Acta Slavica Iaponica, Tomus 25, pp. 135-161

Christian Movements in Central Asia: Managing a Religious Minority in Soviet Times

Sébastien Peyrouse

For many centuries, the five Central Asian republics have been traditionally Muslim spaces, although Islam has not been as deeply rooted in either the South, Turkestan, or in the northern, Kazakh steppes. Since the 18th century, Christian minorities have also been present. All the three main denominations (Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant) have been firmly entrenched since Tsarist times, and each has its own history and national specificities. With the arrival of Polish, Byelorussian and German peasants during the colonial advance into Turkestan, the region's first protestant and catholic communities were formed. In the 20th century, Christianity's diversity in Central Asia was amplified thanks to the diversity of nationalities existing throughout the Soviet Union and the area's role as a deportation zone. Although Russians were by and large in the majority, regions such as Kazakhstan were distinctive because of the presence there of Germans and Poles. Thus, in addition to the Russian Orthodox Church and small groups of Old-Believers, all the main Christian denominations were represented: Catholics, Lutherans, Baptists, Seventh Day Adventists, Mennonites, Pentecostals, Presbyterians, and Jehovah's Witnesses.

The Christians living in Central Asia represent an exceptional case. Along with some in Azerbaijan, they are the only Christians to have conjoined a Soviet experience of militant state atheism and that of being a religious (and national) minority within Muslim space. This article aims to analyze the specificity of Christianity in Central Asia during the Soviet regime by looking at how central political power dealt with religions both according to the local context of Central Asia's "colonial" character, and to changes in its policies toward nationalities.[1] This study thus hopes to shed light on the diversity of religious policies during the Soviet regime, which resulted in differentiating the positions of confessions depending on their degree of subordination to power, the image they had or did not have of "national religion," and their relations to fellow coreligionists abroad. Much is known about the situation of Central Asian Islam during the Soviet period.[2] Starting with the premise that a minor faith can be just as pertinent for understanding a region's history, this article hopes to provide a contribution towards a better understanding of the minority religions of Central Asia.

1 T. Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).

2 A. Khalid, *Islam After Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

The Authorities' Indecision in Relation to Christianity in Central Asia in the 1920s and 1930s

On January 23 1918, legislation was adopted making official the secular policies the new Bolshevik power was to impose: the Church was henceforth separated from both the state and school. The true shape of Soviet religious policy formed during the 1920s. In 1929, an amendment to the Constitution, which until then had banned religious propaganda, added the right to freedom of religion and the right to anti-religious propaganda. This legal development translated in reality as the suppression of the right to religious instruction, which had been possible until then, if difficult. A law on religious associations, adopted April 8 1929, also considerably restricted activities essential to the life of parishes and religious congregations. On October 1st of the same year, a decree from the People's Commissariat for the Interior stipulated that religious ministers must henceforth be registered by the government, thereby giving the authorities complete control over the nomination of religious personnel. The new Constitution of 1936, for its part, restricted the freedom of all religions to worshipping while reaffirming the right to engage in anti-religious propaganda.[3]

As early as 1918, Bolshevik propaganda embarked on a ruthless anti-religion campaign, although in reality day-to-day politics was stamped by continual uncertainty as the Soviet authorities hesitated between recognizing and repressing religious reality.[4] The authorities were compelled to deal with realities – geographic, economic, and social – that refused to yield to their discourses. After the Bolsheviks seized power, religious policy developed in a variety of forms, depending on factors such as, for example, the degree of control held over territories of the former empire. Indeed, in the 1920s, the new Bolshevik regime had less leeway in Central Asia than in Russia, due partly to its geographical distance and the difficulties experienced in ending the Basmatchis revolts. The local authorities and party organs were above all concerned to secure full economic control of the region, to exit from post-revolutionary economic crisis, to strengthen governance structures, and to reinforce their authority.

It soon turned out that the regime's atheist policy would be a long-term undertaking. Some Communist party members even considered that, in the conditions of the 1920s, the policy itself was unrealistic. So, in spite of the considerable zeal of the "new converts," anti-religious policy did not on the whole attract many militants. Further, even though atheist structures were

3 R. Tobias, *Communist Christian Encounter in East Europe* (Indianapolis: School of Religion Press, 1956), p. 242.

4 For further details on the evolution of relations between the religious administration and the government, see W. Sawatsky, "Religious Administration and Modernization," in D.J. Dunn, ed., *Religion and Modernization in the Soviet Union* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1977), pp. 60-104.

the same throughout Soviet territory, they did not everywhere yield the expected results. In Central Asia, atheist militants paradoxically experienced the strong sense of isolation and helplessness that Orthodox missionaries had in tsarist times.[5] In 1924, an organization that prefigured the future League of the Militant Godless was created in Uzbekistan, but it only really became active in 1927.[6] A museum of atheism was opened in Tashkent in 1929.[7] And the first atheist publications written in the local language were published around the decade's end. The government then came to give more open expressions of support for atheism in the 1930s, but this in no way solved the shortfall of workers; the number of members of the League of the Militant Godless was never large, and the means required for an effective propaganda campaign did not extend as far as peripheral regions. According to official figures, in 1940, there were some 1,200 atheist sections spread throughout Central Asia, but they counted no more than 27,000 members.[8]

Orthodoxy was the chief target of the Bolshevik regime's atheist attacks. The Archbishop of Tashkent and Turkestan, Innocent, was resolutely opposed to any change in the Church.[9] At the Second Congress of the Eparchic Directorate in June 1918, he proclaimed the independence of the Orthodox Church of Turkestan and defined new rules for the priests of the region.[10] Under his influence, the religious authorities decided to create two independent bishoprics, one for the churches of the Semirechie, with its see in Vernyi (future Alma-Ata),[11] and another for the rest of Turkestan. However, Innocent also had to

5 S. Peyrouse, "Les missions orthodoxes entre pouvoir tsariste et allogènes. Un exemple des ambiguïtés de la politique coloniale russe dans les steppes kazakhes," *Cahiers du monde russe* 45:1-2 (2004), pp. 109-135; T. Uyama, "A Particularist Empire: The Russian Policies of Christianization and Military Conscription in Central Asia," in T. Uyama, ed., *Empire, Islam, and Politics in Central Eurasia,* Slavic Eurasian Studies no. 14 (Sapporo: Slavic Research Center, 2007), pp. 23-63.

6 N.H. Kolemasova, "Evoliutsiia khristianskogo sektantstva v regione traditsionnogo rasprostraneniia islama (na materialakh Uzbekskoi SSR)." Doctoral thesis (Tashkent, 1981), p. 126.

7 A. Abdusamedov, A. Artykov, "Korennoe preobrazovanie sotsial'noi i dukhovnoi zhizni narodov Sovetskogo Vostoka i pobeda massovogo ateizma," *Voprosy nauchnogo ateizma* 22 (1978), p. 98.

