

Kyrgyz Youth from Past to Present: Opportunities and Threats

Bakit Murzaraimov¹

Abstract

Kyrgyz is a deep-rooted nation history of which goes back to ancient times. Before passing to the settled life, Kyrgyz people lived in a nomadic life. As a necessity of nomadic life, they earned their lives by farming and they met their needs thorough animal breeding. As a house, they lived in “boz uy” that is a traditional Kyrgyz house made of felt. While they lived in their traditional house, they taught their children to make various clothes from animal materials and used animal milk and wool. This traditional life style was transferred from the old generation to the young generation through the history. More importantly religious and moral teaching took place in this traditional house, “boz uy.” Parents not only taught their children the traditional life style, but also taught them human relations such as regard for old people, love for children, hospitality and others.

Keywords: Kyrgyz, Youth, Traditions, Religion, Morality

INTRODUCTION

Pre-Soviet Religious Situation

Historically, the Central Asian region has been a region where various civilizations, cultures and ethnic groups existed and encountered each other due to its climatic and geographical conditions, where nomadic lifestyles were common and also due to its location on trade routes. Central Asia is not only a place where ethnic groups interacted, but it also is a religious transition center, and different religions coming to the region influenced the region. These include Manichaeism, Shamanism, Judaism, Nestorian Christianity, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Confucianism and Islam (Handrahan 100). In fact, during the periods when ancient Turks lived in Kyrgyzstan, preachers, missionaries and lamas from various religious sects such as Buddhism and Nestorian Christians carried out missionary activities (Bartold 517). Although there are very few locations in the country now, it is still possible to see ancient Buddhist motifs. The Buddha image drawn on a large rock in the Issyk Ata region, not far from the capital Bishkek, is one of them. Foreign missionaries brought their own sects to this geography and tried to establish their theory, ideology and cultural values among the local people of Central Asia, including the Kyrgyz (Djamgerchinov 79).

The religion of Islam began to spread among the settled people of Central Asia with the arrival of the Arabs in the 8th century. When Muslim Arabs and Pharisees came to Central Asia, the Islamization of the settled peoples corresponding to the current lands of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan was much faster than of the nomadic communities. Although Islam came to the Fergana valley, where Southern Kyrgyzstan is located, as early as the 8th century, it was found in Northern and mountainous Kyrgyzstan in the 17th-18th century. It should be noted that the spread of Islam was slower among the nomads, especially among the Kyrgyz, who came from the Yenisei River and settled around today's Issyk Kul, compared to other settled peoples of Central Asia. The Djungar Khaganate played a major role in the Islamization of the Kyrgyz people in the 17th century. The main factor in the Islamization of the Kyrgyz living in Tien Shan Mountains (the mountains of God) was their exile to the Fergana valley by the Djungars. However, even in the 19th century, there were communities among the nomadic Kyrgyz and Kazakhs who did not fully embrace Islam. For this reason, tribes in northern Kyrgyzstan accepted Islam superficially so Islam was not deeply embedded in the consciousness of the people. The Kyrgyz people generally lived a nomadic life, they remained far from the Islamic cultural centers of Central Asia, and had poor relations with other settled peoples (Dorjenov 5–6). Over time, old religious beliefs such as Shamanism and Theism lost their vitality by becoming insufficient to meet people's spiritual needs, and thus

¹ UYE E-mail: bakit.murzaraimov@manas.edu.kg

the religion of Islam began to spread slowly among the nomadic people. Kyrgyz intellectuals who were the first to accept Islam and spread it among their own tribes played a great role in this question. Over time, it became fashionable among Kyrgyz intellectuals to send their children to school in madrasahs in Kokand, Bukhara, Samarkand and Kashgar. By learning Arabic, Kyrgyz people were directly under the spiritual and cultural influence of Islam (Israelova 98).

The Kokand khans, who took Kyrgyzstan under their rule in the first quarter of the 19th century, saw Islam as an important tool to rule the country. First, they sought to more deeply spread of Islam in Kyrgyzstan. For this purpose, they sent mullahs, imams, hodjas and dervishes to the regions to make religious propaganda. In parallel with this, they started the construction of mosques in mostly fortified areas. Thus, Islam began to spread widely in Kyrgyzstan. The influence of Islam has been stronger in Kyrgyzstan in the south than in the north. This is due to Southern Kyrgyzstan being closer to the largest religious centers of Central Asia of that times: Kokand, Bukhara and Samarkand (Soodanbekov 135–36).

