting here be saved. May they all know you [Jesus] while they live on the earth and may all the good things will come to them'. I said so many good words [but] didn't say anything about the dead person. And I said, 'Amen,' and everybody said, 'Amen'. And when I was leaving they were talking with each other, 'They [Kyrgyz Christians] are not bad people. They also pray in Kyrgyz.' After that people started respecting and treating us well [male, 37 years, married, Christian professional].

The narrative describes the process by which Kyrgyz Christians have to negotiate their way through community involvement and traditions, between their new religious allegiance and their Kyrgyzness, between their 'deviant' status as non-Muslim Kyrgyz and their place within the Kyrgyz community. In order to move toward a more normative place in Kyrgyz society continuity must be found to affirm the Kyrgyzness of Christian expression, albeit a modern innovative version of it, and to maintain their place within Kyrgyz social structures. The example just given, elicits some of these factors at play. The Kyrgyz Christian, while understood to be different, was nevertheless invited and attended the funeral in the community, dressed in typical and expected Kyrgyz attire (the *kalpak*). Addressed as 'mullah' because of his known ability to recite the Qur'an the Kyrgyz Christian accepted the invitation to pray but at the same time did so with apparently acceptable innovation – to pray a prayer in Kyrgyz, not in Arabic. The fact that these Christians were

received, and were involved in the funeral, resulted in a breaking down of potential negative barriers within the community. These Kyrgyz Christians 'are not bad people' the members of the community said. This communicated that though Kyrgyz Christians may be different, they still come to funerals, they still honour the dead and they are still Kyrgyz.

Yet the process is not so clear cut. Just like the way Kyrgyz Christians have re-constructed Kyrgyz identity by locating ways to maintain social and cultural continuity in a dynamic process that is still ongoing, that same process is taking place as they live out their sense of Christian Kyrgyzness in the community. While many Kyrgyz Christians intentionally seek out Kyrgyz cultural identity, some are happy to acknowledge that it doesn't matter. While most Kyrgyz Christians seem sure that it is important to attend funerals, seeking social inclusion, a few have chosen to oppose it accepting rejection as the natural outcome of conversion. And somewhere there are those who try to find 'balance' in the middle between their Christian faith and their Kyrgyzness. The response of the Kyrgyz community is also polarised between those who remain open to the presence of Kyrgyz Christians at funerals and other important community events, and are happy to retain relationship with them, and those who reject Kyrgyz Christians – through family and community ostracism.

During the field research process the author was involved in participant observation that included attendance at the Kyrgyz Christian funeral of a woman. The following is a description of that funeral and a discussion with one Kyrgyz Christian leader who was present about what occurred. The discussion reflects the issues that have been raised and illustrates many of the dynamics at work in constructing a Kyrgyz

Christian identity in the socio-cultural context of a wider Kyrgyz Muslim community. Nearly all the immediate family members of this Kyrgyz family were Christians. The family lived in a village not far from Bishkek, the capital, which was largely but not exclusively Kyrgyz. The author's wife and the author arrived at the funeral with a couple of Kyrgyz Christian friends who also knew the family. The author's wife went to be with the women. The author stayed with the men. In front of the family house was a traditional *boz-ui* (yurt) where the deceased body was lying in preparation for the burial. Inside the *boz-ui* were mostly women. At different times individuals and small groups would make their way into the *boz-ui* to pay their respects.

The author was with one of his Kyrgyz Christian friends when this friend suddenly made a dash to the *boz-ui* with loud shouts and 'wailing-like' noises in typical Kyrgyz fashion. The author followed behind. After paying their respects they went into the family home to be served tea and *boorsok* (the traditional Kyrgyz bread-like food served at such occasions). At a later point the female and male members of the family gathered outside the *boz-ui*, together with a few well- known Kyrgyz Christian leaders. A non-family male member, who was clearly well respected and a good orator addressed those who were present from the extended family and community about the Christian faith of the family. Later the father and other male family members also shared their memories of their mother and their Christian faith. Finally someone prayed in Kyrgyz with hands outstretched. The dead body was then taken from the *boz-ui* towards the cemetery for burial with the men present walking behind in an informal procession. The tomb had been dug out in a traditionally Kyrgyz way as a crypt in the ground. The body had been wrapped in white cloth and

was placed in the crypt. A prayer in Kyrgyz was said with all holding their hands out. At the end a non-Christian called out for someone to recite the Qur'an. A person in the crowd did so. Everyone crouched to the ground and the man recited the Qur'an. Afterwards the man who had requested the reciting of the Qur'an went to the person who had done so weeping with gratefulness. They walked back and had a meal inside the house.

The author questioned one of the Kyrgyz Christian leaders about what had occurred. The funeral was largely arranged and led by the Kyrgyz Christian family members. They had kept several of the traditional Kyrgyz forms but added speeches about faith and Christian prayers. The author had noticed several people leaving the funeral before the burial and inquired what had happened. Apparently these were extended family members who were upset that the mullah had not been invited to offer Quranic prayers. The Christian leader informed the author that the mullah had actually been invited by the family to come but had refused because the family had become 'Baptists'. He also refused permission for the deceased Christian to be buried in the Kyrgyz cemetery and the family had to get permission for the family member to be buried in a place designated for non-Kyrgyz Christians (e.g. ethnic Russians and Germans). Still pushed to try to get the mullah to come again, the Christian family refused and so some of the non-Christian family left. At the last minute, nevertheless, there was still a recital from the Qur'an. There had only been a few Christian funerals in Kyrgyzstan and it was evident from this experience that there was still confusion and a lack of clarity among Kyrgyz Christians about how to go about it – how to be Kyrgyz and Christian in a funeral, how to honour the deceased and the extended non-Christian family and community, and yet express

their Christian faith. There was a mixed response from the non-Christian Kyrgyz community. Some did not attend at all, some left, while others stayed throughout the Kyrgyz Christian burial. This too illustrates the generally mixed attitude and response of the wider Kyrgyz community toward Kyrgyz Christians – hostile, ambiguous, accepting; irrevocably clear, unsure and confused, tentative and welcoming.

5.4.3 Opposition and acceptance - community response and reaction to conversion

Clearly tensions still persist within both the Christian and non-Christian Kyrgyz communities concerning the place and legitimacy of a Kyrgyz Christian identity. Kyrgyz Christians are still finding their way, still finding their identity, as they negotiate their Christian faith and their Kyrgyzness lived out in the community. In this process the 'oppositional' role of the non-Christian Kyrgyz community challenges the 'Kyrgyz Christian' construct as a legitimate Kyrgyz identity construct. It certainly has had an impact. For some Kyrgyz Christians the opposition causes them to rethink their conversion experience, and especially in the village setting, results in a number of people turning back on their new faith, or hiding their faith. The fear of what other people will say in the village, the gossip, and the shame, are strong factors in causing someone to turn back from Christianity, or not to openly share their faith with the family.[71] It is also in the village where stronger social pressures are enforced. The threat or experience of gossip was mentioned by 22.5% (11/49) of respondents as a common reaction, especially in the village where

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[71] Unfortunately the issue of recidivism/apostasy (turning back from religious faith) was not explored in detail in either the interviews or the survey and therefore clear figures for this are not available.

everybody knows everybody and where news spreads quickly. Several respondents spoke of the extended family and community bringing in well known mullahs to confront them and convince them to turn back from the Christian faith. Others were threatened with physical harm or expulsion from the village. In these cases the faith of the Christians who were challenged became stronger, but those people in the community who had started to follow these Kyrgyz Christians often succumbed to the pressure to not continue in their Christian faith (or at least in the public confession and practice of it).

> Even though they are not very strong Muslims they feel that you can't be a Christian. It is sometimes easier to talk with religious Kyrgyz because you can talk with them and explain, but non-religious Kyrgyz don't want to hear explanations, they say, 'We are Muslims, what are you doing? You are a big shame for our area, our village, and all our relatives' [male, 32 years, married, translator].

One significant issue here is that opposition to Kyrgyz Christians is not necessarily because the community or those who were opposing Christians, were strongly religious Muslims. Religious conversion is viewed as a betrayal to the integrity, cohesion and identity of the community. Muslim identity is viewed not simply as religious belief and practice but as community loyalty. The avoidance of shame is therefore of high value. In the context of history, of culture, and of the Kyrgyz community, conversion to Christianity is perceived as conversion to 'Russianness', conversion to something 'other' than Kyrgyz. It is no wonder that Kyrgyz Christians go to great lengths to show that far from being Russian they are in fact 'true Kyrgyz'. The perceptions of 'Russianness' are also due to the lack of knowledge or misunderstandings about Christianity held by the community at large.

Much of the overt opposition takes place within village contexts. The village community is smaller, social cohesion and integration is tighter, and tradition is upheld to a much greater degree than in larger urban centres. It is also in these larger urban centres where larger groups of Kyrgyz Christians are able to live and meet without the same social pressures, and with a greater degree of anonymity. As one respondent put it, "It's safe in Bishkek [the capital city] nobody cares who you are." This is also true for those respondents who come from families where significant numbers of family members have also become Christians. As one respondent put it, 'because of my Christian environment, I do not feel that I have a lot of opposition.'

The ability to develop and sustain these plausibility structures, and for Kyrgyz Christians to be able to participate in and draw from them, are important factors in leading people to a Christian faith and in maintaining a Kyrgyz Christian identity. It is not only that there were groups or communities of Christians that Kyrgyz Christians could become connected with, but that there were other Kyrgyz who were present. Respondents spoke of the fact that they went to Christian meetings specifically because there were Kyrgyz present, Kyrgyz who could explain the Christian message to them, Kyrgyz Christians with whom they could build friendships. The presence and interaction with Kyrgyz agents were important in overcoming barriers to Protestant Christianity and in creating openness to consider the solutions and claims that Protestant Christianity offered (see also Pelkmans, 2007:890).

> And I refused to go with him [Russian Christian] to the church but [then a] different guy invited me to church, and he was Kyrgyz, and already a believer. So that's why I went there, because he was Kyrgyz. I said, 'What kind of Kyrgyz goes to church, let

me see, let me see the church.' And when I went there it touched my heart and after a couple of times going there I accepted the Lord...[male, 32 years, married translator].

In one of the Bible studies I completely felt brave, courageous. I was not afraid of anything...I have made a lot of Kyrgyz friends who were believers. I went to church for about 6-7 months before I accepted Christ... I went there just so that I could see friends, just because I wanted to make new friends. I made Kyrgyz friends there. We met there. We would hang out. We would go to the mountains. That community was just drawing me …it was a different community [female, 26 years, single, social activist].

It seems to be the case that while at the time of conversion there is often significant opposition from immediate and extended family and the community after a period of time, reapproachment and renewed relationship takes place. Maintaining family relationships appear as strong as maintaining social cohesion through conformity in cultural identity. While dislocation does take place, and some Kyrgyz Christians are not able to maintain (because of family rejection) or do not maintain (because of choice) family connections, family relationships do prove important over time often resulting in family members becoming Christians. Of those Kyrgyz Christians that I interviewed 15 respondents (30.6%) said that *many* of their family members were now Christian (in a few cases across three generations numbering over 30), 16 respondents (32.7%) said a *few* members of their family were Christian, and *only* 3 (6.1%) said that no family members were Christian. The acceptance from their family, and the presence of family members who are also Christian, reaffirm a new Kyrgyz Christian identity. Even if the non- Christian family do not agree with the

new Christian faith of the Christian the fact that they still accept them as family members and welcome them as such provides the platform for normality.

The author asked one respondent what his religiously trained brother said to him about his Christian faith. He replied, 'We argued a lot and finally I said, 'Let's stop arguing. Let's see ourselves not as Muslim and Christian, but you are my brother and I am your brother. That's it.' The opportunity to break down what Kyrgyz Christians consider to be false perceptions of Kyrgyz Christians, of Kyrgyz betrayal, of the sexual promiscuity etc of the supposed 'Baptist' sect, and the ability to show their lives by example, have helped to strengthen and maintain cultural and social continuity within their Kyrgyz community. This has allowed for a 'deviant' ethnic perspective to become an increasingly normative perspective, albeit a minority one.

5.5 Summary of findings from the interview data

The reconstruction of identity in religious conversion among the Kyrgyz is a dynamic ongoing process. This chapter began by recognising that the tools or artifacts of conversion and identity reconstruction are utilised by Kyrgyz Christians to negotiate their way through a path that seeks to maximise the possibility of maintaining cultural and social continuity with their Kyrgyz identity, their Kyrgyzness. This includes a process that requires challenging, resistance, affirmation, and adaptation in order to construct an alternative identity to the apparent 'naturalness' associated with the status quo (Hebdidge, 1979:88-89). Their new Kyrgyz Christian identity has been challenged by the wider non-Christian Kyrgyz community as a deviant identity, contrasted with the normative

understanding that if you are Kyrgyz you are Muslim. Kyrgyz 'Muslimness' was seen largely as a strong connection with their Muslims ancestors, and the reciting of Quranic prayers at important social events rather than with normative/orthodox/scripturalist Islam (tenets of belief and practice). The accusations of betrayal, of selling their faith, family, community and the ancestors have given impetus for Kyrgyz Christians intentionally to find ways to link their Christian faith with their understanding of Kyrgyzness.

Kyrgyz Christians have done so by constructing a Kyrgyz identity which affirms their ethnic birthright – that they were born Kyrgyz; that they were *divinely* created to be Kyrgyz; that religious expressions are a matter of choice not birth, that history 'proves' to Kyrgyz Christians that Kyrgyz were not always Muslims, but in fact were once Christian; and that Kyrgyz traditions, culture and iconic symbols parallel Biblical traditions and meaning and therefore 'true Kyrgyz religion', and that Kyrgyz Christians are in fact 'true Muslims'. Finally, an internationalist perspective that links their new religious faith to a de-ethnicitised deity who is the God of all peoples, and to the community of Christians worldwide, who have a common creator, a common 'Father'. There is a tripartite emphasis on human/divine/cultural (indigenous and external) agency: 1. 'I was born Kyrgyz [it is in my blood]' 2. 'God made me Kyrgyz.' 3. 'We choose our religion [religion is what I believe and I do, we are not born with it].' Identity is then constructed utilising cultural forms, language, and meaning, together with newly introduced 'tools', Protestant Christianity and its attendant manifestations. Conversion does not take place in a vacuum, it takes place within the parameters, and is limited to the social, cultural and historical context - agency and culture engage in a dynamic interplay of cause and effect.