8 M. Haghayeghi, *Islam and Politics in Central Asia* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), p. 25.

9 On the persecutions of the Orthodox Church by the new regime throughout the USSR, see L. Regel'son, *Tragediia russkoi tserkvi, 1917-1945* (Paris: YMCA, 1977); J. Curtiss, *The Russian Church and the Soviet State, 1917-1950* (Boston: Little Brown & Co, 1953).

10 E.A. Muzarenko, "Evoliutsiia russkogo pravoslaviia v usloviiakh Srednei Azii." Doctoral thesis (Tashkent, 1990), p. 86.

11 No bishop could hold the eparchy until 1927. The see also remained vacant between 1935 and 1945: see *Svet pravoslaviia v Kazakhstane* 4:71 (2000), pp. 31-32; G. Seide, "Die Russisch-Orthodoxe Kirche in Sibirien und Mittelasien seit dem Zweiten Weltkrieg. Ihre diözesen und Gemeinden," *Ostkirchliche Studien* 32:2/3 (1983), p. 155.

deal with the ever growing influence of the Living Church (*Zhivaia tserkov'*).[12] Made up of priests who had accepted to support the Soviet regime to prevent Orthodoxy from disappearing, the Living Church provoked virulent opposition among clergy members intent on fighting the new government's policies. After the resignation of the Patriarch of Russia, Tikhon, who was imprisoned for "anti-Soviet activities," the priests of the movement of the Living Church set up a new ecclesiastical administration and placed bishop Antonin at its head. The schism was made public on 8 May 1922.[13] In 1923 the Living Church opposed Innocent's decision to acquire autonomy and managed to displace him.[14] The partisans of Patriarch Tikhon then definitively lost their hold over Central Asia when the region's new bishop, Nikolai Koblov, condemned so-called anti-Soviet activities.

In 1923, repressive measures were begun against the Central Asian Orthodox Church, about five years later than in Russia. The Church was dispossessed of many of its places of worship. Eleven churches out of twenty-eight were closed in Turkmenistan (six alone in the city of Krasnovodsk), and seven out of eleven in Samarkand; one-hundred buildings were seized in the region of the Syr-Daria;[15] and cathedrals, such as for example the Cathedral of Alma-Ata, became targets because of the symbolic power they possessed.[16] The coming into force of the law of 1929 and then of the 1936 Constitution was accompanied by numerous Church closures and massive arrests of religious members. Orthodoxy remained the primary target: in 1917, the Empire counted 39,530 actively used Churches. In 1936, there were no more than 14,090, and in 1940 only 950.[17] Out of the 66,000 odd members of the Orthodox clergy before the Revolution, only 6,500 remained on the eve of the Second World War.[18]

---

12 On the history of the Living Church in the USSR, see W.C. Fletcher, *A Study in Survival: The Church in Russia 1927-1943* (London, S.P. C.K., 1965); P. Walters, "The Living Church, 1922-1946," *Religion in Communist Lands* 4 (1978), pp. 235-243.

13 In the 1930s, the Living Church was despite everything just as subject to purges and persecutions as other movements. It gradually declined in importance, particularly after Stalin recognized Patriarch Sergey, and broke up definitively at the war's end. E. Roslof, *Red Priests: Renovationism, Russian Orthodoxy, and Revolution, 1905-1946* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002).

14 O. Valisl'eva, ed., *Russkaia pravoslavnaia tserkov' i kommunisticheskoe gosudarstvo, 1917-1941. Dokumenty i fotomaterialy* (Moscow: Bibleisko-Bogoslovskii Institut sv. apostola Andreia, 1996).

15 Muzarenko, *Evoliutsiia russkogo pravoslaviia*, p. 101. On the Church in Central Asia, see Iu.F. Buriakov, L.I. Zhukova, V.N. Proskurin, "K istorii khristianstva v Srednei Azii," in *K istorii khristianstva v Srednei Azii (XIX-XX vv.)* (Tashkent, 1998), pp. 5-46.

16 For instance, the newspaper *Sovetskaia step'* published a column entitled "Let's close the cathedral" in which the author considered possible transformations of this edifice into more "soviet" uses, see, *Sovetskaia step'*, 15 September 1929, 4, 6, 7 and 17 October, 1929, 1 November, 1929.

17 M.I. Odintsov, ed., *Religioznye organizatsii v SSSR nakanune i v gody Velikoi Otechestvennoi Voiny, 1941-1945 gg*. (Moscow: 1995), pp. 44-45.

18 Iu.Iu. Valisl'eva, ed., *Russkaia pravoslavnaia tserkov' v politike sovetskogo gosudarstva v 1943-1948* (Moscow: RAN, 2001).

For other Christian movements, in particular those of Protestant origin, their fate in Central Asia was more pleasant than in the rest of the Soviet Union. Indeed in the 1920s, some Protestant denominations actually blossomed. New communities of Mennonites, Seventh Day Adventists, and Jehovah's Witnesses formed. The new wave of immigration caused by the Civil War and its impact on country areas were favorable to the expansion of Protestant movements. Believers flowed into Central Asia from all around Russia. The conversion of many Orthodox members, anxious to avoid the persecutions, bolstered this Protestant expansion. Moreover, the most proselytizing strains, like the Baptists, embarked on campaigns to convert the native populations of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The relative state of religious tolerance in Central Asia also enabled the development of movements of Russian origin such as the Old-Believers, but also the *molokans, molokans-priguny, khlisty, khristovovery* and *dukhobory*. However, their numbers remained more modest than those of the Protestants and their communities were sparsely scattered.

The period of tolerance towards Protestant movements was temporary and partial. The first ideological interferences in religious life and trials against Baptists began in the mid-1920s.[19] Other Christian movements, in particular the Catholic or Armenian "national" Churches suffered the same checks in their progress. Their places of worship were closed and most of the Church hierarchy was deported. The Lutheran Church suffered a relatively rapid decline, in spite of the fact that, at their 1924 synod, they declared their allegiance to the authorities. The persecutions did not immediately provoke any generalized resistance, but some of the faithful started organizing themselves against the regime. One example of this was provided by an independent movement called the "reformed Adventists" (*adventisty-reformisty*) which was created in 1936 and managed to develop a network throughout the entire Soviet Union. In Central Asia, all the important churches, in particular those in the capitals, were closed; the Baptist place of worship in Alma-Ata was closed in 1930 and that of Tashkent in 1932.[20] The clergy had been decimated and those of them left had their right to celebrate church services removed.

In the first years of the regime, the Bolsheviks tried to ally themselves with Muslim revolutionaries and nationalist leaders close to the Jadid movement, but this policy altered in the 1920s. The relative tolerance that had existed between Islam and Bolshevism abruptly came to an end with the tactical reversal of Soviet national policy.[21] The first attacks against Central Asian Islam took place during a controversy about "bourgeois nationalism" and "Sultan

19 *Istoriia evangel'skikh khristian-baptistov v SSSR* (Moscow: izd. Vsesoiuznogo Soveta Evangel'skikh khristian-baptistov, 1989), p. 499.

