Religious Diversity in Post-Soviet Central Asia

SÉBASTIAN PEYROUSE

During perestroika, after a moment’s hesitation, President Gorbachev decided to depart from the restrictive religious policies of the Soviet regime and to liberalize religion. With the independence of the republics of Central Asia in 1991, however, and the general absence of a state, it had to re-determine the relation between religion and state, individual and national identity. Since then these newly independent States—Christian—have had to manage Islam, as the majority religion, in the context of an increasing religious diversity which mainly consists of Christian denominations. Each president in the area has demonstrated to the population—and foreign countries—the desire to grant religion sufficient space in public life. New images of liberal religious policies are all the more necessary because four of the five presidents that are heir to the former Soviet republics were actually opponents of the former Communist Party. All of them went on pilgrimage to Mecca. The presidents of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, Niazov and Karimov, even encouraged, just after independence, the presence of foreign Muslim missionaries in their respective republics. Moreover, Karimov came into office by taking his oath on the Quran. However, at the same time, new legislation in the republics forbids attempts to incite religious antagonism. No constitutional or legislative specificity links up with any religion or denomination. None of the constitutions include references to “Quran,” “Islam,” “Muslim” or “Christian” and “Christianity.” Each state champions, in principle, “local” religions, Islam as well as, Russian Orthodoxy, have allied to put pressure on governments in order to curb proselytizing and restrict religious conversion. While it is difficult to ignore the claims put forward by the main religious communities, most governments tolerate the growth of religious diversity, albeit at varying degrees. Religious revival is clearly manifest in the activities of particular Christian—especially Protestant—movements, which were prohibited during the Soviet Regime, such as the Charismatic and Presbyterian Churches, and Jehovah’s Witness who are now involved in active proselytization. The local population has become the target of such Christian missionary movements; and the missionaries believe that their call appeals to the public because the latter tend to practice a tolerant and traditional type of Islam, often without any theological grounding. Christian proselytizing The emergence of new and active proselytizing religious groups has caused great unease among the two main religious communities of Central Asia, Muslim and Orthodox. Their responses were essentially aimed at Protestant movements and, in a lesser measure, the Catholic Church. The quick expansion of foreign Christian missions and the conversions of locals to various Protestant denominations aroused some hostile reactions from the Muslim clergy who deem that the native population must remain de facto Muslim. They declare their respect for biblical texts, but he added that it is intolerable that a Muslim apostatizes and converts to another religion.1 The press in Central Asia frequently features Muslim representatives who are hostile towards “these too smiling guests whose essential goal is to divide the Muslim people.”2 Revanchism against Protestant missionary movements is present not only in countries like Tajikistan and Uzbekistan where Islamic movements are energetic, but also in Kyrgyzstan where the Christian missionaries are more active. Petitions were signed in Kyrgyz mosques, expressing opposition to, not only new, religious movements like the Moon movement, but to all Protestant denominations. Such protests are reported at the official level: in Uzbekistan, the president of the Council for Religious Affairs declared in 1994: “All these things are alien to our people and of course annoys the Muslims. If we do not take some decisive measures, a lot of blood might flow.”3 Many Muslim representatives, therefore, propose a strict distinction between autochthonous groups who are considered as Muslim and Europeans who can be Christian. Several violent altercations have already occurred in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and especially in Tajikistan, where protestant Churches and even the Orthodox Church were bombed in Dushanbe.

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tivation of Central Asia—which is more criticized for its “Occidentalism”

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sions before the law.

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Church official status. Meanwhile, it then ignores pressures that sever-

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Central Asia, as elsewhere in the former Soviet Union. However, this

phenomenon should be viewed cautiously because the fall of commu-

iness on the entire region. Claiming that national stability is

The political authorities do not fear Christianity as such, but rather the

reign of autochthonous populations, Muslims do not enjoy more

rights than adherents of any Christian denomination.

The appearance of new religious movements along with the renewal

of religious activities contributes to the notion of religious revival in

Central Asia, as elsewhere in the former Soviet Union. However, this

In Uzbekistan, new legislation passed in 1998 requires religious com-

munities to apply for a new registration and to collect 100 signatures.

This new policy implies a policy of suppression of Christian communi-

cies located outside Tashkent and large cities, except for the Orthodox,

the main Protestant and Catholic communities. However, important

minority communities are still present on the Uzbek territory: although

proselytization is forbidden, Protestant denominations remain present

and active. Some believers who engaged in missionary work have been

jailed for several years. In Kazakhstan, legislation on religion has been
drafted, but none has been confirmed. In 1998 a concordat was signed
between the Kazakh State and the Vatican that grants the Catholic

Church official status. Meanwhile, it then ignores pressures that sever-
al Protestant movements undergo, despite the formal equality of all

confessions before the law.

Religious disagreement is much more apparent within the Christian
to the Russian Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church. The latter has in

Achkhabad a Vatican diplomatic representation that is mainly fre-

quented by expatriates.

Official responses

The Muslim and Orthodox responses to proselytizing Protestant
groups have a significant influence on the political authorities and
have led several republics to question the principle of religious liberty.
In Turkmenistan, a new law was passed in 1995 that requires the reli-
gious communities to gather 500 signatures in order to obtain the
 compulsory registration. Considering the small number of representa-
tives of national minorities, except Russians (the majority of Poles and

Germans have left the country), most Christian movements fail to meet
these conditions, even in the capital Achkhabad, and have been, thus,
forced underground. President Nazov has divided the religious spec-

trum into two distinct units: a Turkmen is supposed to be a Muslim
while a European an Orthodox. An Orthodox is not allowed to convert
a Turkmen to Christianity and a Muslim should not convert a Russian
(European) to Islam. A virulent religious activism may cause the gov-

ernment to take radical measures: some preachers have been sent to

t to jail, several churches have been closed, and the Adventists’ church in

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permanent administrative and police pressures, in contrast to the
Russian Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church. The latter has in

the Moscow in

Achkhabad

Mosque

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Notes


2. F. Usmanova, “Religious Renaissance or Political Game?” Central Asian Post, March


7. F. Usmanova, “Religious Renaissance or Political Game?”

8. I. Karimov, Uzbekistan on the Threshold of the 20th Century (Tashkent, Uzbekistan

1997), 39.