The new Kyrgyzness, as defined by Kyrgyz Christians, is found in the affirmation of those Kyrgyz values, cultural expressions and symbolic representations of Kyrgyzness that touch the 'soul of the Kyrgyz'. Values such as hospitality and respect for the elders, cultural expressions such as dress and music, symbolic representations such as those associating the Kyrgyz with their homeland and with their nomadic origins all are seen as binding the Kyrgyz together as a people regardless of religious affiliation.

The new Kyrgyzness for Kyrgyz Christians is also an affirmation and a critique on normative understandings of Kyrgyz identity and culture. Those elements of Kyrgyz identity and cultural traditions that are viewed as being against the Christian faith are removed in this new construction. Muslim identity and practices are seen as being directly associated with Islamic religion, and together with those traditions that involve the 'occult', are removed from the new Kyrgyz identity equation. The 'fuzzy' traditions, those that are not overtly religious but have religious elements, are still 'fuzzy' areas in the construction of identity for Kyrgyz Christians. The 'fuzzy' traditions, the areas of identity that are less overtly religious, remain as contentious issues within Kyrgyz Christianity, lacking uniform agreement. As one respondent mentioned, in this 'we are still finding our identity,' and nowhere is this more typified, than in issues related to funeral rites. The goal appears to be an attempt to retain family and ethnic continuity in a way that enables Kyrgyz Christians to remain Kyrgyz *and* Christian, and as a means to reach out to and evangelise – to win others to their religious faith and construct of Kyrgyzness.

Relationships between Kyrgyz Christians and the non-Christian Kyrgyz community have shown both opposition and acceptance. The 'oppositional' stance of the community has at the same time strengthened the faith of some Kyrgyz Christians and caused the falling away from the Christian faith by others. The freedom to pursue a Christian identity is stronger in larger urban areas than in smaller rural contexts where issue of inclusion, cohesion, and integration are more acutely felt and reinforced through social regulation. Nevertheless, many Kyrgyz Christians find that social relationships with their family members are positively renegotiated with the passage of time allowing for acceptance, or at least toleration, enabling for some growth in numbers and a somewhat normative role in Kyrgyz society - Kyrgyz Christians maybe different, but they are still Kyrgyz.

A number of issues require further consideration. These include the role and place of religion and ethnicity in identity construction, and the deviant nature of religious conversion in Kyrgyz society. Conversion to Christianity among the Kyrgyz was virtually non-existent prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union. Somehow a gap has opened up in Kyrgyz society that has allowed for religious conversion and significant identity change. When compared to most other areas of the Muslim world this is a rare occurrence. Chapter Six will focus on these issues in greater depth.

CHAPTER SIX – Challenging boundaries, reconstructing identity

Kyrgyz conversion to Protestant Christianity has proven itself to be a multi-faceted phenomenon. Challenging normative identity constructions regarding Kyrgyz identity Kyrgyz Christians have entered a process not simply of changing religious affiliation or allegiance but of the reconstruction of ethnic identity. This chapter draws together issues that have been raised over the course of the last two chapters in relation to the research data and seeks to bring out key themes that help us understand some of the social processes involved in Kyrgyz conversion. Kyrgyz conversion is about identity reconstruction. Both religious conversion and identity reconstruction directly challenge what it means for individuals to be a part of group identities, especially ethnic identity. This chapter considers some of these challenges: how the Kyrgyz community has responded to the challenge of Christian conversion and how Kyrgyz Christians have responded to the challenge that they are not legitimate members of the Kyrgyz community.

The question of the reconstruction of Kyrgyz identity through conversion will be discussed in this chapter under three sections. The first section considers how Kyrgyz Christians challenge the accusations of betrayal and the 'deviant' labels ascribed to them by some members of the Kyrgyz community. The second section examines what happens when ethnic boundaries are challenged, especially as they relate to identity, and the factors which influence the possibility of change. The third section describes how Kyrgyz Christians respond to these challenges through a process of

identity reconstruction utilising and seeking to maintain continuity in relation to social, cultural and religious capital.

6.1 Challenging accusations of betraying Kyrgyzness

Kyrgyz Christians, from the perspective of much of the Kyrgyz community, have violated ethnic boundary markers by joining Protestant Christianity. It is in response to the accusation that Kyrgyz Christians should no longer be considered Kyrgyz that the reconstruction of identity has taken place. If we revisit those accusations (elaborated in Chapter Five above) we can summarise them in four statements: "You have betrayed, sold out your community, you have become a *kapyr*", "You were born Muslim...[not Christian]..,therefore to be Kyrgyz is to be Muslim," "You have become Russian," and "You have become Baptist." These statements represent forms of labelling that the community have sought to put upon those Kyrgyz who have become Christians. These labels declare that Kyrgyz Christians have crossed the ethnic boundary, and have violated those markers that identify a Kyrgyz with their community.

Kyrgyz Christians are accused of a form of treason and betrayal to the Kyrgyz community. The accusations of betrayal suggest that Kyrgyz Christians have 'stabbed the community in the back' from within the community. Religious conversion in this context is about a change of behaviour and identity that are considered a violation of Kyrgyz identity and threatens the legitimacy of membership in the community. The 'Russian' label is damaging as it directly attacks the Kyrgyz core identity. The meaning of the label is that a Kyrgyz Christian has, in a sense, 'left

the fold, and joined the enemy', and in doing so, Kyrgyz Christians have betrayed their family, their community, their ancestors and their faith. The accusation is directed squarely at the heart of personal and social identity. Christianity for the Kyrgyz, as has been discussed in the thesis, and reiterated throughout the data analysis, has been largely associated with Russian ethnicity, with the Russian Orthodox Church. It is 'Russian religion' and Christians are said to believe in the 'Russian God'. The Russian community has been the historic dominant 'Other' since the 19th century, from the time of the Tsars.

Kyrgyz Christians are considered to have crossed the ethnic boundary. The religious conversion behaviour of the few threatens the integration of the community and an informal social control mechanism is exercised through labelling, threats and gossip. The data have described some of the labels that have been 'put upon' Kyrgyz Christians. These labels suggest that something must be wrong with the character of those Kyrgyz who have become Christians, what Becker calls 'auxiliary traits' (1963:33) which are attached to the status of those considered deviant in society, or those who challenge behaviour not considered normative (see also Goffman, 1963:5). As no 'normal' Kyrgyz would change their religious identity Kyrgyz Christians must have sold their identity for personal material gain, they must have been bribed (instigated and offered inducements by outside elements to lure them away), they must be crazy, (*tokson toguz* - literally '99' – in other words they are missing '1' or something in the head), or they must have been brainwashed (forced to accept Christianity) (Becker, 1963:32, Erikson, 1966:7, 10).

Ironically the way that these Kyrgyz Christians mostly seem to manage the deviant labels is not simply to challenge their accusers (Sykes and Matza, 1957), but to challenge and transform the *boundaries* of the social group. One of the main consequences of labelling in society can be the reinforcement of the identity and social cohesion of the social group against 'boundary breakers', the deviants, in this case Kyrgyz Christians (Becker, 1973, Durkheim, 1965 [1915], Erikson, 1966). However, Kyrgyz Christians have used the social sanctions, the social control mechanisms including labelling, as motivation to build and refashion an identity within the main social group. The opposition, the stigmatising label, of no longer being Kyrgyz, of becoming 'Russian,' and following Russian religion are themselves tools which mobilise Kyrgyz Christians to pursue initiatives which reinforce their own sense of Kyrgyz identity. Requoting one respondent: '...[because of those who accuse me of no longer being a Kyrgyz it] makes [me] become more Kyrgyz...' In the process, boundary markers are challenged, reconfigured and transformed by Kyrgyz Christians.

6.2 Challenging the boundaries of identity

In the context of Kyrgyzstan Kyrgyz ethnic identity is perceived to determine social linkage to others and to differentiate the Kyrgyz from other Central Asian people and from other peoples outside of Central Asia. That identity is shaped by a commonly understood shared genealogy, history, language, geographic space, cultural symbols and religion. The significance for the case of religious conversion under consideration in this thesis is the issue of the religious category. As has been stated throughout this thesis the commonly understood notion of Kyrgyz identity is that 'to

be Kyrgyz is to be Muslim' and that this identity construct is deemed natural or essential for Kyrgyz identity. It has already been pointed out that ethnic markers can be important boundary symbols (Barth, 1969a). Some ethnic markers cannot be changed, such as skin colour, but other diacritical signs, such as dress, language and religion can be changed. Diacritical signs, over time, can become so embedded in the social group that they can eventually be viewed or accepted as unchanging reality. For the Kyrgyz, 'being a Muslim' has achieved that status.

That a Kyrgyz should be a Muslim is a widely shared and accepted identity construction among the Kyrgyz people. It is largely understood to be a significant form of identification ascribed in cultural and ethnic terms rather than religiously orthodox or scripturalist terms (Akiner, 1996, Gunn, 2003). Nevertheless, the 'Muslim identity' of the Kyrgyz falls within the realm of the wider Muslim community which has been influenced in real ways by Islam as a religion. That there is a sense of a Muslim religious element in that identity, even if it is not dominant, is reflected in the increasing Muslim religious rhetoric and influence in Kyrgyz public life (for example, in the increasing number of people attending Friday prayers at large mosques in Bishkek, and the growing religious content and flavour of programmes on national television), and the recourse for families and local communities to bring religious officials, mullahs, to challenge the faith of those Kyrgyz who have become Christian. It is also reflected in the accusations made against Kyrgyz Christians that they have 'betrayed the religious faith' of the community even when those making those accusations are often not very religious themselves. Though these identities may be constructed, they carry salience and meaning for group identity particularly when these core identity markers have been

challenged, whether within the (intra) group (sub-cultures) or from without, those who represent the 'other' (inter group).

This thesis has demonstrated that Kyrgyz Christians have sought to remove the Muslim identity label as one of the inherent Kyrgyz identity markers. By removing the religious identity marker or label, Kyrgyz Christians are seeking to create a niche in the Kyrgyz community that allows for their recognition as Kyrgyz while retaining continuity with their community. The Christian faith has come to represent a meaningful religious, social and cultural life for Kyrgyz Christians and they do not see their conversion as something which strips them of legitimate Kyrgyz identity. It is in this context that they seek to remove the 'natural' association between Muslim religion and Kyrgyz ethnic identity while emphasising other accepted boundary markers. They seek to redefine what is essential to be a Kyrgyz and utilise symbols that have importance and relevance to Kyrgyz identity as it is commonly understood. The analysis of the data from this thesis shows that this redefinition seeks to emphasise those things *other* than religion but which are important for Kyrgyz identity such as history, culture, language, geography, the ancestors and family (birth and blood).

The very fact that Kyrgyz Christians challenge and then seek to reconstruct the boundaries of the Kyrgyz social group raises important issues. The first is that boundaries by their nature are not immutable or fixed in perpetuity (Erikson, 1966:13). Created out of social and historical contexts and developed over time, social group boundaries are continually subject to change and have more of a fluid or organic quality (Sanders, 2002:327, Glazner and Moynihan, 1963). While some

boundaries appear stronger and more impervious to change than others, boundaries have the potential to change, even if incrementally. Occasionally dramatic events internal or external to the social group may trigger sudden, rapid changes, challenging and testing the strength and flexibility of the boundaries (Erikson, 1966, cf. Beckford, 1986b). The data from this thesis suggest that the break-up of the Soviet Union and the rapid changes and the new openness that have taken place in the independence era have facilitated ethnic boundary innovation among the Kyrgyz. Kyrgyz conversion to Protestant Christianity is an example of this.

Secondly, boundaries are not simply a description of the amount of deviance tolerable in society. All societies allow room for some change and innovation. There are accepted levels of innovation, change, or differentness, and there are unacceptable levels. The more unacceptable the innovation, and the more norms of society that are challenged, the more likely that a deviant designation will be applied and some form of social control will take place, formally or informally. Innovations that challenge core group identity boundary markers which have traditionally been accepted to define who is a member of a legitimate group member, are particularly fraught with danger, and have strong potential to strain member relations and incur some form of punishment. As has been stated through this thesis Protestant Christianity is a new religious movement, and is considered by many members of the Kyrgyz community to be an innovation that has gone too far, hence it is considered a deviant identity. Given that most Kyrgyz see their Muslim ethnic identity as 'natural', it is understandable for members of the Kyrgyz community to think that a Kyrgyz could not be anything else other than a Muslim.

Factors influencing identity boundary strength include the level of integration and regulation that the community employ in maintaining group identity. Clearly the higher the integration, the tighter and stronger, and the more dependent group members are on one another for emotional, economic, filial, political or religious support the stronger and less flexible those ethnic boundaries are going to be. Likewise the stronger the level of social control, the level of regulation that is exercised within the group, the less flexible that boundary is going to be and the more likely that innovations will be regulated, potentially refused and even punished (Coleman, 1990).

Identities, like ethnic boundaries, are not necessarily fixed and have the potential to undergo change (Shahrani, 1984). The strength, flexibility, and porousness/permeability of an ethnic boundary will reflect the potential number of identities available and allowable to its members. In religious conversion among the Kyrgyz, Kyrgyz Christians have sought to redefine boundary markers as they are commonly held or understood by removing 'being a Muslim' as an ethnic identity marker. By doing so, Kyrgyz Christians have challenged normative understanding of Kyrgyz identity. One does not have to be told verbally, 'this is who you are,' though this may also occur. Bourdieu's notion of *doxa* is helpful here in understanding the apparent 'naturalness' of social identity, its social construction, and the role of agency it plays in people's lives. In relation to social identity Bourdieu comments that it is 'the sense of the position one occupies in social space' which largely blinds them from perceiving social reality as anything other than ' the way things are' (Jenkins, 1992:70). In other words, there is this sense that 'it just is and always has been like that'.