20 "Piatidesiatiletie karasuiskoi tserkvi evangel'skikh khristian baptistov goroda Tashkenta" (1946 g.-1996 g.), Referat, 27 (April 1996), p. 3, an unpublished document given by the Baptist Church of Tashkent.

21 On that topic, see H. Carrère d'Encausse, *Le grand défi. Bolcheviks et nation de 1917 à 1930* (Paris: Flammarion, 1987).

Galievist revisionism,"[22] several years after the persecutions against Orthodoxy had begun in Russia. In 1924, as soon as the Basmachi movement had been weakened, Koranic and customary tribunals were suppressed; four years later, 15,000 religious primary schools were closed.[23] The policy of unveiling women (*hudjum*)[24] was at maximum intensity in 1926-27. The banning of polygamy and of purchasing brides (*kalym*) violated some deeply-ingrained Central Asian traditions that were considered as much "national" as religious.[25] A certain tolerance survived toward the Muslim clergy.[26]

At the turn of the 1920s and 1930s, the change was meant to be radical. The policy of the "Great Turn" (*Velikii perelom*) marked the entry of the Soviet Union into Stalinism. Having failed to strengthen the undeveloped atheist organizations, Stalin moved to lay blame on local executives, whom he accused of dominating the bureaucratic machinery and of putting a brake on activities against religion. The struggle against Islam was officially declared, resulting in the closing of most mosques (from 26,000 in 1912 to only a thousand in 1941), the burning of books written in Arabic, the hunting down of clergy (often on grounds of spying for Japan), and the exclusion of Muslim followers from local Communist Parties. In 1934, the last *waqf* were requisitioned.[27] Like the Orthodox Church, Islam found itself accused of having been a linchpin of the tsarist government and of having collaborated with it in the counter-revolutionary effort.

The first decades of the Soviet power thus revealed the violence of atheist ideology and how it put the repressive apparatus at its service. The relatively relaxed situation in Central Asia lasted only until the start of the 1920s, before coming to resemble that already established in the other republics. Although it was different from the rest of the Union, and its atheist organizations particularly weak, Central Asia followed the same overall evolution. After a period of respite in the 1920s, repressive measures against Christianity and Islam gathered pace throughout the 1930s. Churches nearly ceased to exist on the institutional level and the clergy was massively deported.

---

22 For further details, see A. Bennigsen, C. Lemercier-Quelquejay, *Sultan Galiev, le père de la révolution tiers-mondiste* (Paris: Fayard, 1986).

23 On the eve of the Revolution there were 12,000 mosques and 15,000 mullahs in Turkestan. Abdusamedov, Artykov, "Korennoe preobrazovanie sotsial'noi i dukhovnoi zhizni," p. 96.

24 M. Kamp, *The New Woman in Uzbekistan: Islam, Modernity and Unveiling Under Communism* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006); D. Northrop, *Veiled Empire: Gender & Power in Stalinist Central Asia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004).

25 For further details, see S. Keller, *To Moscow, Not Mecca: The Soviet Campaign Against Islam in Central Asia, 1917-1941* (Westport: Praeger, 2001).

26 A.V. Malashenko, "Religious and Political Change in Soviet Moslem Regions," in V. Naumkin, *State, Religion and Society: A Post-Soviet Critique* (Ithaca Press: Reading, 1993), p. 164.

27 R. Pipes, "Muslims of Central Asia, Trends and Prospects," *Middle East Journal* 9:2 (1955), pp. 147-162 and pp. 295-308.

The Post-World War II Order

With the onset of World War II, a period of relative religious tolerance began in the Soviet Union. After the Nazi troops entered Soviet territory on June 22, 1941, a period of national reconciliation and unity contributed to weakening atheist propaganda. The League of the Militant Godless was disbanded, anti-religious publications stopped, and atheist museums closed their doors. However, this liberalization only concerned the so-called "national" religions – those that lent praise to a national past that was more helpful than Soviet patriotism in mobilizing resistance against the Nazi invader. Lutheranism was banned from this revival of religion because Soviet Germans were generally accused of betrayal. And due to its strong ties with the West, Catholicism was also excluded. In 1944, the Armenian Church obtained the right to re-open seminars, ordinate priests, elect new catholicos, and recover certain places of worship in the Armenian SSR; however, in Central Asia, where many tens of thousands of Armenians lived, the situation of the Church failed to improve.

Orthodoxy was the first to benefit from the authorities' newfound tolerance, which granted it a quasi-concordat. On September 4, 1943, Stalin received the three highest dignitaries of the church; later in the same year, an Episcopal synod gathered for the first time since 1917, obtained authorization to nominate a new patriarch, Sergey, and published a periodical, *Zhurnal moskovskoi patriarkhii*. The organizational framework of the Orthodox Church was restored: bishops were recognized as administrative units and the church once again had the right to possess means of transportation, to make objects of worship, and to collect incomes. In 1946, the seminaries reopened. This reversal on religion also benefited Islam. As early as 1942, the mufti of European Russia, A. Rasulaev, took the initiative to renew ties with the political power. Stalin chose to normalize relations with Islam in exchange for support in the war effort. Several spiritual Boards were created, in particular one for the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan, founded in October 1943 with a see in Tashkent.[28] Islam was also granted permission to open the madrassah Mir-i Arab in Bukhara in 1945 and a number of mosques.[29]

The loosening of repressive measures was less of a reality in Central Asia. In the Kremlin's eyes, the area seemed much less threatened by Nazi invasion than the European Soviet Republics or the Caucasus. As a result, it was only towards the end of the war that Christian minorities benefited from this

28 Also created in 1944 were the Spiritual Board of the Shia Muslims and of the Sunni Muslims from Transcaucasia, North Caucasia and Dagestan. The Board of European Russia and Siberia took over from the one created by Catherine II in 1783. The administration of official Islam concerned only the Sunni and the duodecimal Shia. The Ismaelians, the Bahais, the Gholats and the Yezidis did not have any recognized Soviet structure.

29 Y. Ro'i, *Islam in the Soviet Union: From World War II to Perestroika* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

relative tolerance.[30] Religious communities became aware of the advantages they could gain from calling to fight against Nazi Germany, so in 1944-45 in particular many requests for officialization were submitted to the Soviet authorities. Such requests commonly made pleas for church registration so they could "pray for the victory against the enemy."[31] At the war's end, the state directed administrative authorities not to hinder official priests who wished to practice in cities without church or prayer house.[32] However, it was not until many years later that the situation of the Christian movements in Central Asia really began to stabilize.

