The Religious, The Secular and The Esoteric in Bishkek[1]

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A Disenchanted city?

Doing anthropological research on religion in Bishkek can be a bit discouraging. During what has, so far, been around six months of fieldwork there I have often been met with reactions signalling surprise, indifference and discomfort and comments hinting that I was in the wrong place. As one man said, after lifting his eyebrows in surprise and clearing his throat, as if wanting to make sure that I would get his point: “You need to understand that we have never been religious.”

During my former fieldwork in Bukhara[2] I was also regularly met with remarks, which seemed to suggest that I was in the wrong place. There, people pointed out, the seventy Soviet years had made people forget about their *Musulmonchilik*, ‘Muslimness’, and as a researcher interested in Islam I would be better off doing my fieldwork somewhere else. However, whereas the religion lost in Bukhara was surrounded by a profound sense of nostalgia, which seemed to reflect people’s feelings of dislocation in post-Soviet space, most people in Bishkek seem quite content with the idea that they ‘have never been religious[3]’. Talking with people there about their religion, the first thing they will often tell you is that Islam has never had such a strong hold on Kyrgyz people, that they are only superficially Islamized, because Islam came to them relatively late, and because the Kyrgyz were traditionally nomads – as if Islam needed a place to settle in order to take place in peoples’ hearts and minds.

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[1] This paper was presented at the panel “Challenging Interpretations of Islam in Central Asia” at the eighth annual conference of the Central Eurasian Studies Society, Seattle October 18-21, 2007

[2] Louw 2007

[3] I use the concept of ‘religion’ as a translation of the Russian term религия and the Kyrgyz term дин, and the term ‘religious’ as a translation of the Kyrgyz terms динчил and динге берилген and the Russian term религиозный.

Bishkek and its inhabitants have often been described as thoroughly secularized. “When you walk in the street of the capital,” writes Michel Gardaz, for example, in a report named “In Search of Islam in Kyrgyzstan”[4], “you feel only the cold breeze of ‘Scientific Atheism’ blowing in your face.”

People in Bishkek may also refer to the urban landscape to support their arguments that people there are not ‘religious’, asking you to look around: Does this look like a ‘religious’ city? Indeed, at a first gaze Bishkek hardly seems the kind of city you would settle in in order to study Islam. Whereas the numerous ancient mosques, madrasas and shrines in Bukhara may trigger images of a time when life was characterised by ‘Muslimness’, stereotypes of how ‘religion’ looks like are hardly triggered by Bishkek’s urban landscape: Soviet urban planning with post-independence twists in the shape of new business-centres, shopping-malls and casinos.

People may also draw your attention to the tempo of city-life, arguing that people there have too much to do, too much to think of, and too little time to do so. Modern urban nomads – be it elites rushing from place to place in search of the next business deal, cell phone in hand, or the less well-off struggling along to provide for their families – do not have much time and space for religion in their lives.

Others may be attentive to what they perceive as signs that Bishkek is indeed becoming more ‘religious’ or ‘Islamic’: A politician or prominent state employee making reference to Islam in public speeches, the meeting with a *davatchi*[5]; the occasional sight of a veiled woman, people selling ‘religious’ literature in the street, or perhaps of roads being blocked by people attending the Friday prayer. Such signs that ‘religion’ is invading the public sphere are regarded with ambivalent feelings by many. They might find that a certain amount of ‘religion’ is desirable as it counters tendencies to moral decay and ‘westernization’ or ‘russification’. However, “even honey may become bitter if there is too much of it,” as a woman expressed it, and many people in Bishkek display a profound discomfort with ‘religion’ and with people who have begun to embrace, and publicly display, a ‘religious’ identity.

The social life of stereotypes

[4] Gardaz 1999: 276
[5] I.e. a person who calls other people to Islam

Research on Islam in Central Asia has been haunted by stereotypes and essentialisms. The tendency was perhaps most notable back in Soviet times[6]. But also in contemporary research there is a stubborn tendency to postulate that Central Asian peoples' Muslim identity is somewhat superficial; that knowledge about Islam has been lost during the Soviet years[7], and that it, in the case of the region's former nomadic populations, was always shallow anyway[8]. Such approaches ex- or implicitly compare how Islam is understood and practiced in Central Asia with some kind of idealtypical 'real' or 'pure' Islam – as if defining 'real' Islam was unproblematic[9].