The accepted notion of identity is also formulated as group members identify and locate themselves and their group in opposition, in difference, or in sameness, to other people and other groups. Those distinctive elements that a group identifies with become a source of bonding, cohesion and solidarity (Shahrani, 1984). The identity association that an individual may hold, claim or communicate will often vary depending on the particular social context in which they find themselves and with whom they are communicating. The 'Other' may be the next family, the next village, the next region, the next clan, the next profession, the next language, the competing economic group, the next religion or the next sect/denomination of the same religion (Barth, 1969a, Barth, 1969b, Horowitz, 1975, Lubin, 1995, Nagel, 1994). This suggests that while one identity may or may not predominate it is also true to say that there are a number of *identities* that may be involved, all potentially held, to one degree or another, at the same time. The predominance of one identity over another will be decided largely by the social context in which the member/s are involved and with whom they are involved. In the case of the Kyrgyz, this could be family, clan, village, region, north/south national divide, nationality (Kyrgyzstan citizen), ethnic – e.g. Kyrgyz versus Uzbek, religion – Muslim versus Christian, Kyrgyz versus Russian - all depending on about whom one is talking and in what context the situation is taking place.

Religious conversion represents a form of innovation within social identity. Any change of elements that make up social/ethnic identity represents some form of innovation. Some elements of identity appear in a hierarchy in that there are some elements that are more important, less flexible, more intrinsic, more binding than others. This hierarchy of identity itself has the potential to change over time.

Religious conversion as defined in this thesis represents radical religious change, in that it is not merely switching from one religious denomination to another within one religious tradition but a change from one religious tradition to another. In the case of the Kyrgyz it is a change from the broad religious tradition of Islam to that of Christianity. The place of religion in the hierarchy of the substance of group identity will be a significant factor in the level of innovation allowed, how flexible the boundaries of identity are and how much social control is exercised - the ease with which religious conversion is a remote possibility, allowable with restrictions, forbidden, totally accepted etc. Lamont (1995), in her work on boundary strength, suggests that it is only those boundaries which are strongly embedded in widely shared meaning which have enough ability to create hierarchy and bestow value to collective identities. The immediacy of reaction to the Kyrgyz Christian identity by members of the wider Kyrgyz community would indicate the importance of the place and strength of religion as an identity marker.

The swifter the negative reaction, the more sustained the reaction, the breadth of the reaction across various community levels, and the amount of social control/sanction exercised against Kyrgyz Christians are also certainly good indicators of how important religion is as an identity marker. This thesis has demonstrated that while there is often an immediacy of reaction against Kyrgyz Christians there is variation and inconsistency in how sustained the reaction is (in time), in the breadth of the reaction across community level, and in the amount and kind of sanction/social control imposed.

Until recently there has been relatively low political or governmental power exercised to restrict or sanction Kyrgyz Christians or Christian proselytism among Kyrgyz. At the time of independence, a new constitution was created which guaranteed freedom of religion (Anderson, 1999a, 1999b). Most restrictions on the control of religion were lifted concerning all religious groups. Earlier in the thesis it was stated that the religious institutional structures associated with Islam - the mosque, the mullah, madrasas (institutions of Muslim educational learning), and any overall national religious authority - have been minimal factors in the social control exercised against Kyrgyz Christians. Those elements which have sought more powerfully to bring sanction have largely come from family (immediate or extended) or local community. Even when there has been family or community sanction the data have shown that, over time, this opposition and any sanctions associated with it have considerably weakened. Indeed the survey indicates that it has been reduced by as much as half between conversion and the time when the survey was conducted. It also indicates that family connectedness appears to be at least as strong as religion in the collective identity of the Kyrgyz and that there is room for innovation on the level of religion, much more than one perhaps would expect from a Muslim society. That innovation is not simply an innovation within the diversity of Islam – from orthodoxy to popular Islam to Sufism, from Sunni to Shia - but also in the addition of a religious tradition outside of Islam, Protestant Christianity, into the Kyrgyz ethnic milieu.

A number of issues have been raised by the fact that there has been variation and change in the length, breadth, and amount of sanctions imposed on Kyrgyz Christians in an attempt to uphold boundary maintenance. These include the issue of

how *successful* the social sanctions imposed by the family and community were in limiting the effect of this deviant religious behaviour on Kyrgyz Christians, in encouraging recidivism, or in removing Kyrgyz Christians from the wider Kyrgyz community. It also raises the issue of how successful Kyrgyz Christians have been in developing a reconstructed identity acceptable in both the Christian community that they are a part of, and in the wider Kyrgyz community. The data collected and analysed for this research did not directly include data from the non-Christian Kyrgyz community. What this thesis does address, however, is the way those *Kyrgyz Christians* who participated in this research have responded to these challenges as they perceive or construct them. The data also give important indicators regarding the success of the social control imposed on their 'deviant' behaviour and the kind of processes available to Kyrgyz Christians in the construction and development of a Kyrgyz Christian identity.

6.3 Challenging deviance – the reconstruction of identity

The Kyrgyz Christians in this study have responded to the opposition and accusations by reconstructing ethnic identity. The opposition itself has been used as a mechanism to intentionally address issues of identity and belonging. It would appear that prior to their conversion, and prior to the opposition and challenges put forward by members of the non-Christian Kyrgyz community, Kyrgyz Christians did not really think consciously about their Kyrgyzness - their Kyrgyz identity. Or, at least, if it did happen it occurred in relation to inter-group differentiation – the 'Others' represented by the Russian/Slavic community or by 'Uzbeks', their near neighbour Central Asian community to the south and west which historically also was

associated with the Kokand Khanate, the previous politically powerful authority in the region. In this sense Kyrgyz identity is not so much a 'given fact' as it is a 'living thing' that takes life when the social group is challenged. One consciously reflects on, and interacts with, identity when it is challenged or when one is confronted with those who represent the 'Other'. Kyrgyz conversion to Protestant Christianity is a social dynamic that is taking place within and from the Kyrgyz community. It represents intra-group rather than inter-group change. The perception of the Kyrgyz Christian respondents is that non-Christian Kyrgyz view Kyrgyz Christianity as an object of the 'Other' – whether it be symbolised in the label 'Russian' or whether it is just considered 'not Kyrgyz'. The association of Christianity with a Kyrgyz is an association with the 'Other' and brings out a reflex 'identity reaction' – a reaction to oppose those who threaten the stability and integrity of group identity.

However, Kyrgyz Christians from this research do not view their conversion as a threat or as something which takes them outside of the group. They have sought to locate their conversion to Protestant Christianity *within* the boundaries of Kyrgyz identity and the Kyrgyz community. They do not view their conversion as violating boundaries of Kyrgyz identity but rather they see their new religious faith as something which finds social, cultural and historical continuity with the Kyrgyz community and within Kyrgyzness. While the traditional or normative understanding of Kyrgyz identity is that to be Kyrgyz is to be Muslim, an identity most, if not all, Kyrgyz Christians held prior to conversion, Kyrgyz Christians post-conversion have found ways to reconstruct what they understand legitimate Kyrgyz identity to be. The 'new' Kyrgyzness, as defined by Kyrgyz Christians, seeks to affirm traditional elements, especially the social and cultural, while largely removing the religious. By

so doing Kyrgyz Christians seek to find ways to align their new religious faith within Kyrgyz identity by redefining the boundary markers. To be Kyrgyz, therefore, is to be Christian as well as to be Muslim because religion as an essential element as a boundary marker has been removed. 'Blood', family ties and attachments, are thicker than faith when it comes to ethnic identity. Ethnic characteristics such as traditional Kyrgyz values, language and cultural artefacts (e.g. dress, music, food, genealogy) remain constant though with new reference points or sources of authority (i.e. the Bible).

Culture and history, Nagel (1994:161-162) has argued, are the building blocks of ethnicity and the construction of ethnic meaning. She suggests that culture, like ethnic boundaries, is constructed by the actions of individuals and groups, and their interactions with the wider society. Answering the question: 'Who are we?' Nagel sees ethnic boundaries as determining identity options, membership composition and size, and the form of ethnic composition. Answering the question: 'What are we?' she proposes that culture is the source of content and meaning of ethnicity, supplying a history, ideology, symbolic universe and system of meaning. Much like Swidler's (1986) "toolkit" Nagel, offers the imagery of a "shopping cart". In this imagery the cart determines the shape and boundary of ethnicity, and culture, (i.e. the bits and pieces that we put it inside it). The difficulty with Nagel's concept is that it suggests that the cart remains essentially stable and it is the contents which are largely negotiated – put in and taken out. This present study of Kyrgyz Christian conversion indicates that attempts are made to challenge the stableness of the cart (ethnic boundaries) itself not just the contents (meaning). Kyrgyz Christians have sought to transform ethnic boundaries - the cart as it were - redefining possible identity

options, but doing so utilising Nagel's cultural concepts. Kyrgyz Christians have made use of history, music, beliefs, traditions and symbols to reconstruct boundaries and identities.

Nagel also suggests that cultural revisions and innovations occur when cultural elements are changed or new cultural forms or practices are created (1994:163). Kyrgyz Christianity is an example of cultural revision and innovation. Religious change and a new religious framework require an element of identity reflexivity, at both individual and group level (the Christian community), that combines the old cultural tools with new Protestant Christian tools, including the Bible, in reinterpreting and redefining their conversion experience, their new status as Kyrgyz Christians, the [new] meaning of some of those cultural tools, and their place in the Kyrgyz ethnic community. Although there are certainly 'moral entrepreneurs' (Becker, 1973) who seek to uphold normative Kyrgyz identity within the Kyrgyz community, innovations are introduced into society by 'cultural entrepreneurs,' those individuals or sub-cultural groups who take it upon themselves to bring cultural change. While the tools for innovation may be created internally or introduced externally it still requires that they be tried, experienced, interpreted and then propagated in the community by members of the community, albeit members of a sub-cultural group.

This thesis recognises that for many non-Christian Muslim Kyrgyz the Christian association with these same cultural 'tools' is a violation of normative Kyrgyzness. Pelkmans (2007) describes an encounter he had with Muslim Kyrgyz when he showed them pictures of Kyrgyz Christian gatherings which utilised Kyrgyz cultural

artefacts and traditions. Their strong negative reaction to this non-Muslim use of Kyrgyz 'tools' suggests that there are those in the wider community who do not accept that Kyrgyzness can be associated with anything else other than Muslim religion. But it does not mean that there all Kyrgyz have this view. What is important from the point of view of this thesis is that many *Kyrgyz Christians* feel and accept this association thus enabling them to navigate a path within *their* sense of Kyrgyz identity.

This thesis argues that innovation in the form of religious innovation is more likely to take hold, to spread, and is something which builds upon and finds continuity and acceptance within the social, religious and cultural environment. The next section considers how Kyrgyz Christians have reconstructed ethnic identity within their social, cultural and religious framework.

6.3.1 Understanding identity reconstruction through social, cultural and religious capital

Kyrgyz Christians have sought to reconstruct Kyrgyz identity through the use of cultural tools and by maintaining cultural and social continuity. Stark and Finke (2000) have developed an extensive theoretical approach to understanding religion in which they consider the role that social, religious and cultural capital play in the conversion process. These ideas will be considered in light of the findings from the data, which have shown that in conversion Kyrgyz Christians see their Christian faith affirming their Kyrgyzness while concomitantly seeking to maintain and build upon their social, cultural and religious capital.

6.3.1.1 Social capital

As noted earlier in the thesis social capital consists of interpersonal relationships which are built upon investments of time, energy, emotion and even material (Stark and Finke, 2000). People are not likely to lose these relationships in which they have invested and which have value, even in conversion. Rather, Stark and Finke propose, 'In making religious choices, people will attempt to conserve their social capital' (2000:119). All things being equal, they contend, people will not tend to convert or reaffiliate (switch within the same religious tradition) but will tend to hold to whatever faith that their parents and relatives have had, and into which they were socialised. This would explain that while there has been religious revitalisation in post-socialist Kyrgyzstan it has largely taken place within traditional Kyrgyz cultural traditions (popular Islam) or within a wider Muslim religious framework (more orthodox or scripturalist Islam). This would also partly explain why *more* Kyrgyz have not become Christians, and that while rapid change has taken place most Kyrgyz have maintained a religious position that is closest to what they have been brought up with, that is either nominally Muslim, or some form of revitalised Muslim religious expression.

A significant number of Muslim Kyrgyz have nevertheless converted between religious traditions, as in the case of Kyrgyz conversion to Protestant Christianity. Stark and Finke would suggest that this is likely to take place because people have developed closer attachments to those within those new religious groups than with their previous social networks. One of their main propositions about the way people make religious choices is the notion that 'attachments lie at the heart of conversion,

and that conversion therefore tends to proceed along social networks formed by interpersonal attachments' (2000:118). Although much conversion research has validated this understanding (Lofland and Stark, 1965, Snow et al., 1980b, Stark and Bainbridge, 1980, Smilde, 2007) there is evidence from the data from this research to suggest that while attachments with 'members of a Christian church' have been influential in Kyrgyz conversion, it does not appear to be at the expense of existing attachments, such as immediate family and friends, and therefore conserve their social and cultural capital.

The data suggest that in Kyrgyz conversion previous attachments, and new attachments, old and new social capital, have been influential pre and post conversion, in a *parallel* and sometimes intersecting arrangement. Kyrgyz Christians have been introduced to Christian faith through new and old attachments and have sought, where possible, to maintain those attachments post conversion. Effort has also been given to evangelising family members thus facilitating both social capital and new religious faith development. This indicates that the greater the social tolerance of Kyrgyz Christians, and the greater the number of family members who also become Christians, the stronger will be the development of new [Protestant Christian] religious capital. As mentioned earlier some respondents indicated that there were over thirty immediate family members who were also Christians. In some cases these Christian family members span three generations. This is a situation now in which the children growing up in these families (second generation Kyrgyz Christians) are building religious capital that is virtually free of all previous Muslim (orthodox or popular) religious attachments, experiencing only Christian attachments. This will have ramifications in the future as Protestant Christianity

grows and becomes increasingly embedded in the Kyrgyz community. This process would legitimise the Kyrgyz Christian identity construct for future generations of Kyrgyz Christians, and potentially for the wider Kyrgyz community.

