

Field Notes from Kyrgyzstan: Bishkek's New Religious Landscapes

Matthew Derrick
Humboldt State University

I ARRIVED LAST SEPTEMBER in Bishkek, the capital city of Kyrgyzstan, to begin a yearlong sabbatical researching new religious landscapes in this enclave of Central Eurasia. As geographers are wont, I spent those first weeks afoot, familiarizing myself with the city's contours, its boulevards, squares, side streets, and alleyways, along the way gawking at the monumental Mahmud Kashgari (see Figure 1) and other "mega-mosques," as I've taken to call the behemoth temples that have been cropping up in Bishkek



Figure 1.—The monumental Mahmud Kashgari Mosque, reportedly able to accommodate more than 3,000 worshipers, opened in Bishkek in the spring of 2017. (Author photo)

and other post-Soviet Muslim capitals—Kyrgyzstan, like Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, gained its independence upon the dissolution of the USSR in late 1991, and most of its citizens claim at least nominal adherence to Islam.

With nearly one million residents—about one-sixth of Kyrgyzstan’s total population—Bishkek is also home to non-Muslims. Verily, in early October I found myself exploring what is the city’s unofficial Christian quarter, situated in its northwest quadrant. I located first the Orthodox Holy Resurrection Cathedral, then the newish, modest-looking Church of Jesus Christ, and then, even more modest, the Russian Evangelical Baptist Church, but I could not seem to find St. Michael the Archangel Catholic Church, rumored to be somewhere in the vicinity. So, I approached an old man, wobbling down the street, and asked

him, in Russian, if he was aware of the Catholic church’s whereabouts. Nikolai Ilyich, as I came to know the spry guy in his mid-80s (see Figure 2), scratched his chin, thinking, then gestured: “The Russians are that way, the Koreans are that way,” he said, first cocking his hand southward and then angling southeast. Turning eastward, he continued, gesticulating: “The Baptists are that way, and there are some Kyrgyz further over yonder,” and then rotating to face me, “But there are no Germans around here. And I would know—I’m a religious person!”



Figure 2.—The author (at left) and Nikolai Ilyich.

Nikolai Ilyich’s response fascinated me on several levels. First, notice how he conflated ethno-nationality and religious affiliation—this is due to the manner in which group identities became configured in the late Russian Imperial and Soviet eras, a habit that remains common throughout the former Soviet space. Hence, by “Russians” he meant the Orthodox cathedral, which first opened its doors at the height of World War II (though anti-religious, atheistic, Stalin decreed the church’s construction as a way to help win over faithful in the war effort). And by the “Koreans,” he referred to the core group of Evangelical Christians who founded the Church of Christ in the 1990s. His mention of “Baptists” was a nod to ethnic Russians who had abandoned Orthodoxy—and were thereby perhaps slightly less Russian, in his eyes—and formed their own church in the late 1980s. By “some Kyrgyz further over yonder,” he indicated the presence of newly constructed mosques just beyond the fuzzy boundaries of the Christian quarter. And “Germans,” to Nikolai Ilyich and other elders in Bishkek, were representative of the Catholic parish, though, still, he wasn’t sure of their church’s location.

Underpinning Nikolai Ilyich’s mental map is a set of historical-geographic processes that fundamentally shape the meaning of religion in Bishkek and the broader region. For most observers, the assumption is that Kyrgyzstan—along with the other post-Soviet

’Stans—belongs to the so-called “Islamic world.” Indeed, nearly 90 percent of its populace self-identify as Muslim (see Figure 3). But Islam, though arriving in the region in the middle



Figure 3.—A young couple and their nikah (traditional Muslim wedding) at the Dzhuli Mosque, another of the newly constructed “mega-mosques” of Bishkek. (Author photo)

ages via the movement of peoples and ideas along the Silk Road, was not very deeply rooted in society until recent decades. Until the short Soviet century and its attendant modernization policies, the Kyrgyz were, for the most part, nomadic pastoralists who followed customary tribal law, the tenets of Islam subject to centuries-old shamanistic traditions. As such, popular assertions of a post-Soviet Islamic “revival,” a “resurrection,” or a “resurgence” taking place in Kyrgyzstan, implying as they do a return to some idealized premodern past, are woefully inaccurate and, furthermore, serve to inflame fears of religious fundamentalism, radicalization, and an innate aversion to living peaceably with non-Muslims.