Deconstructing stereotypes and essentialisms is fundamental to the anthropological endeavour, and so is the effort to bring out the complexity of meaning as lived 'on the ground'; among the people we are studying. In this case it means bracketing questions concerning the status of peoples' practices and beliefs relative to Islamic orthodoxy – the definition of which is by no means unproblematic – and instead focus on the ways in which people actually live and experience them; why some ideas about, and ways of practicing, Islam are more compelling, or meaningful, to them than others.

Going to the field with the aim of deconstructing essentialisms and looking for the complexity of meaning as lived 'on the ground' it can be a bit disheartening to meet people who describe themselves in terms of the stereotypes one has set out to deconstruct. This is indeed what people in Central Asia often do when asked by a researcher to describe their relationship with Islam: "I am Muslim, but I am not real Muslim," "The Kyrgyz people were nomads, and therefore we are not real Muslims like the Uzbeks" or "We have never been religious" – Just to give a few examples of statements I have recently heard in Bishkek. Statements which, interestingly, coexist with a strong sense, among many people, that their lives are intimately connected with God, with Divine, 'supernatural' or 'extrasensory' interventions.

Stereotypes present meaning as unambiguous and semantically stable. In this way they disguise what is in fact their own enormous capacity for multiple interpretations; their unstable semantics[10]. Now starting to analyze the material from my fieldwork in Bishkek I am trying to probe into the shifting semantics of what it means to people not to be 'religious', not to be 'real' Muslims; the

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[6] Cf. DeWeese 2002; Saroyan 1997
[7] See for example Akiner 1997: 274; Gardaz 1999; Atkin 1995; Shahrani 1995.
[8] See for example Kosmarskaya 1996, Akbarzadeh 2001
[9] Cf. DeWeese 2002; Khalid 2007
[10] Cf. Herzfeld 1992: 73

local social life of the enlightenment concepts of the ‘religious’ and the ‘secular’ and related concepts: How, when, and by whom are the categories of religion and its others defined? What assumptions are presupposed in the acts that define them?[11] What do statements about being ‘religious’ or not being ‘religious’ imply in the local context? Which experiential realities are people referring to when they engage in such concepts? What is, for example, the experiential ‘other’ which people define themselves in opposition to when they say that they are not ‘religious’? What don’t they include in the concept and why? Which meaning do they ascribe to experiences of the Divine if such experiences are not meaningful in terms of ‘religion’?

Although it might be flawed from an anthropological viewpoint, the objectifying and essentialist gaze that distinguishes between ‘real’ and not so ‘real’ Islam – deeming the Kyrgyz not so ‘real’ – makes sense to many people in Bishkek and should therefore be taken seriously. While some people there are beginning to embrace a ‘religious’ identity, being Muslim in a not very ‘religious’ way, or not being ‘real’ Muslims, to many others, remains part of what distinguishes them from other Muslims; be it Arabs, Uzbeks or people from the southern part of Kyrgyzstan who are generally perceived as very ‘religious’, as being ‘real’ Muslims. And the fact that some people in Bishkek are beginning to embrace a more ‘religious’ identity is seen as a symptom of the ills of society and explained in quasi-sociological or –psychological terms.

Being very ‘religious’, to many people in Bishkek, is associated with *excess*; it feeds into other images of excessive aspects of social change. As anthropologist Jon P. Mitchell has argued, social and economic change – or more importantly *perception* of social and economic change – often leads to a kind of moralising against excess that establishes a boundary within which people are censured to remain, but in turn creates a proliferation of images of transgression, and of the consequences of transgression[12].