An important value for Kyrgyz Christians is the maintenance, as far as possible, of the network of social relationships that they already have – especially as it relates to the participation in traditional life-cycle rituals and other important family events. To break these relationships is to isolate themselves from a strong network that each one turns to especially in times of need such as sickness, death, and financial debt, and which affirms ethnic/social group belonging. Almost without exception every person in this study has been directly influenced into becoming a Christian by a family member, a close (Kyrgyz) friend or by another Kyrgyz, and only occasionally by a foreign missionary. This has been supported by the survey data. The importance of this process of 'recruitment' by these strong interpersonal attachments cannot be overstated. To a large extent Kyrgyz are becoming Kyrgyz Christians through other Kyrgyz, or at least, are very quickly introduced to other Kyrgyz Christians, or a Kyrgyz church or a group, usually where the Kyrgyz language is widely spoken or used, and where Kyrgyz songs are employed in worship. The identification of their new faith is very quickly associated with other Kyrgyz and with forms and language that are their own. This has the effect of reinforcing the idea that it is normal, it is natural, to be a Kyrgyz and to be a Christian. The breaking down of traditional thinking relating to the boundaries defining ethnic identity is apparent among these Kyrgyz Christians. A situation in which significant numbers of Kyrgyz openly declare a new religious allegiance, where significant numbers are either family members or people within their social networks are also Christians, and where they

maintain large elements of continuity with their Kyrgyz culture, will potentially create an environment which reduces the effect and isolation of 'deviant' behaviour affirming its legitimacy in terms of ethnic identity.

However, the importance of remaining within the Kyrgyz community is of sufficiently high value, that it appears Kyrgyz conversion is also largely about attachments to *Kyrgyz* Christians, and a desire to maintain social connections with one's Kyrgyz family and community. Retaining strong social connections within the Kyrgyz community is a strategy that affirms Kyrgyz ethnic identity. In light of the place of deviance, the violation of normative Kyrgyz identity and of the role of social sanctions, it is no wonder that retaining Kyrgyz social capital is as important as building new Christian social capital. Conversion that includes the support of other Kyrgyz is vital.

One also sees the importance of social capital as reflected in how Kyrgyz Christians find ways to identify continuity with the Kyrgyz ancestors. By looking beyond the experience of Islam to the ancestors who were 'Kyrgyz but not Muslim', or 'Kyrgyz and potentially Christian', Kyrgyz Christians are able to strengthen the connection between their new faith and their Kyrgyz identity. It strengthens the idea one is not betraying their ancestors because, as one Kyrgyz Christian put it, 'if my ancestors were [potentially] Christian then it is OK for me to be a Christian too.'

Given that the 'Christian identity project' is not normative for the Kyrgyz it is necessary to understand what conditions would facilitate its growth. This thesis argues that one such condition that has allowed for growth has been the tolerance of

Kyrgyz Christians within the Kyrgyz social community. There has certainly been opposition but the data suggest that over time this has reduced by about half with those who most opposed Kyrgyz Christian conversion, immediate and extended family and friends, and also to a lesser extent with other members of the community including religious officials, the mullahs. A predominantly passive cultural rather than aggressive form of Muslim religious sentiment in the Kyrgyz community has also allowed room for change. Kyrgyz social attachments especially that of blood relatives, appears to have stronger 'power' in affirming social solidarity than religious attachments. This toleration, I would suggest, has facilitated the growth of Kyrgyz Christians and affirmed a place within general Kyrgyzness, even if that place is considered marginal by the wider community.

6.3.1.2 Cultural capital

These Kyrgyz Christians have also sought to maintain, build upon and even transform cultural and religious capital (Stark and Finke, 2000:120). Stark and Finke describe cultural capital within the context of religious capital. While there is clearly an overlapping of the two there are also distinctive features about cultural capital which suggest that it should be discussed in its own right. Culture, and the capital that it is built from, are not the exclusive domain of religion (although religion is included) but involves most aspects of society in one way or another.

People tend to make choices that maximise and build upon cultural capital. There is a strong sense of the subjective in this process. A person 'feels' that something is Kyrgyz, that 'it belongs', that, 'it is a part of me.' The evocative nature of this is

expressed by those respondents from the research who spoke of the identity connection they felt when their Christian faith was expressed through the Kyrgyz traditional music. This idea is similar to Bourdieu's *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1980, 1983, Jenkins, 1992, 2002b). *Habitus* represents the indebtedness and embedded nature of culture in a person's life and which provides an unconscious controlling influence in the choices that people make. One can see also see *habitus* at work in Kyrgyz conversion where Kyrgyz Christians seek to maximise and utilise cultural capital in the blending of their new Christian faith with their sense of Kyrgyzness. The recourse to cultural symbols, the use of Kyrgyz language, of history, of traditional musical instruments, of traditional dress and the affirmation of cultural values are symptomatic of this. One difference in the Kyrgyz context is that this process of 'finding continuity' or 'of identity reconstruction' is not simply an automatic or unconsciousness process, we find that Kyrgyz Christians have *actively* engaged in a reflexive project to look for, to investigate, to rationalise and construct 'Kyrgyz Christianity' (Frith, 2000). Kyrgyz Christians have been active not passive agents seeking to implement and transform cultural forms and meaning.

The active nature of agency is also reflected in one of the discourses used by Kyrgyz Christians which emphasises the place of choice in the conversion process and in the construction of identity. There is a sense here where the authority to make choices (or the assumed identities available) is not simply something governed by an institution/s, or that is uncritically accepted as normative, but rather where there is greater freedom for choice by individuals or small groups in society. This is a reflection of a level of de-traditionalisation that has taken place within the Kyrgyz community (Heelas, 1996, Luke, 1996). While it is generally accepted that Kyrgyz

are Muslims, Kyrgyz Christians claim the right to challenge and change this assumption, the accepted ethnic identity construct, and claim the 'right to choose' as central to that process. These Kyrgyz Christians are also claiming the right to make and change religious choices during a person's lifespan, without losing their place in the community, and without losing their sense of Kyrgyzness.

There is a certain sense in which people make choices by weighing up costs and benefits, but do so within the confines of the cultural tools or preferences available to them (Sherkat and Wilson, 1995). Although the ability to choose maybe a more recent, albeit 'modern' phenomenon, the kinds of choices and the way we make choices are often influenced by the traditional in a mutually impacting and interpenetrating process (Adam, 1996, Luke, 1996). One is limited by what one knows and will tend to make choices, even religious choices, in ways that reflect what is known and are familiar. When new knowledge is introduced there remains the tendency to understand, interpret and experience this new knowledge within this framework.

Innovation can be seen as a dialectical process where the new is added to and interprets the old and at the same time the old is added to and interprets the new. In the case of Kyrgyz conversion Protestant Christianity (the new) is added to the Kyrgyz cultural context (the old) and interprets – critiques, affirms, adapts – Kyrgyz culture. In turn Kyrgyz culture is added to and interprets – critiques, affirms, adapts – Protestant Christianity. The process of the Christianisation of indigenous culture and the indigenisation of Christianity can have unexpected consequences as indigenous Christians develop their own forms of Christian faith (Cohen, 1995, Jenkins, 2002a,

Jenkins, 2006, Kaplan, 1995b, Kaplan, 1995a, Pelkmans, 2007, Sanneh, 2003, Viswanathan, 1998, Wanner, 2004). The data from this thesis suggest that if conversion from one religious tradition to another occurs (radical religious innovation) it will most likely do so in a way that seeks to find cultural and social continuity between the new and the old (Hefner, 1993c, Sanneh, 1990, Walls, 2002). The more this is able to occur the more likely that cultural and social space will be available for the innovation to take root. On the other hand the less cultural and ethnic continuity to be found in conversion, the less likely the new tradition will be able to find strong roots in the social environment (Keyes, 1993).

6.3.1.3 Religious capital

The use of 'religious capital' (Iannaccone, 1990:299) is also pertinent to the discussion. Stark and Finke utilise this term in the context of culture and suggest that 'religious capital' is one element that makes up the cultural 'bundle'. They define religious capital as consisting 'of the degree and mastery of and attachment to a particular religious culture' (2000:120ff). Stark and Finke see religious capital as an intertwining of culture and emotions over time. Participation in common religious activities, especially with others, increases the level of connectedness and confidence in the truth of the religious tradition. It has been suggested that this also increases the preferences that people have for the kind of religion they will choose (Sherkat, 1997). Stark and Finke then speak of the fact that people will generally make religious choices in such a way as to conserve their religious capital as much as possible, and to imbibe as little new religious capital. The more religious capital a person has the less likely they will reaffiliate and convert because their social,

emotional and religious investment in that religion is strong. Likewise, if a person decides to switch their religion they will tend to switch towards a religious group that is closer to their own religious tradition.

How does this relate to Kyrgyz conversion? The data from the thesis show that most of those Kyrgyz who became Christians fall into a category of nominal Muslim faith, of low levels of religious capital and of weak religious commitment (as measured by the amount of regular prayer, fasting, mosque attendance, Quranic recitation, popular Muslim practice). This certainly places them within the potential conversion candidate realm. It must be said that this characteristic is probably widely true of the Kyrgyz community and so while it may predispose Kyrgyz to consider conversion it does not explain it. This would concur with Stark and Finke who suggest that people who choose to convert to a different religious tradition are more likely to be those who have little religious capital. These converts are more likely to lack a prior religious commitment, and have only a nominal attachment to a religious group (2000:121, Stark and Bainbridge, 1980). The implication is that joining a new faith is not so expensive, a person has less to lose, in terms of religious capital, and therefore a person is more likely to consider converting.

As discussed earlier, it is often the case that religious and ethnic identity (the cultural and social) are deeply connected and have come to be seen as one forged identity matrix - to be Kyrgyz is to be Muslim. To leave one's religion risks heavy personal loss because it is likely to result in severe social sanctions.[72] It can be viewed as

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[72] Stark and Finke also point out that in some cases ethnic and religious commitments are bound up in political arrangements which form strong tripartite loyalties that can last for hundreds of years (2000:125).

deviant behaviour that threatens the integration and stability, the identity of the community (Erikson, 1966). As a result, Kyrgyz Christians have sought to minimise these losses, as indicated by the data from this research, by emphasising cultural and social continuity. It has been suggested that the strength of the combination of social, cultural, and religious capital investments in the lives of individual and social/ethnic groups is a convincing argument for why many religious organisations have such a low rate of re-affiliation and conversion to other religious groups (Stark and Finke, 2000:125). The intertwining of the three kinds of [relational] capital investments often means that an investment in one is an investment in all. The Kyrgyz situation would suggest that this combination is not as strong for the Kyrgyz, thus allowing for the possibility of re-affiliation or conversion to other religious groups such as Protestant Christianity.

Kyrgyz ethnic identity has traditionally been understood to be a fused connection between religion and ethnicity and that this identity has significantly been impacted by the relationship vis-á-vis the 'Other' Russian community. The distancing of Christian faith from Russian culture and ethnicity has been one catalyst for locating Protestant Christianity within Kyrgyz identity. In addition this Muslim religious identity is largely an ethnic/cultural construct without strong orthodox religious meaning and attachment. This would affirm that religious conversion is more likely to occur when investments by members of ethnic groups in one or more of the social, religious and cultural capital of a group have significantly *declined*. The thesis findings also concur that when conversion does occur it is likely that the conversion alternative will most likely move in a trajectory that finds continuity with large aspects of the social, religious and cultural environment in which it has taken place.

This 'continuity trajectory' reflect the preferences (Sherkat and Wilson, 1995, Sherkat, 1997), the *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1980), that consciously and unconsciously influence the way we make choices. It emphasises once again that change is usually a result of a combination of both agency and structure. In religious conversion one makes religious choices, even new or introduced religious choices, but one does so in the framework of, and is heavily influenced by, one's cultural, religious and social environment.

One significant change for Kyrgyz Christians is the apparent rejection of the past Muslim religious identity associated with Kyrgyzness. This would appear to go against the proposition that when conversion takes place it is likely to do so in ways that finds similarity or continuity with previously held religious tradition/capital. Islam in its orthodox and popular expressions and forms has been replaced by Kyrgyz Christians with Christian religious expressions and forms - the mullah and the popular spiritual specialists with the Christian pastor/leader, the mosque and the sacred places (*mazar*) with the church or Christian meeting. The new or introduced cultural tools (Bible, Christian literature, influence of foreign missionaries) have interpreted these as 'bad' or 'wrong' or 'demonic'. While this may be so,[73] nevertheless, the new Christian faith has built upon or found continuity with old religious expressions. Protestant Christianity is different but *not completely* different from the Muslim religious expression as understood by the Kyrgyz. Like Islam, Protestant Christianity recognises that there is One God, the Creator. It recognises the names of religious prophets that Kyrgyz are somewhat familiar with (even

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[73] Of course there is always the possibility that somehow respondents have given answers that they think the researcher wants to hear or what they think their Christian religious leaders want to hear or what they think they should be saying as Christians.

though they may have little religious knowledge), and comes with a worldview that accepts spiritual realities and the need for spiritual answers/power to solve earthly problems. The fact that Kyrgyz were largely not very knowledgeable about Islamic teaching and were open to spiritual experiences meant that they were also amenable to innovations that brought in new interpretations, that built upon and accepted traditional forms, especially where there was enough Kyrgyz cultural expression to make it *feel* something like the Kyrgyzness that was associated with Kyrgyz ethnic identity.

It is important to remember that one of the surprising aspects of Kyrgyz conversion is that it is unusual, in the context of the Muslim world, to have such large numbers of people who claim Muslim identity to convert to Christianity. In most Muslim societies, or societies where Muslims form the majority of the population (Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Malaysia or Pakistan) around the world, there is a close association between religion, ethnicity and national identity, whether it be theocratic or democratic (Hassan, 2002). What makes Kyrgyzstan unique then? This thesis strongly suggests that the particular colonial and post-colonial experience with the Soviet Union is significant.

