

**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/basyryk* – 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* – Kyrgyz 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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/Ramazán 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.