Clearly, returning to Nikolai Ilyich, this is not the case. Striking is his public profession of faith, his declaration of belonging to Russian Orthodoxy. In stating to a stranger—and a foreigner at that—“I’m a religious person,” he positions himself not against Muslims or other sorts of Christians, but rather amongst a motley stead of faithful. This community includes Muslim (and non-Muslim) Kyrgyz. It includes ethnic Koreans, who endured forced migration by Soviet officials in the 1930s from the Russian Far East to the Central Asian steppe. It includes ethnic Germans, who in the late-eighteenth century were invited by Catherine the Great to farm Russia’s lower Volga area and then, amid the violence of World War II, were forcibly relocated by Stalin to Kazakh and Kyrgyz lands. And it includes multiple other ethnic and religious groups who claim Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, as their home. As a multiethnic, interfaith community, their contemporary religious expression is conditioned not so much by some return to primordial, old-time religion, but rather by a shared Soviet and post-Soviet experience, the age-old search for transcendence (see Figure 4).

I eventually found the Catholic church and thereafter began regularly attending Sunday mass (see Figure 5). What initially struck me, in addition to the simple beauty of the modest temple, was the diversity of the parish. The church may have been founded by exiled Russian Germans in the late 1960s, but today few of them or their kin remain; in the wake of the Soviet Union’s collapse, most ethnic Germans in the area left Kyrgyzstan, accepting Germany’s offer for repatriation. Today, the parish is populated by Russians, Kyrgyz, Koreans, Indians, Africans, Filipinos, European and North American expatriates, and other cultural groups—truly a catholic gathering. Among their numbers is at least one California geographer. By the time you read this posting from the field, I will be baptized into the Church, becoming a Catholic like my Volga German ancestors.

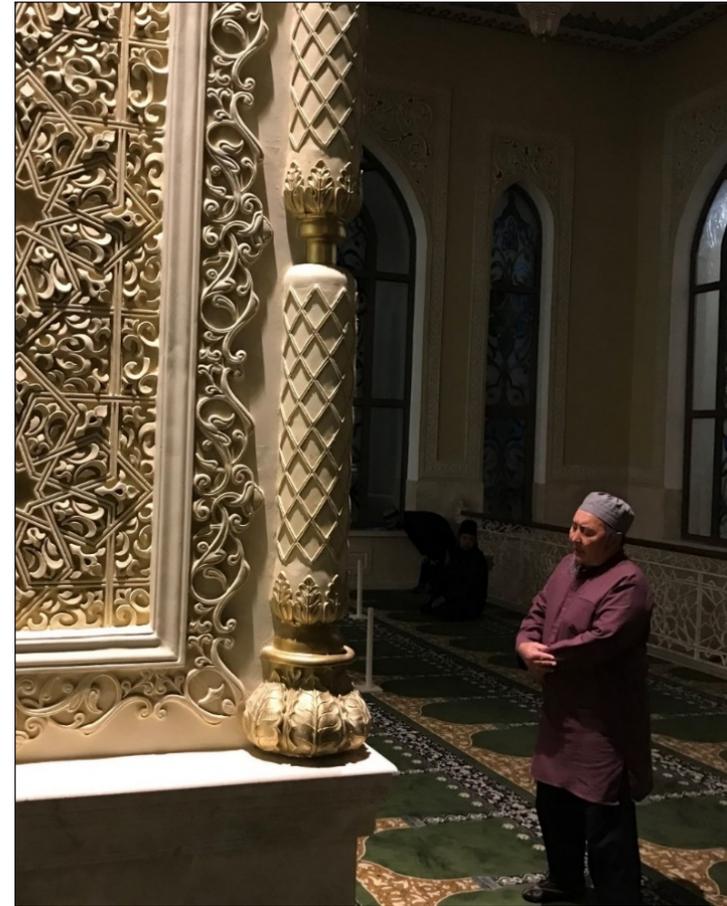


Figure 4.—A man prays at Mahmud Kashgari. (Author photo)



Figure 5.—Sunday mass at St. Michael the Archangel Catholic Church. (Author photo)

An associate professor of geography at Humboldt State University, Matthew Derrick is co-editor of The California Geographer as well as vice president of the California Geographical Society. He spent the 2017–18 academic year as a Fulbright Scholar in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, where he conducted research on new religious landscapes and taught political geography at the American University of Central Asia.