Kyrgyzstan would not be what it is today if it were not for the Soviet Union. The policies of the Soviet Union set in motion major changes in the development of the republics of the Soviet Union in its identity, economy, social structure, education and its treatment of religion. The Soviet Union set about a great 'secularisation experiment' in which, as one of the pillars of Soviet Communist policy, the concerted effort of the state was mobilised to eliminate religious belief, practices and

institutions and systematically replace them with socialist belief, practices and institutions. There was a Durkheimian belief that religion was essentially about the social invention of rituals, and the control of rituals (institutions), which bring integration, cohesion and integration to human society. Religion in effect was really about society rather than about other-worlds or metaphysics (Durkheim, 1965 [1915]). The Soviet reasoning was if one removes religious belief, rituals and institutions and replace them with non-religious (e.g. Communist) rituals and institutions and beliefs people will naturally and inevitably turn away from the religion and superstitions (Froese, 2008).

The radical secularisation implemented by the Soviets, at least in Kyrgyzstan, had unforeseen multiple outcomes. It did secularise the population, in the sense that it virtually removed the role of religious institutions in society and promoted a strong non-religious materialistic worldview as an alternative outlook. But the fact that it sought to provide an all-encompassing ideology and way of life also set up a situation that, in the event it collapsed, many in the population needed to find an alternative to the failed Soviet system, and religion once again stepped in to offer that alternative. It also suggests that while on the surface religion was apparently held at bay, under the surface religion remained embedded in much of the thinking and ways of the Soviet population waiting for the opportunity to make a re-appearance in public life. Perhaps religion, Marx's 'opium of the masses,' was much stronger and more resilient than even he imagined.

This thesis has analysed how most Kyrgyz Christians, and it is suggested most of the Kyrgyz population generally, held a nominal Muslim faith that was defined more by

traditions and ethnicity than religious belief. The blending of an eclectic pre-Islamic spirituality within a Muslim framework encouraged this further (Gunn, 2003, Imart, 1986). The dismantling and control of Muslim religious organisation and authority and educational institutions over a significant period of time reduced Muslim religious knowledge (Heyat, 2004, Lubin, 1995, Pelkmans, 2007). This had the effect of distancing and weakening the attachments, and consequently of religious capital, that most Kyrgyz had with official Islamic religion.

Soviet ideology and practices created the environment for new religious opportunities and acceptance for the Kyrgyz that perhaps were not present even seventy years earlier. Certainly, the seventy years of sustained anti-religious policies of the Soviet Union caused a major decline in the religious and cultural capital of the Kyrgyz. An understanding of Islam as a religion was barely known. Their traditional syncretic expression of religion had been severely curtailed. Large numbers of Kyrgyz were simply not religious, they did not *know* about religion. There was massive ignorance about religion and the knowledge of Islam was minimal. This kind of environment provides fertile ground for the potential introduction and acceptance of new religious ideas and new religious groups. As Froese suggests:

> New and different religions or religious cults do best with people who have little religious capital…converts need not re-learn an entire religious system because they begin with none. Therefore, a lack of religious capital does not predict an aversion to religion but rather a potential openness to atypical religious ideas. If this is the case, then the Soviet population in 1989 represented a sea of possible converts to a wide host of religious missionaries (2008:183).

Christianity was new to the Kyrgyz, especially when it was communicated outside of a framework of Russian ethnicity, something which Kyrgyz Christians have gone out of their way to emphasise. In Stark and Finke's (2000) terms there were large unserved preferences or 'niches', religious niches, among the Kyrgyz in the new, open environment in which they found themselves after independence. There was not strong local Islamic religious authority to hold them and there were many who rushed in to fill the 'religious demand' vacuum that suddenly opened. Foreign Islamic groups and Christian missionaries entered. Hare Krishnas, Jehovah's Witnesses and the Baha'i also joined the fray. To one degree or other all these groups found adherents, they found their own niche. Protestant Christians also found their niche within the Kyrgyz community, and have grown considerably since independence.

6.3.2 New identity constructs – Kyrgyz/Muslim and atheist/communist

While the outward religious expression of Islam largely dismantled under the Soviets a sense of Muslim identity prevailed. Many Central Asian Muslims continued to participate in Muslim festivals, practise circumcision and hold religious marriages and burials. Central Asian communist party members and workers (apparatchiks) facilitated this process by protecting fellow Muslims who indulged in Muslim traditions though they themselves outwardly supported the anti-religious Soviet policy (Glenn, 1999). It was common to have local Central Asians, including Kyrgyz, find little difficulty in calling themselves, even promoting the concept of 'Muslim Communists' or 'Atheist Muslims'. Apparently contradictory terms were

accepted as a legitimate, albeit constructed, identity. Heyat (2004:275) describes those Central Asians caught up in this dialectic process as having 'religious hearts and atheist minds.' Froese (2005, 2008) argues that the particular nature of Islam with its non-separation of church and state, the anti-Western doctrine of Soviet Communism the political and economic (national) aspirations for power and development (modernisation) by national elites, and the merging of Islamic tribal structure with the Communist Party enabled the merging of a Kyrgyz Muslim and atheist identity (Heyat, 2004:275, Pelkmans, 2007:883). Of particular relevance to this thesis is the hybrid Muslim/atheist identity. This hybrid identity was at times also reflected in the qualitative data gathered through the conversion narratives.

From this discussion of hybrid identity two things are important for this thesis. First, is that strong, overtly Muslim religious (supernatural/metaphysical) attachments were weakened, although not removed, and room or space was made for a new form of identity adapted and negotiated between the cultural toolkits offered by both Soviet and Kyrgyz Muslim frame-works. Second, the creation of opportunities for hybrid or mixed identities previously unfamiliar to the Kyrgyz reflected the dynamism of the nature of ethnic and social identity/ties. The fact that there are variations of what is considered 'Kyrgyz' raises the possibility that there could be several Kyrgyz identities. If there can be a Kyrgyz-Muslim-Communist/atheist identity construct, given the right circumstances, there can also be a Kyrgyz-Christian construct. In the former identity construct, the 'Muslim' marker remained and was somehow seen as compatible with a communist/atheist identity. 'Muslim identity' was clearly viewed in its most general cultural and community form. Religious conversion, however, pushes the construct further along the continuum by largely removing the Muslim

label altogether allowing for a more radical Kyrgyz identity. The Kyrgyz Christians who participated in this research have sought to remove both the Muslim cultural/ethnic categorisation employed by the Soviets and any religious categorisation that may still be imbibed from history, from community memory or from post-independence Muslim religious revitalisation.

The power equations are of course significantly different. The hybrid Kyrgyz-Muslim-Communist identity was premised on the Communist element as a dominant resource of political and economic power. The Communist Party was the 'colonial' ruler and through membership and position enabled access to the resources of the Soviet Union and the 'Communist World' and were strong motivating factors for formulating this alliance (Froese, 2005, 2008). The Kyrgyz-Christian construct is a predominantly religious alliance that has potential as an economic resource, with access to European/American/Asian/former Soviet Union Christian financial support, but without access to the prevailing political and economic structures that the Communist Party held during Soviet times.

6.3.3 The subjective nature of the conversion process – 'being Christian feeling Kyrgyz'

Pelkmans (2007) has argued for the problematic nature of missionary involvement in the treatment of culture and the encouragement of an indigenous expression of the Kyrgyz church in post-socialist Kyrgyzstan. He has found a similarity between the Soviet attempt at delinking religion from the form of ethnic identity and the Christian attempt to delink religion from Kyrgyz identity and culture. There is much to

commend in his analysis and this thesis agrees with much of it in relation to the influence that the policies of the Soviet Union had in defining national and ethnic categories and its treatment of religion, and the impact this has had on providing the groundwork for conversion to Protestant Christianity. Missionaries have also clearly had a role in the development of a 'contextual' Kyrgyz church and in promoting indigenous expressions of Christian faith, a process Pelkmans refers to as 'folklorising'. However, Pelkmans tends to dismiss the importance and reality of this process *for Kyrgyz Christians*, as if it were an imposition from the outside, and an unacceptable or unnatural development within the Kyrgyz community. If it were simply an outside imposition it would not have resonance and significant meaning for Kyrgyz Christians.

One of the basic assumptions of this thesis has been to understand conversion from the perspective of Kyrgyz Christians (Hollan, 1999). While there will be an ongoing debate about cultural forms and meaning, there is little debate that for Kyrgyz Christians form and meaning are important. The indigenous expressions of Kyrgyz Christianity are deeply embedded as subjective and salient attachments. These expressions are linked both to the forms and to the social and identity connections that these signify to Kyrgyz Christians as members of the Christian community (their Christian identity - Christianness) and as members of the Kyrgyz community (Kyrgyz identity - Kyrgyzness).

Religious conversion is a social process which includes both subjective and rational elements. People experience and think through religious conversion. Individuals and communities engage as active agents in a deliberate, reflective process that inevitably

leads to change and an (re-) interpretation of the process of conversion (Smilde, 2007, Hollan, 1999). Adapting ideas originating from Herbert Simon (1982) and Raymond Boudon (1993) Stark and Finke introduce the idea of 'subjective rationality' (2000:37). They suggest that when people make decisions they will maximise – weighing up the costs and benefits - in order to gain the most for the least cost, even for religious decisions Stark and Finke (2000) suggest that humans are not really so cut and dried about the way they go about making decisions and that the process is a good deal more 'fuzzy' and 'intuitive'. Their use of the term 'subjective rationality' includes the idea that human actors make decisions because it makes sense, 'it feels right', given the particular context. It is therefore important to try to understand the decisions and actions of people from *their* perspective.

The weighing up of costs and benefits in religious conversion is not necessarily a strictly cognitive or linear process but one that involves a healthy dose of subjectivity – it is also what a person feels and experiences as right and true. Kyrgyz Christians have experienced a new faith in a way that feels and affirms their sense of Kyrgyzness. The data from the thesis have highlighted this in the way Kyrgyz Christians discuss the place that language, cultural artefacts and symbols, musical instruments and the historic connection with their ancestors have had in their Kyrgyz Christian identity. The emotive and affective (subjective) attachments and the meanings associated with these various 'tools' form powerful identity and relational bonds in the process of identity reconstruction. They explain, justify and legitimise what otherwise would be considered deviant behaviour. The next chapter will conclude by bringing together the main research questions and the key findings from the thesis.

CHAPTER SEVEN – Conclusion

This thesis has investigated the conversion of the Kyrgyz people to Protestant Christianity as part of the growing phenomenon of religious revitalisation after the collapse of the Soviet Union. A key contribution has been to consider the importance of understanding conversion from the perspective of the convert – Kyrgyz Christians. An analysis of the research data has identified the content – the various discourses – and the process by which Kyrgyz Christians reconstruct ethnic identity in their conversion process. This chapter brings together the various aspects of this investigation including a summary of the main findings, limitations of the research, suggestions for further research, and implications for the sociological study of religion, and of religious conversion in particular.

7.1 Summary of the thesis findings

While it may be true that the radical secularisation policy of the Soviet Union failed to eradicate religion from the fabric of Central Asian, and Kyrgyz, society, it did leave deep imprints. Many Central Asian Muslims were detached from a formal, more orthodox religious understanding and attachment to Islam, however, Muslim cultural and folk traditions which could be practised in unofficial ways allowed Muslim identity to remain attached to ethnic and national sentiments. After the collapse of the Soviet Union the consequent religious revitalisation and the emergence of Muslim national identities through the process of independence demonstrated how after seventy years of the enforcement of Soviet policies the pull

of religion had a much deeper hold on the population than Marx, Lenin and Stalin and their communist cohorts realised.

Protestant Christianity, as a new religious movement in the Kyrgyz community, has entered a dynamic process of change over the past two decades. It incorporates 'tools' from both outside and inside of the community. Time will tell whether this movement remains a small isolated 'sub-cultural' event within the Kyrgyz community or whether it grows to a point where a critical mass of people, influence and toleration allows it mainstream acceptance, an acceptance that offers the small band of followers a change in status from a 'cult' through to a 'church'. The rapid growth of indigenous Christianity in Kyrgyzstan, upwards of 20,000 Kyrgyz Christians in the period since independence (in 1991), suggests that, whatever has been achieved has met with some success. But the term 'some success' is significant when this social movement is compared with other Muslim communities around the world, where few examples of this scale of conversion to Christianity have been witnessed. Maintaining and building upon social and cultural capital and blending introduced and indigenous cultural tools have been significant factors in this growth. One author has suggested that unless Christianity is less tied to European interests and becomes more 'implanted among [Central Asian] natives...it could eventually disappear' (Peyrouse, 2005:670). On the basis of the research undertaken for this thesis it would appear that Protestant Christianity is indeed finding roots in Kyrgyz 'soil'- in the hearts and minds of Kyrgyz people.

The Kyrgyz Christian identity project described in this thesis has focused on reinterpreting and clarifying traditions in light of the past (Giddens, 1990:37). It has

also been a process that utilises new information to reorientate Kyrgyz Christians beyond their ethnic traditions toward an identity that links them to a modern nation state, Kyrgyzstan, and a global community, the Christian community. That global Christian community is not solely a Western community. One of the largest missionary groups in Kyrgyzstan has come from South Korea and Kyrgyz Christians appear to view Protestant Christianity with Asian as well as Western associations. The changing economic and international dynamics of the late 20th and early 21st centuries have seen a dramatic shift from a North American/Eurocentric (global north) to an increasingly non-western centric (global south) world. This has impacted religion and especially Christianity around the world (Jenkins, 2002a, Jenkins, 2006).