The war over, religion was no longer of interest to the authorities, and, starting already in September 1944, Stalin's tone changed. The fast emerging cold war logic meant the regime could once again combat religion without having to justify its policies on the international stage. 1947 was particularly stamped by a resurgence of anti-religious policy. The banning of believers from state institutions and the Party, the increasing severity of criticisms in the newspapers, and the creation of a society called *Znanie* to replace the League of the Godless Militants, presaged the tightening of measures to come. At the same time, there was also a revival of academic atheism, of which B. Bonch-Bruevich was the spearhead.[33]

The Soviet authorities divided religions and cults of the USSR into three categories, and were thereby able to create some variability in the liberties granted to each. The first category was comprised solely of the Orthodox Church. It came under the supervision of the Council for the Affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church, which the Council of People's Commissars created in September 1943. All the other Christian churches and recognized religions (Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, etc.) came under the jurisdiction of the Council for Religious Affairs of non-Orthodox faiths, formed in May 1944.[34] Just like their predecessors, both councils oversaw the correct implementation of legislation and facilitated dialogue between the state and religious institutions. A third

30 Much evidence gathered during interviews in the different republics of Central Asia with aged people showed they had strong reservations concerning a genuine and considerable change in the religious policy during World War II.

31 Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Pavlodarskoi oblasti, f. 646, op. 1, d. 553, l. 61; quoted in *Iz istorii russkoi pravoslavnoi tserkvi v Pavlodarskom Priirtysh'e. Sbornik dokumentov* (Pavlodar: NPF "EKO," 1999), p. 156.

32 A letter written by the delegate to the Council for the Religious Affairs of the Orthodox Church to the Council of Ministers of the Kazakh SSR was distributed on that subject at the end of 1947. Ibid., pp. 175-176.

33 For a history of atheism and propaganda in the Soviet Union, see D. Powell, *Antireligious Propaganda in the Soviet Union: A Study of Mass Persuasion* (Cambridge, Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1975); D.V. Pospielovsky, *A History of Marxist-Leninist Atheism and Soviet Antireligious Policies* (London, Macmillan Press, 1987), p. 70.

34 O. Luchterhandt, "The Council for Religious Affairs," in S.P. Ramet, ed., *Religious Policy in the Soviet Union* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 57.

and final category included all religions not recognized by the state which the authorities wanted to combat in an official and efficient manner. The NKVD (to become the KGB in 1954) was given the responsibility for controlling and eradicating them.

The existence of numerous Protestant denominations was a strong cause of concern for the authorities, since they had a well-known propensity for proselytism. As soon as the war ended, the Soviet state decided to bring together certain influential Protestant groups into a single organization, which was officially sanctioned in exchange for collaboration. In October 1944, a Congress held in Moscow sealed a union between Evangelists and Baptist Christians, both of whom were the most numerous and widespread in Soviet territory.[35] In the light of considerable presence of both denominations in Kazakhstan, the Kazakhstani delegates were particularly numerous.[36] The Baptist and Evangelist groups of the city and the *oblast* of Tashkent were the first to recognize this union, followed by all of the Central Asian communities. The Union of the Evangelist and Baptist Christians attempted to attract other Protestant denominations on the pretext of cultural and theological similarities: in August 1945, the Pentecostalists also joined the Union, and then, in 1963, after long years of debate, most of the Brethren Mennonite communities did so as well.[37]

However, the government could not bring together all of these churches and denominations. The Catholic, Lutheran, and Armenian churches remained largely separate, with no official registration or places of worship anywhere in Central Asia, but still under the control of this same Council for Religious Affairs. The Council also dealt with the Old-Believers and other Russian schismatic movements, whose membership lived mainly in Siberia and Kazakhstan but had been weakened by the persecutions carried out in the 1930s.[38] There were a few remaining movements that the state refused to recognize. Some, like the Jehovah's Witnesses, were ruled out from registering due to their openly anti-communist theses.[39] Witness groups were discovered by chance in some country regions, notably in Kazakhstan. They had set up clandestine accommodation to celebrate worships, since they refused to attend Orthodox churches, and some even engaged in proselytizing actions.[40] The "True Orthodox Christians" (*istinno-pravoslavnye khristiane*), a movement emergent under the Soviet regime whose members chose to lead an itinerant life and opted for

35 M. Bourdeaux, *Religious Ferment in Russia. Protestant Opposition to Soviet Religious Policy* (London–Melbourne–Toronto–New York: Macmillan, St Martin's Press, 1968), p. 5.

36 *Bratskii vestnik* 1 (1945), p. 11.

37 *Glaube in der Zweiten Welt* 7-8 (1989), p. 26.

38 C. Lane, *Christian Religion in the Soviet Union. A Sociological Study* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1978), pp. 115-120.

39 "Opyt nauchno-issledovatel'skoi raboty mezhvuzovskoi kafedry nauchnogo ateizma," *Voprosy nauchnogo ateizma* 15 (1973), p. 240.

40 F. Fedorenko, *Sekty, ikh vera i dela* (Moscow: Politicheskaia literatura, 1965), p. 207; W.C. Fletcher, *L'Église clandestine en Union soviétique* (Paris: Alain Moreau, 1972), p. 137.

complete withdrawal from society, constituted a similar case. The "Children of God" (*Bozh'i deti*) were theologically close to the True Orthodox Christians, and developed mainly in Kazakhstan. Its followers wholly rejected all aspects of this world, including even music instruments, and refused to talk to anyone outside the movement.[41]

The development of religion in Central Asia was thus quite distinct from that of European Russia. While in the latter Christianity enjoyed widespread recognition during the war and later had to endure more difficult years, in Central Asia, after having been through the inconveniences of a peripheral situation during the war, religion came to discover its benefits after the war.[42] This fact particularly affected the Orthodox Church, which derived little benefit from the years 1943-46, but could continue its reconstruction more peacefully than its coreligionists from Russia. The eparchy of Tashkent and Central Asia re-opened in 1947. Some regional churches were authorized and priests appointed to replace the religious staff which had been decimated.[43] On a local level, the opening sometimes occurred so late that the population did not have the time to enjoy it. For instance, the local administration authorized the reconstruction of the church in Samarkand, but stopped the building work after the war.[44] In Turkmenistan, a few communities experienced noticeably renewed activity and the 1948 earthquake caused a wave of church reconstructions.[45]

The region's number of religious Christian communities increased considerably during the war due to the deportation of "punished peoples." That villages of deported persons were so remote and their situation so completely isolated (Germans did not have the right to settle in Kazakhstani cities before 1955) provided some compensation at a religious level. Although churches were not officially sanctioned, fewer controls existed due to the absence of any authorized prayer houses. This absence did not present any problems for the Protestants, who often allocated to laymen an important part in the life of the parish. Catholicism found itself in a similar situation. Forced to cease all its activities in Central Asia in the aftermath of the revolution, the Catholic Church, trying to survive, took advantage of the isolation of Germans and Poles, especially in northern Kazakhstan. After Stalin's death, thousands of prisoners were liberated, among whom were some Catholic priests who returned to the area and clandestinely reorganized the parishes. Although they were not officially sanctioned, the priests in these remote regions had the benefit of rela-

41 The movement was to be banned and its leaders sentenced in 1958; N. Struve, *Les chrétiens d'URSS* (Paris: Seuil, 1964), p. 218.