The spread of Islam among the Kyrgyz people became a political factor that enabled Kyrgyzstan to get closer to other neighboring countries in Central Asia in the future. With the accession of the Kyrgyz lands to Russia, a new era began in state-religion relations. Therefore, the religious regulations of Tsarist Russia dominated Central Asia and Kyrgyzstan, which became a part of it. In Tsarist Russia, all religions were divided into three main categories: dominant religions (Orthodox), tolerated religions (Islam, Lutheranism, Catholic), and frowned upon religions (old Russian faiths, Baptists, Adventists) (Golst 18). By openly intervening in religious affairs, the state officially adopted the policy of inequality of religions before the law and defended the dominant and tolerated religions against the intolerable religions. The Russian government protected the Orthodox faith. In fact, those who criticized this were claimed to have committed the most serious crime and were severely punished by taking away all their property rights. In 1875, 755 laws regarding the investigation of various sects and old beliefs were published in the Russian Tsarist Empire code (Ivanov and Lobazov 14).

After the annexation of the Kyrgyz lands to Russia, missionary activities to spread Orthodox Christianity among the Kyrgyz people began. From 1865, the year the occupation began, to 1895, Russian government tried to convert the Kyrgyz to Orthodox Christianity and sent many missionaries to the lands of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Local people reacted to these activities, and some missionaries were killed in Kazakhstan. Thus, Christianity could not be very effective because it was not popular among the local people. After a certain period of time, since the missionary activities did not yield results and failed, the idea of Christianizing the Kyrgyz was withdrawn by the Russian administrators, and official documents accepted and registered that the Kyrgyz were Muslims as of 1895 (Israelova 96). According to 1905 Russian official figures, 96% of the people of Turkestan belong to Islam and 3.7% belong to Orthodox Christianity (Tabishalieva 84). Those in this 3.7% are not Turkestan converts, but Russian and Ukrainian immigrants settled by Russia.

After this date, when Tsarist Russia realized that it could not turn the Kyrgyz into Orthodox Christianity, it planned to consolidate Russian domination by using Islam. They believed that Islam as a religion would bring good results for Russia. In historical documents, the Russian Government not only supervised the Islamic religious institutions in the lands under its control, but also obliged the local people to fulfill their religious duties meticulously. For this reason, the Russian government, like a sharia state, stated that it was mandatory for the Muslim people to fulfill the requirements of the Islamic religion and stated that the state would provide all facilities and control in this regard. A document of those period (Chistyakov 310) states: “According to the decree of His Majesty the Emperor, the Russian Sovereignty ensures that Muslims in all of Russia fulfill the requirements of their own religion and are in strict harmony. Those who convert must be punished in three ways: the first with a whip, the second with a beating, and the third with a whip.” (Klimovich 24; Podoprigora 324) Mullahs took duties in the army for Muslims, Muslim soldiers recruited into the Russian army were free to follow the requirements of their religion.

Another little-known issue is the spread of Islamic educational institutions in Kazakh and Kyrgyz nomadic societies in Tsarist Russia. This is an important situation in the history of Central Asia in terms of both the prevalence and the results of these institutions. From the second half of the 19th century until the establishment of the Soviet Union, schools and madrasahs increased in number among the Kazakh and Kyrgyz communities

in an unprecedented way. This process accelerated with the increase in the number of Tatar and Bashkir mullahs among the Kazakh and Kyrgyz nomadic societies after Russia took over these lands. What is interesting here is that the nomads themselves desired to receive Islamic education (Frank 292).

Researchers have evaluated the changes in the Russian Government's religious policy towards Islam and the Muslim community differently. There are two dominant views on this issue: Some argue that the Russian Tsarist government tried to increase Russia's influence on Central Asian societies and keep Muslim societies under control by using Islam as a tool to dominate the Central Asian societies, while others argue that the imperial administration was trying to control freedoms (Zimanov 234). It is said that Russian Tsarist government approached the religion from its own perspective and that did not interfere with the religious affairs of the local people and did not touch Islamic organizations (Buryakov et al. 17). Even local governments have struggled to open new religious institutions. For example, between 1899 and 1908, the number of mosques in various regions of today's Kyrgyzstan increased by up to 2.5 times. This situation continued until the October revolution of 1917 (Dorjenov 8–9).