The reorientation of identity for Kyrgyz Christians is a reconstruction that necessarily involves the instrumentalisation of the old and the new, the past and the present, of tradition and novelty to situate Kyrgyz Christians within their ethnic community as legitimate members, within their nation state as patriotic citizens, and within Christianity as an important part of the worldwide Church (Wanner, 2003, 2004). Kyrgyz Christian identity can be represented as an innovative hybrid identity, at the same time incorporating the local and global, affirming traditional forms and values and incorporating new forms. This hybrid identity has become a potential alternative to those religious identities or ideologies that the Kyrgyz have previously experienced as sources of meaning and explanation for life's situations and experiences. In the post-socialist scenario this process has not been unique to Kyrgyzstan (Wanner, 2004:172) .

Kyrgyz Christians have faced opposition to their conversion in different ways, and from different parts of the Kyrgyz community. This 'identity reaction' has largely focused on the feeling that Kyrgyz Christians have somehow violated normative understandings of what it means to be a legitimate member of that community and has been encapsulated in various accusations and labelling by the community. Kyrgyz Christians have responded not simply by challenging their accusers but by challenging the boundaries that have thus far appeared to define Kyrgyz identity and Kyrgyz membership. They have challenged the Kyrgyz ethnic boundary by reconstructing what it means to be a Kyrgyz through a process of critique, affirmation, adaptation and adoption from the Kyrgyz cultural bundle and from introduced elements associated with Protestant Christianity.

The findings of this thesis demonstrate clearly how social, cultural and religious capital are influential factors in understanding the conversion process for Kyrgyz Christians, including the reconstruction of identity. It also offers an insightful explanation for understanding why it is that more, indeed most, Kyrgyz have not become Christians. These findings suggest that the stronger a person's attachments or investments in social, cultural and religious capital the stronger the chance that a person will not engage in religious change, and that if a person does engage in religious change it will most likely be towards a religious expression that is closest to their social, cultural and religious capital bundle. Further, the findings suggest that if a person decides to engage in religious conversion between different religious traditions, they will still most likely do so when they find continuity or are able to build upon their social, cultural and religious capital. When conversion does occur between religious traditions it is most likely to do so in circumstances which have

allowed for the weakening of strong attachments to religious knowledge and institution/s associated with whatever religion a person was previously identified.

As mentioned in chapter six the development of a new hybrid Kyrgyz Muslim-atheist identity in the Soviet period was a precursor for the development of a more radical Kyrgyz-Christian identity affirming the idea that boundaries of ethnicity and identity are not necessarily fixed but have the potential for change in multiple directions. Religious decision making is not simply about making choices based on cognitive, thoughtful processes that weigh up the advantages and disadvantages of conversion. Conversion is also a subjective process that involves intuitive, emotive and sometimes 'fuzzy' processes. For Kyrgyz Christians this includes the sense that Protestant Christianity has come to feel Kyrgyz. Whether by design, or by reinterpretation, or simply by the social context in which the process of conversion has taken place, the respondents in this research have come to view their Christian faith as being embedded in their sense of Kyrgyz identity, albeit in the innovative form that Protestant Christianity has given it.

The thesis also demonstrates that the analytical approach that appropriately applies to understanding Kyrgyz conversion is one which recognises the dynamic interplay between structure (especially social networks and culture), and human agency. Kyrgyz Christians have not simply been the manipulated pawns of external forces but are active agents in change, recognising that they have done so within the contextual parameters in which they are situated - they are both the products of culture and the initiators of cultural and religious change.

7.2 Suggestions for further research

One clear suggestion for further research, based on the discussion above, is to investigate conversion and the Kyrgyz reconstruction of identity from the point of view of the non-Christian community. This would add to our knowledge of the processes that both sides of the Kyrgyz community engage in when conversion or religious innovation takes place – those seeking religious and those at the receiving end of that change.

One of the strengths of this research has been the mixed-method methodology utilised. This approach allowed the author to draw upon data and analysis from diverse sources and added to the richness and complexity of the research topic. More in-depth research that independently focuses on the qualitative and quantitative methods used would draw out information that would add greater insight into the particularities and dynamics of the process of religious conversion among the Kyrgyz.

Another suggestion concerns the influence of Soviet policies on nationality and nationalism and the development of a Kyrgyzstan national identity after independence. There is a remarkably similar process and content to the way the government of Kyrgyzstan has pursued a policy (post-independence) of constructing a national Kyrgyz identity (influenced by previous Soviet polices) and the way Kyrgyz Christians have reconstructed Kyrgyz ethnic identity in light of conversion. Further comparison and analysis of these parallel processes will potentially add further insight into understanding the role that ethnicity plays in forming national and

sub-cultural identities in newly emerging nation states, especially in the post-socialist context.

Finally, it gives a deeper analysis of an approach that promotes the idea of religious markets and the religious economy. This approach would consider the role of religious monopolies, of religious supply and demand, of competing religious suppliers and the kind of religious suppliers active in the 'religious market', of preferences and choice, of religious pluralism, and the kind of effect this may or may not have on individual religiosity. A fourth suggestion would be to consider an in-depth application of normative and labelling theories of deviance in Kyrgyz conversion. Here the focus is on how individuals engage in religious behaviour deemed deviant and the way different members of society respond to this phenomenon in order to control/punish/change the behaviour.

7.3 Implications for the sociological study of religion

The study of Kyrgyz conversion is an example of the revitalisation of religion after the collapse of the Soviet Union. As such it offers an opportunity to contribute to the processes at work in this revitalisation. It also enables the possibility for comparisons with other similar movements in Central Asia and the former Soviet Union already alluded to in this chapter (see the example of the Ukraine Wanner, 2004:172). These comparisons will allow the sociology of religion to continue to contribute to the understanding of the dynamics involved in situations of rapid social change and in particular to the way wider social changes afford the opportunity for individuals and

communities to utilise religious change and revitalisation as a means of transformation and innovation in ethnic and national identities.

An understanding of context and the creative agency, such as exhibited by Kyrgyz Christians in the conversion process, challenges researchers to consider a multi-factorial approach in the study of religious conversion and new religious movements. Whether change is initiated from without the individual or community or from outside, individuals have the capacity to improvise – to adapt and adopt – to bring change and to make explanatory sense of their life situations and experiences. The challenge for scholars is to seek to understand how people go about doing this. Despite appearances or even rhetoric, individuals and communities generally seek to build upon and locate continuities with the past – culture, social relationships – even as they seek to introduce innovation into the present and future. Any study of religious change should identify and investigate both the old and the new, and the way particular individuals and groups engage with these.

This investigation in the post-Soviet context also furthers knowledge on the ongoing debate regarding the Secularisation Theory described in Chapter One. Processes of secularisation and religious processes have been and remain significant factors in the study of religious change. While the Soviet experiment in radical secularisation failed to eradicate religious sentiment and religious behaviour, suggesting that a religious or spiritual urge is common to human experience, it did serve as a catalyst for religious revitalisation and change. The severe weakening of one particular religious tradition and attachment through secularising processes, Islam in the case of the Kyrgyz, allowed for religious and identity innovation from a new religious

tradition, Protestant Christianity. In the case of the Kyrgyz, the secularising

processes included social and educational changes that promoted greater

individualisation and de-traditionalisation allowing for individuals to emphasise the

right and freedom to choose religious identities and engage in religious innovation

outside of normative constraints.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX #1 A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE KYRGYZ PEOPLE – Origins, religion and the development of Islam

WHO ARE THE KYRGYZ?

Historical evidence indicates that the Kyrgyz, a Turkic people, originally came from the upper Yenisei River in southern Siberia. In the 9th century they forayed into central Mongolia destroying the existing Uighur kingdom. While some remained in their homeland others became absorbed into the Mongol empire of Genghis Khan of which a number later settled in what is present day Kyrgyzstan (Soucek, 2000). The Kyrgyz have been traditionally divided into two great federations, the *Otuz Uul* and *Ich Kilik*, each made up of a number of groups consisting of tribes, and within those a number of clans (Glenn, 1999). For instance the *Otuz Uul*, had two groups, one of which was the *Ong Kanat*. The *Ong Kanat* was made up of three tribes, one of which was the *Tagay*, which itself was divided into thirteen clans; within this the *Bugu* and Sary Bagysh were the most significant. That there was a strong sense of identity as a broad Kyrgyz community is reinforced by the fact that at the turn of the 20th century an annual meeting was conducted in which a number of cultural and sporting activities took place. At that time a khan was elected, who, while having little real authority, which remained with the leaders of the clans, nevertheless represented the unity of the Kyrgyz as a people (Glenn, 1999:60). A primarily mountainous people (Kyrgyzstan is 96% mountainous) the Kyrgyz have traditionally been nomadic pastoralists famous for their horsemanship and their livestock. Even during the Soviet period most of the Kyrgyz continued to live in rural areas engaged in agricultural and livestock activities.

TRADITIONAL KYRGYZ RELIGION/SPIRITUALITY

Prior to the coming of Islam the Kyrgyz had a stronger affinity and dependency with the natural environment. Their traditional religious or spiritualistic beliefs and practices were more akin to the pluralistic worldview of animism and shamanism (Tabyshalieva, 2000, 2003; Anderson 1999b; Basilov, 1987; Zweininger, 2001). Anderson (1999; see also Imart, 1986:77-79; Abramzon, 1971:267-339) gives some specific examples that include 'beliefs in the spirit world, devotion to the supreme deity Tengri (heaven), the cult of the ancestors, and various forms of totemism which sacralised the wolf, the horse, or other animals central to their daily life.' As a result, the form of Islam adopted by many Kyrgyz was more heterodox than orthodox. While embracing many Muslim forms they adapted their new faith within the framework of their previously held worldview. Folk or Popular Islam, a syncretistic combination of the old and new, became the dominant religious framework for the Kyrgyz.

Privatsky (2001) and DeWeese (1997) would argue that rather than this being syncretistic or a remnant of or survival of pre-Islamic practices (such as shamanism) the traditional or local beliefs and practices that appear as non-orthodox Islam should be considered as 'contextualisations of Islam.' In other words, an indigenisation of Islam by the local population has taken place where local beliefs and practices have come to be identified as 'Muslim' in the popular thinking of the people. Privatsky, referring to Gellner's work, explains this as a natural outworking of the 'multicultural character of Islam' and a fundamental characteristic of successful religious movements (2001:15). Perhaps it is only semantics, but Imart (1986) reverses this idea and suggests that it is not so much Islam that contextualises but

rather it is the local people who adapt. In the context of northern and central Kyrgyzstan he comments, 'In contrast to what happened in the south [of Kyrgystani], national identity was not adapted to Islam, Islam was rather adapted to *Kirghizity*, especially among the lower classes…Islam is an utterly foreign way of life and thinking, [and] was accepted only because, and only so far as, it allowed continuation of ethnic [traditional] life (1986:77, 80). However, Imart later acknowledges the key role that Sufi sects played in the Muslim penetration of Kyrgyzstan, suggesting that part of their success lay in their permitting [i.e. taking an active role] the survival of ethnic particularism, including adapting local traditions in religious expression (1986:82-83).

Religious holy places, *mazars*, were, and still are, commonplace, especially in rural areas. *Mazars* are either places where Muslim Sufi saints were supposed to be buried or physical locations, such as trees, streams, waterfalls, rocks that were associated with spiritual power and blessing. These *mazars* continue to be places where Kyrgyz go for blessing, healing, and deliverance from evil, and for pilgrimage (Poliakov, 1992:99-104). More obvious outward Islamic social practices relating to birth, circumcision, death and marriage were more readily embraced and practiced whereas more orthodox religious rites (daily worship *namaz*, fasting during *Ramadan*, and social taboos such as abstinence from alcohol etc) were adhered to less rigorously. During the Soviet time very few mosques were built or permitted and so those who wished to worship had to do so clandestinely or less obviously in make-shift mosques. Since independence, there has been a sharp increase in the number of mosques (59 in1991 to more than one thousand five years later) and in mosque attendance, although it is still small compared with the population as a whole

(Anderson, 1999b). The Kyrgyz in the southern part of the country tend to observe more orthodox religious rites. It appears that the closer proximity to a larger Uzbek population and influence (Osh and Jalalabad Oblasts), who are known to be more orthodox and conservative (Haghayeghi, 1995), may account for this. As we shall see below the southern part of Kyrgyzstan was also the part that was most influenced by the Islamisation attempts of the ruling Khokan Khanate that had exerted control of that area up to and into the early Soviet period.

ISLAM AND THE KYRGYZ

The first Muslim encroachment into Central Asia under Qutayba ibn-Muslim, occurred just a few years after the death of Muhammad in the early 7th Century (AD 713). This initial thrust into the Ferghana valley was followed by further inroads into the Talas area of present day Kyrgyzstan by AD 757 and the embracement of the new religion by large numbers of the ruling elites (Imart, 1986; Gunn, 2003; Soucek, 2000; Haghayeghi 1996; Foltz, 1999). However, the mighty Tien Shan mountain range that separated the Ferghana Valley in the south from the northern areas proved formidable and this initial Muslim adventure retired restricting its dominant influence up to the Ferghana area. This region also reflected a sedentary/nomadic divide among the Turkic peoples of Central Asia with the more sedentary Uzbek/Tajik area in the South becoming established for centuries to come as a bastion of the Islamic community in religion, culture, language and the sciences; and the northern nomadic Kazakh and Kyrgyz peoples maintaining only a veneer of Islamic acceptance (Naby, 1994). After an initial period of subjugation under the Mongols, in the thirteenth to fourteenth centuries, the Muslim Kokand rulers (located in the Ferghana valley of what is now present day Uzbekistan) initiated a systematic

Islamisation which reached into the northern areas from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries (Filonyk, 1994). While the southern regions of Kyrgyzstan largely accepted Islam through the force of successive conquering Muslim rulers the story appears to be different in the northern areas, including Kazakhstan, where the penetration of Islam was achieved in the late nineteenth century through the help of Muslim Tatar missionaries sent with the blessing of Catherine II as part of her strategic Russian administrative control of that area, as well as the missionary work of various Sufi groups (Imart, 1986; Filonyk, 1994; Soucek, 2000).