42 W. Kolarz, *Religion in the Soviet Union* (London: Macmillan, 1961), pp. 84-87.

43 *Zhurnal moskovskoi patriarkhii* 10 (1946), p. 62 and 12 (1946), p. 44.

44 Muzarenko, *Evoliutsiia russkogo pravoslaviia,* p. 104.

45 *Zhurnal moskovskoi patriarkhii* 2 (1958), p. 17.

tively tolerant authorities and operated until the 1960s at which time they, too, incurred the same inconveniences as other underground parishes.[46]

Being in a peripheral situation, then, seems to have created a climate in Central Asia in which Christian religious repression was fairly lax. So despite renewed attempts at atheist discourse, the southern republics enjoyed greater flexibility in relation to the authorities than in the USSR's Russian or the European republics. While no concessions were ever officially made, either to the German minority, or to Catholicism – that symbol of the West – the Orthodox Church and certain Protestant movements, such as the Baptists, managed to retain the few advantages they had won. Yet, this is perhaps partially due to the fact that, in the eyes of the authorities, the Christian churches of Central Asia had very little significance. Not only did they form a minority compared to Islam, the state's main religious partner in Central Asia, but these Christians were also less visible to foreign observers than those of the European regions of the USSR. They were isolated, unable to file protest and thus proportionally less listened to.

So, after more than thirty years of the Soviet regime, the authorities had come to insist on not treating religion as a single bloc against which a uniform policy of exclusion would suffice. Policies varied depending on many factors: whether the religion was in a more easily controlled central region or a peripheral region, which were generally more subject to the weight of tradition and the goodwill of local administrations; whether it was a less-practiced religion, such as Buddhism, or Islam and Orthodoxy, which were more difficult to control; and, finally, policy was alert to intra-denominational tendencies, which varied from dissidence to open political rallying.

The Processes of Regional and Denominational Differentiation under Khrushchev

The Renewal of Atheist Campaigns

Stalin's death in March 1953 marked a fundamental turning point in the history of the Soviet Union. Considered until then as a totalitarian system, the USSR slowly drifted toward an authoritarian and police regime. The new secretary of the Communist Party, Nikita Khrushchev, initiated a partial process of de-Stalinization during the 20th Congress in 1956. But although this process questioned the excesses of Stalinism, it did not question the functioning of the regime itself. So, while an end was put to mass repressions, there was at the same time an attempt to "return to Leninism," accompanied by all of the myths inherent in such a notion, among them the atheist desire to get rid of religion. The end of the Stalin years and the transition prior to Khrushchev's rise to power already indicated the new tightening of policy toward religion.

46 *W stepie dalekim: Polacy w Kazachstanie; V stepi dalekoi: Poliaki v Kazakhstane* (Poznań–Almaty: Wystawa, 1997), pp. 77-79.

As early as summer 1954, a potent atheist campaign was organized in rural areas, but the CPSU Central Committee stopped it after only four months. In Kazakhstan, anti-religious periodicals denounced the formation of new religious communities around displaced populations and "punished peoples."[47]

In 1959, the first Secretary of the Communist Party decided to launch a new campaign against religion, giving himself five years to force out religion from Soviet society and promising to show soon to the world the "last Christian in the USSR." In 1960, V. Kuroyedov, who remained in office until 1985, replaced G.G. Karpov as the President of the Council for the Affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church. Khrushchev confirmed this political line at the 22nd Congress of the CPSU in 1961. Within a few years Orthodoxy lost most of the rights it had managed to acquire during World War II. Throughout the USSR, authorities closed about 11,000 out of 20,000 places of worship, 53 out of 66 monasteries, and five out of the eight Orthodox seminaries.[48] The campaign particularly targeted young people, whom the authorities wanted to keep away from religion. The entry of the young into religion was controlled. In April 1962, the 14th Congress of the Komsomols restricted the right to freedom of conscience to adults alone. Thus, parents providing a religious education to their children could be deprived of custodial rights.[49]

The practice and the process of denigrating religion had changed since Stalinist-era terror. Although there was still an atheist militancy, the authorities feared popular reaction. As a result, they sometimes directly targeted believers, but preferred to lobby accusations in indirect ways, often, for instance, by denouncing church corruption cases. They also made use of apostate priests to demonstrate the church's institutional deviancy, they charged religious communities with being profitable ventures, and accused certain priests of such irreparable evils as war-time collaboration with the Nazis.[50] The local press disseminated remarks made by persons belonging to the religious order, ministers or mere believers who had converted to atheism. These remarks made possible the closing of places of worship without any legal procedure.[51] The press presented most of the small denominations as a dense set of "Christian sects" and issued blanket accusations of corruption and anti-Sovietism.[52]

47 See N. Dzhandil'din, "Sovershenstvovat' formy i metody ideologicheskoi raboty," *Partiinaia zhizn' Kazakhstana* 5 (1963), p. 11. Also see *Pravda Vostoka* 26 (September 1962), which reported the persistence of cults and sacraments, including among persons involved in the Party's structures.

48 W. van den Bercken, *Ideology and Atheism in the Soviet Union* (Berlin, New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1989), p. 114; M. Bourdeaux, "The Black Quinquennium: The Russian Orthodox Church 1959-1964," *Religion in Communist Lands* 1-2 (1981), pp. 18-23.

49 See "Eure Kinder werden weggenommen," *Glaube in der Zweiten Welt* 9 (1984), p. 10.

50 *Bloknot Agitatora* 25 (1961), p. 57; *Pravda Vostoka*, 16 February 1961.

51 10,000 churches were slated to be closed during the last four years of Khrushchev's rule. See Bourdeaux, *Religious Ferment in Russia*, p. 13.

52 *Kazakhstanskaia pravda* 17 February 1963, p. 4; "Christian Churches and Sects in Central Asia and Kazakhstan," *Central Asian Review* 4 (1963), pp. 346-347.

Specific Developments in the Central Asian Context

Regarding policies on nationalities, Khrushchev's aim was to revive the policy of indigenization and to have the Central Asian Muslim dignitaries take part in his foreign policy. But the new atheist campaign by no means spared Islam. Between 1958 and 1965, the number of authorized mosques in Central Asia dropped from 1,500 to 500 and more than a thousand anti-Islamic books were published during the same period.[53] In Central Asia, Christianity, not Islam, was eventually relatively more protected, although it did not escape the new wave of repression.