In Bishkek, as in other parts of the post-Soviet world, perceptions of radical social and economic change has led to a proliferation of images of, on the one hand, excessive individualism and, on the other hand, fanaticism: Excessive strategies for survival and for regaining a sense of agency and identity which some people, it is believed, have resorted to as an answer to the social upheavals that have characterised the time since independence. Extreme ways of being-in-the-world which are surrounded by both fascination and repulsion: Repulsion because they are indeed excessive, anti-

[11] Cf. Asad 2003: 201
[12] Mitchell 2001

social, and embody peoples' anxieties about where society is heading. Fascination because people nonetheless may recognise concerns which are their own in such excessive answers to the predicaments of present-day life.

On the one hand there is the common image of the religious 'fanatic' – in many ways an imagined cultural entity, known to most people by representations alone[13]. Although being branded as religious 'extremist' is not as fatal as in Uzbekistan, in Kyrgyzstan the trope of the 'extremist' Muslim aiming at a violent overthrow of the secular state is also prominent in public debates about which role 'religion' should play in society[14]. And the concern to distance oneself from 'extremist' or 'fanatical' ways of being 'religious' is a major one for many people. People commonly speak about religious 'fanatics' as weak-minded persons who – similar to those who have found a refuge in the bottle, or in drugs – have found a refuge in religious submission; in submission to an authority that frees them from the burden of having to care about their own lives. People who have become 'very religious' are often described as people who have withdrawn from the world, from society, even from their families – in short, from the present – because of their inability to face and handle everyday problems and find meaning in the 'ideological vacuum' that the breaking up of the Soviet Union allegedly caused.

In addition to the image of the religious fanatic there has also been a proliferation of the image of the religious hypocrite – an image which feeds into other images of cynicism and hypocrisy, excessive individualism and consumerism: phenomena also perceived to be characteristic of post-Soviet society, in particular urban society. 'Being religious' is by many described as some kind of superficial lifestyle that has nothing to do with sincere belief but merely is chosen because it is some kind of fashionable, signals the right things, much like the latest Armani-dress. As such, religious lifestyle, in the opinion of many people is also often used as a cover of legally or morally dubious acts. The tendencies of prominent, morally dubious, politicians and businessmen to make a big show out of funding mosques or attending the Friday prayer has undoubtedly contributed to the suspicion that people regard religious lifestyle with. It is striking how people, in interviews, jump from talking about 'religiousness' to talking about what is perceived as other kinds of modern or urban pretence and insincerity: Notably politicians whose words about democracy, social justice and fight against corruption is perceived as just a cover of their pursuit of power and profit.

[13] Cf. Lindquist 2002 on the New Russians as imagined cultural entities
[14] Cf. McBrien 2006

When the Divine takes place in the city

People in Bishkek might often define themselves as not very 'religious', but that has not necessarily anything to do neither with their identity as Muslims, nor with their relationship with God. To be religious or not has nothing to do with what God, or the Divine dimensions of existence, *do* in peoples' lives.

The Divine also finds its place in Bishkek's urban landscape; among its casinos, bazaars, shopping centres, bars and advertising billboards; and also Bishkek's self-declared 'non-religious' population find themselves surrounded by signs from God which help them drawing the contours of themselves, the trajectories of their lives – especially, perhaps, in situations where their existence is shaken.

Let me give an example.

Gulmira[15] was a middle-aged woman who lived with her teenage daughter and her elderly mother in an apartment in one of Bishkek's suburbs. Like so many others of her generation, Gulmira had experienced life in Bishkek deteriorating since the breaking up of the Soviet Union. When I met her and asked her to tell about her city she conveyed a general impression of physical as well as moral decay, insecurity and vulnerability: Frunze, the city of her youth, had been green and clean; it had been a cultural, industrial and intellectual centre. Now the city had become dirty; the streets were unkempt; the factories had been closed; the intellectuals had left for better jobs in Russia, Kazakhstan or the West. Instead the city had been filled with labour migrants from the south and with unemployed people who drowned their sense of hopelessness in drugs and alcohol. The rising gap between the rich and the poor had split up society, and the concern to make money filled up the minds of people and made them ruthless and unscrupulous. The former bastion of modernity[16] had become porous; the former symbol of hope and progress had become the site of day-to-day survival strategies.