Imart (1986) suggests that the form of Islam that the Tatars brought was more akin to a 'modernized *jadid* variety' that presented Islam more as set of sociopolitical ideas than it was theological, and that allowed for a Muslim world view that was open to the kind of secular questions as 'the preservation of group identity [which appealed to the nomadic Kyrgyz tribes] or the introduction of modernism', something which was in opposition to the Khananised Islam that was being propagated from the south. Again it was the Sufi sects, according to Imart (1986:82), that ultimately brought Islam to the Kyrgyz, and perhaps more significantly, did so by 'rooting into the ethnic collective soul of a peculiar form of…Islam-like rather than Islamic Weltanschauung' through a 'deep sense of ethnic specificity.' The Sufis also worked through the social leadership structures of the nomadic groups:

> Sufi *shaykhs* spread Islam first among *biys*, who accepted the role of *murids*
> for political reasons; Sufi *ishans* adapted it to the tribal/clan system; and the
> Sufi predicators secured…the maintenance of Kirghiz autonomy against any
> kinds of foreigners and '*kaapirla*' (Imart, 1986:82).

In addition these particular Sufi groups were actually only distantly related to the Sufism more typically found in other areas of Central Asia, often detached from their more mystical orientations but with a strong social concern. More importantly perhaps, Sufism welcomed both ethnic particularism (Kyrgyz tribal/nomadic identity) and made a way for the adaption of their traditional pre-Islamic rites and concepts [including the idea of individualised relationship with God] into their Muslim and Kyrgz identity (Imart, 1986). Imart takes great pains to suggest that the Kyrgyz expression of the Muslim faith has more akin to the way other mountainous peoples around the world have embraced Islam (the Caucasus, Morocco, Algeria and the north African Berbers) or perhaps of that in South-East Asia where 'Islam…initially attached itself to a diffuse set of pantheistic beliefs related to natural forces and described as a variety of shamanism' (Imart, 1986:67, 69).

The Kyrgyz today consider themselves to be Muslim, not necessarily because they see themselves religiously so, but because they are ethnically or culturally so (Gunn, 2003; Haghayeghi, 1996: xix; Peyrouse, 2004; Glenn, 1999). The self-perception of what that meant (in terms of identity) primarily related to their local context – to their nomadic lifestyle and history, to the traditional beliefs and practices associated with their pre-Islamic but now Muslim indigenised past, the overlaying and adaption of Muslim culture and beliefs, and of course, the decades of Soviet ideology and education.

APPENDIX #2 DETAILED DESCRIPTIONS OF INTERVIEW

RESPONDENTS

Interview Number	Gender	Age	Marital Status	Education level completed	Present occupation	Approximate years since conversion and primary reasons stated for conversion
1	Female	35	Single	Tertiary	Christian Professional[74]	11+ Personal healing from 'epilepsy', seeking God
2	Male	37	Married	Tertiary	Christian Professional	11+ Healing of blind sister from severe headaches
3	Female	26	Single	Tertiary	Social Activist	0-5 Example of and relationship with Christians[75]
4	Male	32	Married	Tertiary	Translator	11+ Family/economic problems, seeking God
5	Female	46	Married	Tertiary	Accountant	11+ Economic problems, relationship with Christians
6	Male	49	Married	Technical	Social Worker	0-5 Personal crisis Changed life of wife
7	Female	24	Single	Tertiary	Translator	6-10 Loneliness, relationship with Christians
8	Female	60	Married	Tertiary	Retired	11+ Seeking God, words of Christians

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[74] Christian Professional – engaged in full-time Christian work whether as a pastor, church worker, Christian religious organisation

[75] Unless otherwise mentioned 'Christians' refer to *Kyrgyz* Christians.

9	Male	46	Married	Tertiary	Translator	11+ Healing of wife, relationship with Christians
10	Female	20	Single	High school	University student	11+ Influence of older sister, Jesus 'movie'
11	Female	23	Married	Tertiary	Teacher	0-5 Influence of cousin, relationship with Christians
12	Female	23	Single	Technical college	Computer Operator	0-5 Influence of classmate, relationship with Christians
13	Female	45	Married	High school	Housewife	0-5 Example of Christian son/friend, convincing words of Christian
14	Female	37	Married	Tertiary	Business	6-10 Personal problems, seeking God, changed life of friend, deliverance from evil spirit
15	Female	38	Married	Vocational institute (sewing)	Business	6-10 Personal problems, influence of younger brother
16	Female	39	Married	High school	?	11+ Seeking God, influence of classmate and relationship with Christians
17	Female	25	Single	Tertiary	Unemployed	6-10 Changed life of relative, family Christian, relationship with Christians

18	Male	36	Married	Tertiary	?	6-10 Example of Russian Christians, immediate deliverance (ecstatic experience at night) from illness and drug addiction
19	Male	25	Married	High school	Non-Government Organisation (NGO)	0-5 Example of and relationship with Kyrgyz, American, Uzbek Christians
20	Female	67	Married	Tertiary	Farmer	0-5 Influence of daughters, family problems and answered prayers (from economic difficulty)
21	Male	50	Married	Tertiary	Christian Professional	0-5 Witness and healing of sister-in-law and wife
22	Female	57	Married	Tertiary	Teacher	0-5 Influence of Kurdish Christians, healing of daughter, relationship with Christians
23	Female	41	Married	Vocational institute cooking	Christian Professional	6-10 Witness of Christian and immediate healing of daughter
24	Male	39	Married	Tertiary	Self-employed	6-10 Influence of neighbour, relationship with Christians and healing
25	Male	44	Married	Tertiary	Christian Professional	11+ Russian Christian life and testimony, Bible, relationship with Christians

26	Male	30	Married	Tertiary	NGO	11+ Influence of classmate, relationship with Christians (mixed ethnicity)
27	Male	26	Single	Tertiary	Christian Professional	6-10 Family problems, Influence of classmate, American and Kyrgyz Christians in university
28	Female	23	Single	Tertiary	Administration	0-5 Example of American family, answered prayer to family problems
29	Female	50	Married	Vocational institute cooking	Translator	0-5 Influence of son, seeking God, dream
30	Female	54	Married	?	Shopkeeper	6-10 Economic difficulty, Kyrgyz pastor, seeking God/Bible
31	Female	46	Married	High School	Housewife	0-5 Marriage difficulties, Christian witness
32	Male	56	Married	Tertiary	Christian Professional	6-10 Example of and relationship with Christians
33	Male	24	Single	Tertiary	Social Worker	0-5 Example and relationship with American Christians, 'Jesus' movie
34	Male	33	Married	Tertiary	Business	0-5 Influence of brother, disenchantment with mullahs

35	Male	23	Single	Tertiary	Christian Professional	0-5 Loneliness, example and relationship with Christians in university
36	Female	31	Married	Tertiary	Translator	11+ Russian neighbour, Foreign English teacher, relationship with Christians (mixed ethnicity) seeking God
37	Female	42	Married	Tertiary	Teacher	6-10 Disenchantment with Muslims, classmate/friend, relationship with Christians, vision
38	Female	40	Married	Tertiary	Lawyer	11+ Personal problems, (marriage/financial), seeking God, relationship with American Christian, answered prayer
39	Male	37	Married	Vocational institute Turner	Business	6-10 Sister-in-law, words of Kyrgyz Christian
40	Male	53	Married	Tertiary	Lawyer	11+ Personal problems, work/financial, Kyrgyz work mate, convincing words of Pastor
41	Female	56	Married	?	?	6-10 Personal problems (daughter with evil spirits (?)), relationship with Christians, Bible
42	Male	66	Married	Tertiary	Retired	11+ Influence of wife, meeting with elderly Christians, seeking God

43	Male	68	Married	Tertiary	Retired	0-5 Christian literature, personal healing
44	Female	53	Married	Vocational Institute Agriculture	Accountant	0-5 Personal problems (health), relationship and support of Christians
45	Male	31	Married	High School	Business	6-10 Influence of neighbour, personal healing
46	Female	44	Married	Tertiary	Business	0-5 Many personal problems, Sister-in-law, neighbour, seeking God/Bible
47	Female	49	Married	?	Self-employment	0-5 Personal problems, Neighbour, personal healing, answered prayer
48	Female	27	Single	High School	Unemployed	0-5 Relative, family members, personal and family struggles, university Christians, foreign lady
49	Male	37	Married	Technical Institute Welder, plumber	Christian Professional	11+ Ethnic German[76] Christian, ecstatic experience, Bible, Christian meeting

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[76] 'Central Asian' German. Family came to Kyrgyzstan during Soviet years.

APPENDIX #3 LOCATION OF SURVEY RESPONDENTS – URBAN OR

RURAL

N=424 (three respondents did not respond to this question)

GENDER	LOCATION OF BIRTH OF SURVEY RESPONDENTS			
	Urban/Town		**Rural/Village**	
	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number
Male	**21%**	**91**	**11%**	**46**
Female	**42%**	**178**	**26%**	**109**
TOTAL	**63%**	**269**	**37%**	**155**

APPENDIX #4 INTERVIEW THEMES/QUESTIONS (ENGLISH VERSION)

A. Biographical/Family/social background Information

1. How old are you now? When and where were your born? What was your community like?
2. How many brothers and sisters do you have and what 'number' were you?
3. What was your father's occupation?
4. What role did your mother have in your life?
5. What kind of education have you received?
6. What were the important events of your life?
7. Marriage? How did you meet your wife/husband? Children? Ages?
8. How would you describe the situation of Kyrgyzstan, the Kyrgyz community today? What are the positive/negative things?
9. How do they compare with Soviet times?

B. Religious Background

1. Was your family a religious family? If so, in what ways was your family religious? What religious/traditional practices did you keep? Mazars? Cemeteries? Mullah? Shaman? Fortuneteller?
2. How did Soviet Communist/atheist education affect your family?
3. Were you a religious person? How? Practice/belief?
4. Did you or your family have concerns about evil spirits? Can you tell me of stories that you know about or have experienced related to evil spirits?
5. When did you first hear about the Christian faith? When did you first meet a Christian? Tell me what happened/what did you think?
6. What did you think about Christians or the Christian faith before? What did your family/community think? Has that changed?

C. Religious Switching Story

I. Narrative

1. At what point in your life did you become a Christian believer? How long ago was that? What were the circumstances that led up to this? Were there any significant questions/problems/issues in your life? What people were involved in this change (alone/with others)? How did you know them? Did you have any contact with non-Kyrgyz and was this a factor in the process?

2. Are there other members of your family/friends who are Christian believers? If so, how are they related to you? Did they become believers before or after you? Were you involved in their conversion decision/process? If so, how?

3. Have supernatural phenomenon – dreams, visions, healing, miracles, demon-possession etc been a part of your conversion process? If so, how?

4. What do you see are major problems/issues in the Kyrgyz community?

5. Have any of the major problems affecting the Kyrgyz community influenced you in becoming a believer or changing your life? If so, how?

6. Are there more men than women who are believers? What do you think the reason for this is?

II. Changes

a. Behaviour/relationships/attitude

1. How would you describe your life before you were a 'believer'?

2. How would you describe your life since you became a believer? (Behaviour/relationships/family/attitudes/work/friends)

3. Have there been any changes in your life since you became a 'believer'? If so, in what ways?

4. Have your friends/family commented on your life afterwards? If so, who and how/what did they say? Examples

5. How would you describe your life today?

6. Are you financially/economically better off after conversion? If so, what factors have influenced this? How do you/others feel about this?

7. What benefits/rewards do you have in becoming a 'believer' (in 'this life', after death)? What are the difficulties?

b. Belief – religious practice

1. In what ways do you see the Christian faith different to what you understood about religion or God before? In what ways (examples) is it similar?

2. Who do you understand Muhammad/Jesus Christ to be?

3. Who is God in Islam/Qu'ran and in Christianity/Bible?

4. What is a good Muslim/ good Christian believer?

5. What are the important things that the Muslim faith/Christian faith teaches us to believe/to do?

6. How should a Christian believer behave in the family? Wife/husband/children? Work? Community?

7. Were any of these things important in your decision to embrace the Christian faith? If so, what and how?

8. Do you believe in Satan or spirits? How is this different than what you understood before?

9. Do you still use traditional practices to deal with spirits/problems/fears/sickness? Examples? If not, why not? What do you do now?

III. Opposition

1. What was the response of your friends/family/community to you becoming a 'believer'? Do they know? How did they find out? If there was opposition, what kind of opposition was there? Is there any opposition today? Where does the most opposition come from?

2. Are there are any restrictions/difficulties on you practicing your Christian faith? Examples? Is it more or less than when you first became a 'believer'?

3. How is your relationship with the religious leaders (i.e. Maulvi/shaman) in your community?

D. Kyrgyz Ethnic Identity

1. What does the term 'being a Kyrgyz' mean to you? Describe the characteristics of a good Kyrgyz?
2. Is being a Kyrgyz important to you? Examples?
3. What are the important aspects of Kyrgyz people/culture?
4. Some people say that 'to be a Kyrgyz is to be a Muslim'? What do you think?
5. Is it possible to be a Kyrgyz and a Christian believer?
6. Is Christianity a foreign religion? Why/Why not?
7. Has being a believer changed you as a Kyrgyz? If so, how? Positive/Negative?
8. What does your family/community think? What do you think other Kyrgyz believers think about this? Do you have to stop being Kyrgyz to become a believer?
9. What is it like being a Kyrgyz and a Christian believer? Examples?
10. Do you feel that a Kyrgyz needs to leave their culture/tradition/religion in order to be a Christian believer? Why? Why not?
11. How do you think your Kyrgyz family/friends would feel if they met your Kyrgyz believer friends or went to your Christian fellowship/church?
12. Why do you think people change their religious faith?
13. Why do you think people might lapse (stop practicing/believing)?
14. Many Kyrgyz have become Christian believers since the independence of Kyrgyzstan in 1991. How many do you think there are? Before that there were hardly any believers. Why do you think this is so? How do you think things will be in the future

APPENDIX #5 GENERAL INFORMATION SHEET

PhD Thesis Project Information Sheet:

"To understand the process and consequences of religious switching to the Christian faith among the Kyrgyz people of Kyrgyzstan."