As a result, state institutions and religious institutions entered a new era with the annexation of the Turkestan lands where Kyrgyz people lived to Russia. During these periods, the Russian Tsarist government used Islamic institutions as a tool to govern and control the local people. Meanwhile, the Russian government also undertook the opening of new places of worship, the printing of religious publications, and the financing of religious officials from the state treasury. In those periods, instead of being removed from state affairs, religion was seen as an important part of the state in government practices, and this was considered the most important distinguishing characteristic of that period. Thus, traditional religious institutions became the means of monitoring and keeping Muslims under control by the state.

Religious Situation in Kyrgyzstan during the Soviet Union Era

Religion-state relations in Kyrgyzstan during the Soviet Union period need to be examined within the context of the Soviets' religious policy in general and Islamic policy in particular. The fact that the Russian Orthodox Church was intertwined with the state during the Tsarist Russia and had an official status in the state determined the Bolsheviks' attitudes towards religion. For this reason, the Soviet Union was the first state in the world whose ideological aim was to completely destroy religion and the role of religion in society and replace it with atheism. With the Bolsheviks coming to power, a campaign to deprive religious organizations of all their privileges was launched. According to the first decree of the "Land Law" issued on October 26 (November 8 in the Gregorian calendar), 1917, the Bolsheviks decided to hand over all monastery, church and foundation lands to farmer deputies to be used for district land committees and district councils. The next step of the Soviet state was the abolition of religious and ethnic privileges.

In the Declaration of the Rights of the Peoples of Russia, adopted in mid-November 1917 and its appeal to the working Muslims of all Russia and the East, all national and religious privileges, restrictions, the division of religions into "dominant", "tolerated and prohibited" were removed from the legislation. With this, the separation of citizens into groups or societies based on religious grounds had been eliminated.

The problem of state and religion relations in the early years of the Soviet Union was shaped within the framework of Vladimir Lenin's ideas. Lenin explains state-religion relations in his article "Socialism and Religion" as follows: "The state should have nothing to do with religion, religious communities should not have any connection with the government. The state should not provide any subsidies to churches, and the state should not provide funds for churches and religious communities. As associations formed by citizens who share the same ideas and thoughts, they should be completely independent and free from the state" (Lenin 83–87). These theoretical ideas formed the basis of the religious policy in the early years of the Soviet state, and the first decrees prepared were reinforced by the law "On Separating the Church from the State and the School from the Church" on January 23, 1918. Later, these laws formed the basis of all Soviet Constitutions.

However, the Bolsheviks could not fully take into account the social and political structure of Central Asia while implementing their policies. While depriving the clergy of their assets, property and privileges, they did not take into account that religious institutions and local clergy were much more influential in Central Asia.

In the early years of the Soviet Union, the Soviet State supported reformist religious activities in Central Asia, especially the left-wing Jadidists movement, which fought against the Kadhimists and their madrassas. The aims of the young Jadidists who wanted to reform the religion seemed to coincide with Soviet ideals. In fact, in 1922, the Soviets established local religious councils throughout Central Asia. These boards performed the same functions as the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan, which was later established. The purpose of these boards was "to ensure the connection between the government and the people, to reform religious matters, and to combat the unnecessary superstructure of Islam, that is, its provisions regarding society and politics, and misinterpretations of Islam" (Khalid 61).

By the mid-1920s, this situation had completely changed. After establishing its dominance in Central Asia, the Soviet Union showed its true attitude towards religion. Hundreds of mosques were closed or demolished in a few years. In 1927, the "Offense Policy", that is, the policy of forcibly removing the veil from Muslim women, was initiated. In the same year, all madrassahs were closed and the foundations were seized by the state in 1928. With the law against religious activities enacted in 1929, all religions were prohibited from being practiced openly in society. During the Stalin period, this law was used to liquidate Jadidists and many of them were killed or exiled based on this law (Khalid 71–77). Ultimately, pressures and arrests were launched against the Jadidist Movement activists in Central Asia and campaigns were launched against the leaders of the Kokand Autonomous Region, Shûra-i İslam, Shûra-i Ulama national political organizations, national patriotic newspapers and magazines, traditional schools, madrassahs and Jadid schools.

These policies of the Bolsheviks had a negative impact on state-religion relations in Central Asia. As a result, these policies caused the society to be divided into two: those who sided with the Bolsheviks and those who supported the local clergy, who received more or less support from the public. Despite the legal separation of religion from the state implemented by the Soviet Union, Muslim religious leaders and mullahs were respected persons of society. This phenomenon had a great impact on the events in the political process of the region. For this reason, the Bolsheviks started propaganda against the clergy to prevent them from having a directive political influence on society.