Orthodoxy was one of the first targets. Fourteen churches were closed in Kyrgyzia and Tajikistan during the Khrushchev era.[54] At the beginning of the 1960s, only four churches existed in Turkmenistan, one each in Ashkhabad, Chardzhou, Krasnovodsk, and Mary.[55] As of November 1959, the archbishop of Tashkent was no longer permitted to organize charities, which official Soviet legislation now banned. In December 1961, a radical measure was put forward by the Uzbek delegate to the Council for the Affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church, Sh. Shirinbaev: the abolition of the eparchy of Tashkent and Central Asia.[56] This measure was not followed-up on, but a campaign was later launched in the local press against allegedly corrupt priests. The Catholic Church, which was trying to recover from the severe blows it had been dealt since the Revolution, was forced to close the few parishes that until this point it had unofficially been permitted to run, in particular in Kazakhstan.[57]

Nevertheless, Central Asian churches on the whole were less affected by the atheist campaign than Russian ones, due to distance and the specific situation of this region. Kazakhstan was home to an exiled German minority that between 1955 and 1960 managed to regain some its rights. The republic was also earmarked for a huge virgin-land clearance project. So, the numbers of Russians continued to increase. From 1954 onwards, more than two million "volunteers" flew in and cleared twenty-five million hectares over six years.[58] This program only strengthened the national reality of the republic. Deported peoples were already responsible for exploiting the coal and copper mines of the regions of Karaganda and Dzhezkazgan, while the Gulag (*steplag*) allowed the exploitation of the steppes in the north. To these prisoners can be added

53 A. Bennigsen, C. Lemercier-Quelquejay, *Les musulmans oubliés: l'Islam en Union soviétique* (Paris: Maspero, 1981), p. 188.

54 A speech by Vladimir, the archbishop of Tashkent and Central Asia, at the celebration of the 125th anniversary of the Orthodox eparchy of Tashkent, 1996 (unpublished document given to the author by the episcopate of Central Asia).

55 A.M. Chiperis, "Sovremennoe sektantstvo v Turkmenskoi SSR," *Izvestiia Akademii nauk turkmenskoi SSR* (*Seriia obshchestvennykh nauk*), 5 (1964), p. 75.

56 Muzarenko, *Evoliutsiia russkogo pravoslaviia*, p. 107.

57 *W stepie dalekim: Polacy w Kazachstanie*, p. 83.

58 M. Pohl, "The Virgin Lands Between Memory and Forgetting: People and Transformation in the Soviet Union, 1954-1960." PhD. (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1999).

the Russians sent to the region for the virgin lands campaign as well as those come to undertake two large Soviet technological projects on Kazakhstani territory – the Baikonur Cosmodrome and the Semipalatinsk nuclear polygon.

The new industrial villages in the steppes led to the construction of some places of worship; the isolation of these communities of European origin ruled out any ideas of totally controlling local religious activities. The Soviet state was actually also compelled to make a few compromises with the newcomers, whose conditions of settlement were difficult, and so once the Komsomol brigades left the atheist campaign was relaxed. In the press stories were reported of the creation of previously unknown Russian sects in the new villages, like the *Bozh'i Korovy* or the "ladybirds."[59] Accounts from believers come to settle in this region all spoke of a period of unofficial renewal, once more revealing the Soviet regime's – relative but real – pragmatism when it came to managing troublesome areas.[60] In order to better establish their presence in the region, the authorities felt it necessary, where politics and economics were concerned, to have Russians occupy positions of decision-making power in Central Asia. However, the state was at the same time obliged to reckon with the minority status of Russians within a Muslim-dominated Central Asia whose population was still mainly agricultural, uneducated, and above all had little mobility. It thus seems that the prevailing social and political position of Russians and other "Europeans" in the republics of Central Asia compelled the authorities to make concessions, notably on the religious level.

This minimal religious compensation given to believers in Kazakhstan also affected Germans. In September 1955, Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, who had inaugurated diplomatic relations between the USSR and the Federal Republic of Germany, visited Moscow. The West German leader managed to negotiate new statuses for the Germans prisoners deported during the war with his Soviet counterparts. After German-Soviet relations returned to normal, the German minority was no longer labeled a "punished people" and its isolated citizens were allowed to move to cities or the mostly German villages of Siberia and Kazakhstan. The political authorities themselves encouraged this regrouping as they hoped it would enable better control of the communities. However, Germans did not attain the right to return to their former autonomous republic of the Volga.[61]

This relaxation of national policy had religious consequences, as the Mennonite and Lutheran Churches comprised mainly Germans. For the believers,

59 Kolarz, *Religion in the Soviet Union*, p. 348.

60 Interviews carried out in the cities of the north of the country: Karaganda, Astana, Semipalatinsk, Kokchetau, Petropavlovsk, and Pavlodar, Spring 2000.

61 In February 1957, the authorities rehabilitated the deported nationalities. Chechens, Ingush, Balkars, Karatchais, and Kalmouks all eventually returned to their autonomous regions, with the exception of the Poles. As for the Germans and the Tatars of Crimea, they were obliged to remain in their zones of deportation.

this political change made it possible to use their numbers to gain some legitimacy with the local administrations. A few symbolic registrations of Lutheran churches after 1957 made the regime's concessions official.[62] The control of the militia somewhat slackened, in particular for the Mennonites, who then could network between communities in Central Asia. Though these movements were not completely suppressed, as Khrushchev had promised they would be, they did not avoid all forms of repression. Leaders from local Protestant communities were arrested and the daily life of believers continued to be difficult. In order to avoid sanctions, the meeting place was regularly changed and services were sometimes not held for extended periods.

The Birth of Dissident Movements

The atheist campaign of 1959 once again forced religious movements to choose either between cooperating with the authorities, or refusing to do so and leading clandestine or semi-clandestine religious lives. Orthodoxy had to deal with the atheist campaign despite having submitted to political power. On the eve of Khrushchev's removal, there were only 46 Orthodox registered communities in Kazakhstan, 25 in Kyrgyzstan, 20 in Uzbekistan, 5 in Tajikistan, and 4 in Turkmenistan.[63] Resentment against the authorities thus became more acute as anti-religious measures intensified, giving birth to the first dissident movements. There were few protests coming from within the Orthodox Church in the USSR, in Central Asia especially where the Christians' minority status and condition of isolation consigned them to relative silence. However in Tashkent, Archbishop Ermogene stridently opposed the regime's laws and his Church's submission to power, attempting to continue regardless of the ban on organizing charitable works. As soon as he took office in 1953, he had the cathedral in Tashkent and a church in Samarkand rebuilt. He refused to exclude the young and began training a new generation of priests. His actions earned him the ire of the political authorities, who accused him of "keeping all privileges of the years before the Revolution," summarily dismissed him from his see and transferred him to the Kaluga region.[64]

Though the Orthodox institution remained very centralized, the other Christian movements could not handle their internal opposition. The Protestant strains were most affected by schisms, around which some non-registered communities decided to regroup in order to cope with the difficulties. By the end of the 1940s, they formed the first Council of the non-Registered Communities of the Union in Tashkent (*Ob"edinennyi sovet po tserkovnym voprosam neofitsial'nykh obshchin goroda Tashkenta*), which arrogated the right to appoint preachers in order to free itself from the influence of both the state and the official hierarchy. Other groups in Central Asia followed this example.