The three main objectives in the research are:

1. To describe the phenomenon, and to determine the reasons why many Kyrgyz have become Christian 'believers' since the fall of the Soviet Union.

2. To identify what changes have taken place in their religious and social beliefs and practices.

3. To develop an understanding of how these Kyrgyz believers and the broader Kyrgyz community view this phenomenon in terms of 'Kyrgyz' ethnic identity.

In order to do this Kyrgyz Christian believers from different backgrounds are being asked to participate in a questionnaire to discuss their personal experiences. All questionnaires will be kept confidential and each participant will only be identified by a number, not by name.

This PhD research project undertaken by David Radford, has been approved by the ethics committee of the Flinders University of South Australia under the supervision of Prof. Riaz Hassan.

APPENDIX #6 LETTER OF INTRODUCTION FROM PHD SUPERVISOR

LETTER OF INTRODUCTION

Dear

This letter is to introduce David Radford who is a PhD student in the Department of Sociology at Flinders University in South Australia. He will produce his student card, which carries a photograph, as proof of identity.

David is conducting research for his PhD thesis under my supervision. His research addresses the subject of religious and social change since the fall of the Soviet Union. He wants to focus on understanding the process and consequences of religious switching to the Christian faith among the Kyrgyz people of Kyrgyzstan.

He is hoping to gain information from those Kyrgyz who have become Christian believers. The purpose of this letter is to ask you whether you would be interested in participating in this study. David would be most grateful if you were prepared to volunteer to assist in this project, by granting an interview

Be assured that any information provided will be treated in the strictest confidence and none of the participants will be individually identifiable in the resulting thesis, report or other publications. You are also entirely free to discontinue your participation at any time or to decline to answer particular questions.

Since David intends to make a tape recording of the interview, he will seek your consent, on the attached form, to record the interview, to use the recording or a transcription in preparing the thesis, report or other publications, on condition that your name or identity is not revealed. You can also indicate whether or not you are prepared to allow him to make the recording available to other researchers on the same conditions.

It may be necessary to make the recording available to secretarial assistants for transcription, in which case you may be assured that such persons will be advised of the requirement that your name or identity not be revealed and that the confidentiality of the material is respected and maintained.

Any enquiries you may have concerning this project should be directed to me at the address given above or by telephone on (0061 8) 8201 2567 or fax 0061 8 8201-3521or e-mail riaz.hassan@flinders.edu.au.

This research project has been approved by the Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee. The Secretary of this Committee can be contacted on Telephone: 0061 8 8201 5962, or fax 0061 8 8201-2035, e-mail sandy.huxtable@flinders.edu.au.

Thank you for your attention and assistance.

Yours sincerely,

Prof Emeritus Riaz Hassan (Department of Sociology, Flinders University of South Australia)

APPENDIX #7 CONSENT FORM FOR INTERVIEWS

CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH
(by interview)

I …..

being over the age of 18 years hereby consent to participate, as requested in the introductory letter, in the research project on religious and social change amongst the Kyrgyz people of Kyrgyzstan. I have read the information provided.

1. Details of procedures and any risks have been explained to my satisfaction.

2. I agree to my information and participation being recorded on tape/videotape

3. I am aware that I should retain a copy of the Information Sheet and Consent Form for future reference.

4. I understand that:

    - I may not directly benefit from taking part in this research.

    - I am free to withdraw from the project at any time and am free to decline to answer particular questions.

    - While the information gained in this study will be published as explained, I will not be identified, and individual information will remain confidential.

    - I may withdraw from the research at any time without disadvantage.

    - I may ask that the recording/observation be stopped at any time, and that I may withdraw at any time from the session or the research without disadvantage.

5. I agree/do not agree* to the tape/transcript* being made available to other researchers who are not members of this research team, but who are judged by the research team to be doing related research, on condition that my identity is not revealed. **I am aware and accept that a translator will be used.**   *
    delete as appropriate

Participant's signature…………………………………Date…………………...

I certify that I have explained the study to the volunteer and consider that she/he understands what is involved and freely consents to participation.

Researcher's name   David Radford

Researcher's signature……………………………..Date……………………

6. I, the participant whose signature appears below, have read a transcript of my participation and agree to its use by the researcher as explained.

Participant's signature…………………………………Date…………………...

<u>QUESTIONNAIRE INFORMATION</u>

IDENTIFICATION NUMBER ………………………………………… ☐

DATE OF QUESTIONNAIRE ………………………………………….. ☐

LOCATION OF INTERVIEW ………………………………………… ☐

PROVINCE WHERE PARENTS LOCATED…………………………………… ☐

NAME OF CHECKER ………………………………………… ☐

RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND AND SOCIALISATION

-   Questions about you and your family's religious affiliation
[Please ticket the appropriate box]

---

1. What is your Church denomination? [Please indicate ONE primary church affliliation]

    [ ] Church of Jesus Christ

    [ ] Baptist

    [ ] Assembly of God

    [ ] Presbyterian

    [ ] Korean

    [ ] Independent Charismatic

    [ ] Independent Kyrgyz

    [ ] Other [Please indicate name]……………………………………….

    [ ] Don't attend a primary church

    [ ] Don't attend any church

2. When did you become a Christian believer?

[ ] Before 1991

[ ] Between 1991-1995

[ ] Between 1996-2000

[ ] Between 2001-2008

3. Where did you spend your childhood? In a:

[ ] Town

 [ ] Village

4. In which province did you spend most of your childhood?

[ ] Batken

[ ] Bishkek

[ ] Chuy

[ ] Issyk Kul

[ ] Jalal-Abad

[ ] Naryn

[ ] Osh

[ ] Talas

5. Where are you living now? In a:

[ ] Town

[ ] Village

6. Which province are you presently living in?

[ ] Batken

[ ] Bishkek

[ ] Chuy

[ ] Issyk Kul

[ ] Jalal-Abad

[ ] Naryn

[ ] Osh

[ ] Talas

7. I was raised in a religious family:

[ ] Strongly Agree

[ ] Agree

[ ] Not sure

[ ] Disagree

[ ] Strongly Disagree

[ ] No answer

8. My family closely followed Kyrgyz traditional spiritual ways:

[ ] Strongly Agree

[ ] Agree

[ ] Not Sure

[ ] Disagree

[ ] Strongly Disagree

[ ] No answer

9. How would describe yourself before you became a Christian believer?

[ ] Practicing Muslim

[ ] Non-Practicing Muslim

[ ] Religious but not Muslim

[ ] Not Religious

[ ] Atheist

[ ] No answer

10. As a Christian believer which statement best reflects how you feel about God? (Please tick one of these)

[ ] God is not closely involved in your life

[ ] God is closely involved in your life sometimes

[ ] God is closely involved in your life a lot

[ ] Unsure/Don't know

11. How important is it for you as Christian believer to know that God loves you?

[ ] Very important

[ ] Important

[ ] Somewhat important

[ ] Not important

[ ] Unsure/Don't know

Before you became a Christian believer how often did you engage in the following?

	Never	Sometimes	Often
12. Seeking help from a Mullah	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
13. Seeking help from a fortune teller/shaman	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
14. Seeking help from a traditional healer	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
15. Visiting mazars	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
16. Praying to God directly	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
17. Preparing food for or praying to your ancestors	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]

After becoming a Christian believer how often have you engaged in the following?

	Never	Sometimes	Often
18. Seeking help from a Mullah	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
19. Seeking help from a fortune teller/shaman	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
20. Seeking help from a traditional healer	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
21. Visiting mazars	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]

22. Praying to God directly	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
23. Preparing food for or praying to your ancestors	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
24. Seeking help from a pastor/Christian leader	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
25. Attending church services/bible studies	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]

26. <u>Before</u> Becoming a Christian believer did you have any problems with a black/oppressive spirit (basyryk/al barysty)?

[ ] Many times

[ ] A few times

[ ] None

27. <u>After</u> becoming a Christian believer do you still have problems with the black/oppressive spirit (basyryk/al barysty)?

[ ] Many times

[ ] A few times

[ ] None

Were you facing any of the following problems in your life before you became a believer?

	Yes	No
28. Financial	[ ]	[ ]

29. Family [ ] [ ]

30. Marriage [ ] [ ]

31. Unemployment [ ] [ ]

32. Excessive drinking [ ] [ ]

33. Evil spirits [ ] [ ]

34. Breakdown in relationships [ ] [ ]

35. Chronic/serious illness [ ] [ ]

36. Other (Please specify below)………………………….. [ ]

37. Where did you first hear clearly about the Christian faith?

[ ] Your home

[ ] Someone else's home

[ ] Public place

[ ] Church building

What role did the following factors play in you becoming a Christian believer?

	Significant role	Some role	No role	Unsure
38. The convincing words of someone	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]

39. The good example/changed life of a Christian believer [ ]   [ ]   [ ]   [ ]

40. Dreams/visions [ ]   [ ]   [ ]   [ ]

41. Healing [ ]   [ ]   [ ]   [ ]

42. Deliverance from evil spirits [ ]   [ ]   [ ]   [ ]

43. Answered prayer [ ]   [ ]   [ ]   [ ]

44. You were seeking after truth/God [ ]   [ ]   [ ]   [ ]

45. Major problems/crisis in your life [ ]   [ ]   [ ]   [ ]

Did any of the following influence you to become a Christian believer?

	Yes	No	Don't know
46. An close/immediate family member	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
47. Extended family	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
48. Classmate	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
49. Workmate	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
50. Neighbour	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]

51. Teacher	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
52. Friend	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
53. A member of some Christian church	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]

KYRGYZ IDENTITY

– Questions about Kyrgyz identity and ethnicity

<u>**Before**</u> **you became a Christian believer what did you think of the** <u>**God**</u> **of the Christians?**

	Yes	No	Don't know
54. The same as the God of the Muslims	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
55. The God of the Russians	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
56. The God of all nationalities	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]

<u>**After**</u> **you became a Christian believer what do you now think about the** <u>**God**</u> **of the Christian?**

	Yes	No	Don't know
57. The same as the God of the Muslims	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]

	Yes	No	Don't know
58. The God of the Russians	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
59. The God of all nationalities	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]

Before you became a Christian believer what did you think about Christians?

	Yes	No	Don't know
60. They are Russians	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
61. They are 'Baptists' involved in sect activities	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
62. They are good people	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
63. I didn't know anything	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]

How important are the following characteristics for a person to be identified as a Kyrgyz?

	V. important	Important	Not Important	Unsure
64. Born in a Kyrgyz family	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
65. Speaks the Kyrgyz language	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]

	Very important	Important	Not Important	Unsure
66. A Muslim	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
67. Attends important family events (e.g. weddings, funerals)	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
68. Practices important Kyrgyz values (e.g. hospitality, respect for elders)	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
69. Other (Please specify below) …………………… ……	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]

How important are these cultural factors for a Kyrgyz Christian believer??

	Very important	Important	Not Important	Unsure
70. Circumcision	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
71. Wedding attendence	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
72. Participation in funeral rites	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]

73. Visiting fortune tellers/shamans/mazars	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
74. Following traditional Kyrgyz practices (e.g. Nooryz, Toloo)	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
75. Practices important Kyrgyz values (e.g. hospitality, respect for elders)	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]

76. Which of the following statements do you think is the most correct? Please tick the correct one.

[ ] Christian ideas and the Bible are as compatible/close with Kyrgyz culture as Islam

[ ] Christian ideas and the Bible are more compatible/close with Kyrgyz culture as Islam

[ ] Christian ideas and the Bible are less compatible/close with Kyrgyz culture than Islam

[ ] Unsure/Don't know

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY RESPONSES

– Questions about how your family and community have responded to you as a Kyrgyz Christian

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77. Are there members of your family who are also Christian believers?

[ ] Yes

[ ] No

[ ] Unsure/Don't know

78. If yes, how many?

[ ] 1-5 people

[ ] 6-10 people

[ ] More than 10 people

79. How close do you feel to your family?

[ ] Very close

[ ] Somewhat close

[ ] Not close

[ ] No relationship

[ ] Unsure/Don't know

Do the following people know that you have become a Christian believer?

	Yes	No	Unsure/don't know

80. Immediate family   [ ]   [ ]   [ ]

81. Extended family   [ ]   [ ]   [ ]

82. Friends   [ ]   [ ]   [ ]

83. Do your non-Christian Kyrgyz family or community feel that you are still Kyrgyz now that you are a Christian believer?

[ ] Yes, always

[ ] Yes, sometimes

[ ] No, but still accept

[ ] No, and don't accept at all

[ ] Unsure/don't know

Did you encounter any opposition from the following people when you became a Christian believer?

	Yes	No
84. Close/Immediate family	[ ]	[ ]
85. Extended family	[ ]	[ ]
86. Neighbours	[ ]	[ ]
87. Friends	[ ]	[ ]

	Yes	No
88. Strangers	[ ]	[ ]
89. Government officials	[ ]	[ ]
90. Community leaders	[ ]	[ ]
91. Mullahs	[ ]	[ ]

Do you still encounter opposition from the following people?

	Yes	No
92. Close/Immediate family	[ ]	[ ]
93. Extended family	[ ]	[ ]
94. Neighbours	[ ]	[ ]
95. Friends	[ ]	[ ]
96. Strangers	[ ]	[ ]
97. Government officials	[ ]	[ ]
98. Community leaders	[ ]	[ ]
99. Mullahs	[ ]	[ ]

PERSONAL BACKGROUND INFORMATION

– General background questions about your life

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100. Gender

[ ] Male

[ ] Female

101. Marital status

[ ] Married

[ ] Separated/Divorced

[ ] Widowed

[ ] Never Married

102. What is your year of birth?

[   ] [   ] [   ] [   ]

103. What is your present occupation?

[ ] …………………

104. What is the highest level of formal education you have completed?

[ ] Some Primary School (Grades 1-4)

[ ] Primary School completed (Grade 5)

[ ] Some High school completed (Grades 6-9)

[ ] High School completed (Grade 11)

[ ] Some Vocational school/Technical school

[ ] Vocational /Technical school completed

[ ] Some University completed

[ ] University completed

[ ] No education

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