The socialist state was an atheist state. The state atheism of the Soviet Union was called "Gosateism (state atheism)" (Kowalewski 426–41). Therefore, first of all, the state itself carried out propaganda against religion. The state used all its power to defend and spread views based on atheism; atheism propaganda was made in schools, religions were mocked, believers were harassed, and efforts were made to replace religion with universal atheism.

Atheism policies implemented in the 1930s stopped for a short time with the start of the Second World War. During the Second World War, while the Soviet Union was struggling to survive, it was observed that the Soviet state policy regarding religion was softened in order to receive the support of believing citizens, thus oppressive policies against religion were eased. For example, on the night between January 4 and January 5, 1943, a historical meeting was held in the Kremlin between Stalin and his entourage and the leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church. Although only representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church attended this meeting, results of great importance for other religions also emerged.

In 1943, the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan was established in Tashkent. The powers of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan were increased over time, and a small number of local Islamic institutions were reopened and relations were established with the Islamic world. This institution in Tashkent was also used in relations with the Islamic world. In 1945, a meeting was held with the King of Saudi Arabia, Abdulaziz bin Saud, and Soviet Muslims were allowed to perform the pilgrimage. In 1946, Mir Arab Madrasa was reopened in Bukhara. In 1971, Imam Bukhari Islamic Institute was established as a second center providing religious education. During these periods, the number of religious institutions in Kyrgyzstan increased significantly. It has been determined that there are 33 registered religious communities and 10 unregistered religious communities (Khasanov, col.2014). However, from time to time, especially in the mid-1950s, late 1970s and early 1980s, atheism policies were accelerated and religious people were humiliated.

In general, the pressures against Islam during the Soviet Union period caused religious education and religious

groups to go underground in the country. By the late 1980s, unofficial congregations were gathering at home in a cell system under the leadership of their mullahs and receiving religious education, and their numbers are likely to be greater than those attending official mosques. These unofficial mullahs either learned the religion on their own from books or were trained by other mullahs through the cell system. At the same time, sects and Sufi groups also continued their existence.

As a result, state-religion relations of the Soviet period can be defined by two basic policies. In the first stage, legal guarantees were for freedom of religion. Then it was a policy of gradually separating the state from religion. Ultimately, it was to establish atheism as a religion in society. In short, the policies of distancing the society from religion in all aspects and spreading atheism were taken as basis.

Religious Situation in Kyrgyzstan After Independence and the Effect of Religion on Young People

Kyrgyz people, who have been under the pressure of atheism for a long time, entered into both a material and spiritual quest immediately after independence. The Kyrgyz people, who were previously dependent on Russia in every aspect, were also economically dependent on Russia. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, this bond was broken and Kyrgyzstan was left in an economic, cultural and ideological vacuum. As a result, the Kyrgyz people, left in a vacuum both materially and spiritually, entered into a search.

During this period, it is seen that many people, such as fortune tellers and clairvoyant, emerged from among the people. There were even those who said that people who were in a spiritual void went to these fortune tellers and learned their religion from them. In parallel with this, it is seen that missionaries from the West have begun to flock to Kyrgyzstan intensively. In this case, some of the people believed in what they believed to be old traditions, some fell into the trap of Western missionaries, and some still continued in the ideology of atheism.

According to an old understanding among the Kyrgyz people, a person who knew two words of Arabic or who knew how to read Arabic was seen as a scholar and was respected. As a result of this understanding, every Arab coming from the Arab states in 1991-93 was seen as a true Muslim and a true scholar, and a large part of the people believed in them. It is seen that during this period, many superstitious ideas such as Wahhabism, Salafism and Hizbuttahir entered the Kyrgyz people.

In addition, according to the constitution adopted in Kyrgyzstan in 1991, everyone could learn their faith in any way and wherever they wanted. As a result, most people went to Arab states, Pakistan, Turkey and Egypt to learn religion.

Most of those who went to Arab states and received religious education returned with either Wahhabi or Salafi ideas. The reflection of this was especially great in the years of 1994-96. They were known among the public for their ideas such as not building graves in the form of mausoleums, not reciting the adhan well, and not performing circumcision prayers.