62 H. Römmich, "Evangelische Gemeinden in Russland nach einem halben Jahrhundert Sowjetherrschaft," *Kirche im Osten* 14 (1971), pp. 145-146.

63 *Zhurnal moskovskoi patriarkhii* 2 (1993), p. 20.

64 Muzarenko, *Evoliutsiia russkogo pravoslaviia*, pp. 108-109.

The true split of the Protestant world in the Soviet Union occurred during the 1960s. The Baptist and Evangelical Union were given a new status, eliciting very strong reactions of protest from among the clergy and faithful.[65] These protesters organized themselves and created a dissident Baptist Union in August 1961. This Union not only formally challenged the laws, but also refused to apply them. In 1965, these dissidents founded the Council of the Christian Evangelical and Baptist Churches (*Sovet tserkvei evangel'skikh khristian-baptistov*), whose members were more commonly called *Initsiativniki*.[66] In Central Asia, a similar dissident structure existed from 1964 with the creation of the Brotherly Council of the Churches of Southern Asia (*Bratskii sovet tserkvei po iugu Azii*).[67] The *Initsiativniki* formed communities, mostly in Kazakhstan[68] but also in Kyrgyzia (in the regions of Issyk-Kul, Frunze, and Kant), in Tajikistan (Dushanbe and Ordzhonikidzeabad), and in Uzbekistan (Tashkent, Ferghana, Namangan, and Iangiiul'). Many other groups were formed in these regions during the 1970s and 1980s.

Under Khrushchev, national and religious differentiation in policy platforms proved a significant advantage to religion in Central Asia. This differentiation became necessary on account of the European minorities living in the area – not only deported Germans and Poles, but also Russian, Ukrainian and Byelorussian "volunteers" who had come for the virgin lands campaign. The Protestant movements then distinguished themselves by the major role they played in the birth of religious dissidence. Brezhnev's policy of indigenizing officials further accentuated the religious specificities of Central Asia.

The Brezhnev Decades: Political Stagnation and Religious Dynamicism?

The removal of Nikita Khrushchev in 1964 left entire sections of the policy he had pursued for more than eight years open to question. The long period that stretched from the rise to power of Leonid Brezhnev to the beginning of the perestroika, a period commonly referred to as the "stagnation" (*zastoi*), proposed a new approach to the Soviet Union. Certain economic reforms were temporarily suspended and others begun before eventually being reined in by

65 See the story of a former pastor from Central Asia, T. Quiring, "Die Kontroverse um die staatliche Kontrolle bei den Baptisten seit 1961: Erfahrungen des Leiters einer registrierten Baptistengemeinde," *Glaube in der Zweiten Welt* 11 (1988), pp. 18-32.

66 According to Soviet sources, 110,000 Baptists joined the ranks of the reformed in 1963, and 155,000 in 1966, see G.S. Lialina, *Baptizm. Illiuzii i real'nost'* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1977), p. 42.

67 O.P. Kislova, "Sovetskoe zakonodatel'stvo o kul'takh i ego znachenie dlia preodeleniia khristianskogo sektantstva." Avtoreferat (Tashkent, 1972).

68 *Initsiativniki* groups were located in almost all large Kazakh cities in the 1960s and early 1970s. These cities include: Aktiubinsk, Alma-Ata, Dzhambul, Dzhezkazgan, Karaganda, Kokchetav, Pavlodar, Saran, Semipalatinsk, Syrianovsk, Trofimovka, and Tselinograd.

opponents. The political authorities' desire for stabilization was accompanied by a search for economic efficiency and a rationalization of the pressures put on cadres, which confirmed the ideological decline of the regime. The Brezhnev period remains a period in which there was an at once voluntary and involuntary decentralization and a profound transformation in Soviet society: demographic differentiation between "European" and "Muslim" peoples, massive urbanization, the development of an informal society, and a seizing-up economy operating in a permanent system of deficit.

A Veneer of Tolerance

Upon coming to power, the new first Secretary drew on the lessons of Khrushchev's failed eradication of religious institutions. He revised and corrected the Party line; the leadership became aware of the inefficiency of any direct and general confrontation with religion. Brutal methods of propaganda were criticized. More than ever, the authorities understood that they could not eradicate faith, and that they had to settle for some sort of measured and pragmatic cohabitation.[69] The objective was then to exploit religions by admitting they had a certain influence, but forcing them in return to enter into a role of support of official values. Brezhnev curbed the closing of the places of worship and simplified the perception of the religious landscape by the authorities. The Orthodox Church and all recognized movements were as of December 1965 group under a single authority, the Council of Religious Affairs.[70]

This contradiction between halting the anti-religious campaign and refusing to repeal the policy carried out until that point, told of the uncertainties and fluctuations in the government's attitude towards religion until perestroika. From 1965 to 1979 anti-religious articles published in the Soviet press became increasingly rare (a more aggressive phase started again at the start of the 1980s but was quickly stopped). Most ideological writings during this time did not focus on religion. As in previous years, atheist campaigns were acceptable, but the prevailing mood varied between denouncing and recognizing the legitimacy of religious movements, churchgoers, and their leaders. The signing of the final part of the Helsinski Accords in August 1975 furnished the religious dissidence with a crucial instrument. The signed agreements did not impose restrictions on authorities, but it included the famous "third basket" dealing with human rights, and thereby aided a legal dissidence to emerge which de-

69 The two main atheist magazines, *Ezhegodnik muzeia istorii religii i ateizma* and *Voprosy istorii religii i ateizma,* had their publication stopped. *Voprosy nauchnogo ateizma* replaced the latter in 1966.

70 The religions and denominations were now split up into three departments: a department for the affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church, one for Islam and Buddhism, and a separate one for Judaism, and the Protestant, Catholic and Armenian Churches, as well as for the movements referred to as "sects." Luchterhandt, "The Council for Religious Affairs," p. 59.

manded that the authorities respect the international agreements they themselves had signed.[71]

The USSR thus much publicized the various concessions it granted to religion, in the hope of reinforcing its international legitimacy. The rights conceded remained, however, strictly subordinated to the state's designs and often created no more than a simulation of religious freedom. This simulation allowed movements such as the Baptist and Evangelist Union and the Orthodox Church to regain a more official status,[72] and the Lutheran Church to get new rights. The authorities also sought to kill two birds with one stone: by authorizing the official movements to open new Churches, they hoped to persuade the unregistered currents that they had nothing to gain by remaining in clandestinity. Thus from 1977 until perestroika, the Baptist Church was permitted to open across the entirety of Soviet territory some 300 new places of worship, the Lutheran Church 129 and the Catholic Church 40, whereas adherents to Orthodoxy, which had no real clandestine groups, only obtained authorization to open a mere 33 new buildings.[73] The gulf thus widened further between the official movements and the strains that had experienced schisms during the preceding decades.