I asked Gulmira about the changes in the religious sphere. Having talked very passionately about the changes Bishkek had undergone since independence she suddenly seemed demonstratively uninterested and started giving very short answers. She did not know anything about religion, she said. Although she was out of a family of *moldo*s she conceived of herself as an atheist, and that

[15] 'Gulmira' is a pseudonym.
[16] Cf. Buchli & Alexander 2007

was all there was to say about that. However, when I talked with her again a few days later, returning to the subject, she said that it would not be correct to say that she did not believe in God. Probably there existed some kind of 'supernatural' force in the world. She sometimes experienced such a force herself; notably through her dreams.

Some years ago, Gulmira told me in order to give me an example, she worked as a chief accountant in the military. As a chief accountant she had her own office. People would always comment on how cosy it was. One night she had a dream: She came to her office in the morning and saw that people were removing all the furniture from the room. The atmosphere had become different; dusty, dirty and dark. The wallpaper was falling off the wall.

In her dream, the decay of the outside world had invaded what had until then been one of her safe havens in the midst of post-Soviet chaos. And that haven, the office, became a different place to her; an enchanted place – replete with omens that her life would fall apart in case she did nothing to get away. In the morning, she said, she knew for sure that she had to leave the job and handed in her resignation. The month after, she heard, the authorities discovered some 'irregularities' at her former place of work. Her former colleagues were still in trouble, but her dream had made her leave her job in time. Gulmira concluded that probably there had been some special forces at work in her life.

In Bishkek, people frequently experience glimpses of the Divine or supernatural forces in what might appear to the spectator as unimportant phenomena and make these glimpses significant as basis for decision-making and reflections on their lives. Like Gulmira they might experience such glimpses in images, voices and feelings experienced in dreams. Or they might experience it in intuitions, sudden brain waves or impulses. In words they overhear in the street, which seem somehow meant for them. In difficulties in doing something they have planned – travelling somewhere, getting in touch with someone – which is perceived as a sign from God that they should indeed not do it. In the feeling of hope against all odds. Or just in a general sense that God takes part in their lives.

This brings us into the sphere of what one could call everyday 'esotericism' or 'mysticism'. What characterizes such 'mystical' or 'esoteric' experiences is the idea that they somehow defy expression; that they need to be experienced to be properly understood. They are states of insights

usually hardly reachable by rational understanding. They are transient, short. And the person undergoing such experiences feels him- or herself as passively being held by a superior power. The Divine *takes place* – shortly, but usually making a lasting impression on the person and sometimes drawing the contours of a new self for him or her.

If the experiences as such are ineffable, the circumstances surrounding them are often remembered in great detail, localizing the Divine, enchanting the most unlikely places in the city, creating sacred landscapes which are usually highly personal: Gulmira's office, for example, was not an enchanted place to anyone but her, and perhaps the people whom she told about the dream, and who recognised the dream's authenticity and thus the moral grounding of an act which might have been interpreted as the mere attempt to save one's skin in time.

Hermeneutics of suspicion and hermeneutics of enchantment

The point that I wish to make is not that Bishkek is *really* enchanted, that people are *really* religious, under a thin veneer of secularism. That would just be a subversion of the argument that people are not 'real' Muslims and another confirmation that there are certain phenomena which are really, essentially, religious, and other phenomena which are essentially secular.

I suggest that a potentially fruitful way of approaching religious life among Bishkek's not so 'religious' population might be to focus on how people there variously enchant and disenchant their surrounding world. How they sometimes engage with a 'hermeneutics of suspicion' in order to find mundane concerns behind expressions of 'religiousness', and how they sometimes engage with what one might term a 'hermeneutics of enchantment' that perceives signs of Divine forces in apparently secular phenomena. How they create sacred, as well as secular, landscapes in the city; how ideas about the 'religious', the 'secular' and the Divine become read and inscribed in the urban landscape and the way life in the city is imagined, and how these processes are intimately connected with city life as such; with peoples' efforts to navigate it; with their hopes for, and fears about, the directions society and their lives may take in the future.

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