Most of those who went to Pakistan and received religious education returned as members of the tabligh community. Today, they are known among the public as Tablighchi (Daavatchi). Tabligh Jamaat members usually walk around in public wearing Pakistani clothes, slippers and a beard. These are not always welcomed by the public due to their attire. The characteristic of the Tabligh community that is known among the public is that they can preach for three days, forty days, four months, six months, one year, three years, seven years and for life, that is, in their own words, they can guide the people.

Almost all of those who went to Egypt were influenced by the Fethullah Gulen community in Egypt. When this group returned to Kyrgyzstan, they founded many different associations and foundations of the Gulen community. By using religion, they gathered many influential people and state administrators around themselves.

Students who went to Turkey were taken by the Religious Foundation or the Presidency of Religious Affairs, which is the official institution of the state, and received education within the framework of the plan and program accepted by the state, without any community influence. In Kyrgyzstan, where Tablighists, Salafis, the

Gülen community and many similar false movements are around, those who receive education from Turkey are currently seen as the most moderate and reasonable in the eyes of the state and official institutions. This is why many politicians claim that Turkey's model is the most suitable model for Kyrgyzstan.

Values Education, “Iyman Sabagi” and its Problems

Before moving on to the "Iyman", that is, "faith" lesson in schools, it is necessary to briefly consider what this word means in Kyrgyz as a concept. This word, which is of Arabic origin, has two meanings in the Kyrgyz language. The first refers to human habit, morality and behavior with people. For example, when you say "believer" or "non-believer" in Kyrgyz, it is not clear whether that person believes in religion or God. It is understood whether he is morally good or immoral. This is the general meaning that the public understands. The second meaning is the meaning understood in religious circles, that is, in those who are more or less aware of religion. In this sense, the word faith is understood more accurately.

When state bodies say faith lessons in schools, they mostly mean the first meaning. However, those who want to teach this lesson in schools have taken the second meaning as a basis because they are from the religious environment, that is, mullahs. Therefore, the mullahs saw themselves as secularists in order to teach the faith lesson in schools and started teaching ablution and prayer to children in the faith lesson. Thus, for a while, mullahs taught this subject in schools. But this did not give the desired result. This process has brought about many problems. If the fact that the mullahs did not have enough knowledge about religion created another problem, the fact that faith lessons were not included in every school created another problem. In addition, it is still not clear how this course will be taught in schools providing education in Russian language. The most important thing is that this course does not have an accepted curriculum. The curriculum offered by the Ministry of Education is not accepted by those who are traditional and religious, and on the contrary, the ministry does not accept the curriculum offered by those who are influential in the religious community. For example, Uzbek Haji Chotonov prepared a two-volume "faith lesson" course book to be taught in the faith course and submitted it to the Ministry of Education. However, the book was not accepted by the ministry because it was limited to the worship and ritual parts of Islam.

As a result, the course was taken from the hands of the mullahs and given to men of letters and historians, on the grounds that religion was being taught in faith classes in schools. It is also noted that in some schools this course was taught by physicists and mathematicians. In some schools, the course was left to the initiative of the school principals. So in some schools the faith course was taught in some it was not.

In schools where faith lessons were taught, lessons were taught based on the program offered by the Ministry of Education. The program offered by the Ministry was a program based on customs and traditions. In other words, unlike religion, national customs and traditions were emphasized. For example, children were taught national games, customs practiced in wedding ceremonies, horse equipment, etc. Only in senior grades, there were two-hour lessons that briefly introduced world religions. However, this was not enough to know religions in general.

Since the faith lesson in schools created a lot of controversy in the public, in 2003, the Ministry of Education focused on this lesson again and decided to change the lesson to Adep "decency" lesson. However, only the name of the faith course has changed to decency, and no changes have been made in the program. Therefore, the problems and discussions on this course still continue.

CONCLUSION

Various religious groups that emerged in Kyrgyzstan after independence specifically target young people in their activities. They provided young people with all kinds of opportunities to trap them. As a result, young people who are interested in religion easily fall into the trap of these groups because they cannot learn religion from its true source. While some young people go to madrasahs to learn religion, others go to schools of different religious groups or communities. As a result, people of the same nation have different ideologies. To prevent this, the state has to introduce religion lessons in schools, and Kyrgyz authorities are currently working on this. It is often stated that the best example in this regard is the example of Turkey. Currently, the state is

trying to provide religious education in a controlled way and to raise young people as a generation that loves their homeland and nation.

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