Legislation was revised at the adoption of a new constitution on October 1977. This document maintained the principle of exclusion of religion in the long term, but at the price of recognizing temporary cohabitation. The emphasis was placed on a formal prohibition on including minors in religious practices: the youth were no longer to slip through the atheist net. The intervention in Afghanistan in 1979 and the missile crisis in Europe in 1983 ended this policy of *détente*. The renewal of tensions between the two geopolitical blocs freed the Soviet authorities from their obligations to keep up appearances. There was a noticeable increase at the time in the number of religious prisoners, which jumped from 180 imprisoned Christians in 1979 to 400 in 1982.[74] However, by allowing some believers to go abroad and by authorizing European religious officials in remote regions such as Central Asia, the Soviet authorities involuntarily opened a breach in the wall of opaqueness that it had long maintained on religious matters.

---

71 M. Sapiets, "One Hundred Years of Adventism in Russia and the Soviet Union," *Religion in Communist Lands* 3 (1984), p. 271.

72 In Kazakhstan in the second half of the 1960s, these two Churches counted respectively 20 official communities and 46 prayer houses as compared with only 25 mosques. See M.S. Fazylov, *Religiia i natsional'nye otnosheniia* (Alma-Ata, 1969), p. 76. For more information on the relations between the Orthodox Church and power, see W. C. Fletcher, "Backwards from Reactionism: the De-modernization of the Russian Orthodox Church," in Dunn, ed., *Religion and Modernization,* pp. 205-238.

73 Pospielovsky, *A History of Marxist-Leninist Atheism*, p. 114.

74 J. Anderson, "Soviet Religious Policy Under Brezhnev and After," *Religion in Communist Lands* 1 (1983), pp. 25-30. The Baptist movement counted 87 prisoners in 1979 and more than 200 in 1984. "Baptisty: uspekhi i poteri," *Posev* 8 (1983), p. 4 and 11 (1984), p. 3.

The Emergence of a Compromise with Islam

In Central Asia, the atheist campaign continued to affect Islam. From 1973 on, the authorities tightened their control over communities of worshippers, closed many non-registered mosques, and continued to denounce Islam as a religion which supported the status quo and was foreign and reactionary in its relationship to youths and women.[75] So-called parallel Islam was particularly targeted; there were more than 2,000 clandestine mosques compared with 365 official ones in the USSR,[76] and the clandestine network of Sufi brotherhoods (*tariqat*), in particular the *Naqshbandiyya*, was at the heart of unofficial religious activism. Despite these attacks, the Brezhnev era turned out to be rather advantageous to religions in Central Asia. Economic difficulties affected the region less than others in the USSR. It even enjoyed a rise in living standards. Improvements in health conditions as well as processes of demographic transition led to strong growth of so-called "Muslim" populations – 22.5 million people according to the 1959 census, and 42 million in 1979 – but this did not aid the resolution of other on-going problems such as poor social mobility and small numbers of mixed marriages.[77]

Nationalization or indigenization was mostly carried out in political and administrative practices. The authorities wanted to reduce national inequalities within official governing bodies. Brezhnev did not launch great destabilizing reforms but he allowed much permissiveness. His policies were well received, in particular by the local elites who benefited from this so-called "stagnation." The republican leaders of the Communist Party had finally obtained stability and a situation within which they could pursue individual careers. This led to a system which favored clientelism and patronage and in which values of fidelity prevailed over competence or ideology. The Brezhnev years were indeed marked by the long "reigns" of the First Secretaries: Dinmuhamed Kunaev ruled over Kazakhstan from 1959 to 1986, Sharaf Rashidov over Uzbekistan from 1959 to 1983, Muhammad Nazar Gapurov over Turkmenistan from 1969 to 1986, Zhabor Rasulov over Tajikistan from 1961 to 1982, and Turkadun Usubaliev over Kyrgyzia from 1961 to 1985.

In 1964, Central Asia opened itself to foreign delegations and whenever international conferences were held there, Tashkent was presented as the great showcase of Soviet Islam. Brezhnev's USSR actually tried to present itself not only as a state that treated its national minorities well, but as a Muslim power. This "Islamic" strategy made systematic use of the Central Asian religious hierarchy in order to make overtures to the allied Muslim world, but also to pro-American conservative states like Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Morocco. In return, the authorities made a certain number of concessions to Islam. In 1971, a

75 *Khronika zashchity prav v SSSR*, vyp. 4 (1973), p. 36.

76 A. Bennigsen, "Islam in Retrospect," *Central Asian Survey* 8:1 (1989), p. 101.

77 H. Carrère d'Encausse, *L'empire éclaté: la révolte des nations en URSS* (Paris: Flammarion, 1978), pp. 311-330.

new madrassah, Al-Buhari, opened in Tashkent. Some students even received authorization to go to Egypt and other Arab countries to finish their studies. New publications were launched, particularly after 1968, when *Musul'mane v sovetskom Vostoke [Muslims in the Soviet Orient]* was first published in Uzbek and Arabic, and then in other languages.[78]

Islam thus survived as an essential internal component of the whole Central Asian structure, as much officially as unofficially. Despite maintaining atheist ideological discourse, the authorities operated a tactical rapprochement on the practical level with Islam. Private religious freedoms were unofficially guaranteed in exchange for public political conformism. Believers were considered honest Soviet citizens and the officials representing the Spiritual Boards proclaimed compatibility between Islam and socialism on ideas of equality, the brotherhood of mankind, peace, and world disarmament. Socialism was accepted as a mode of management of reality, a program of economic and social development, and was not regarded as a rival ideology to Islamic faith. In this context, the level of religiosity – prayers, fasting during Ramadan, pilgrimages, payment of the dowry (*kalym*) – diminished, but a generalized observance of traditional family rites was maintained.

Local authorities, especially after local officialdom was largely indigenized, were increasingly reluctant to pursue any struggle against Islam. This situation provoked strong criticisms from atheist circles,[79] but these criticisms bore no consequence. The administrators of both the regional and republican governing bodies, who were often self-confessed or unofficial believers, showed significantly less enthusiasm to fight not only against Islam, but also, significantly, against the Christian denominations. Paradoxically, the Christian communities of Central Asia benefited from their minority status and from the traditional tolerance afforded other religions in Islamic lands. Muslims, even when they held high-ranked offices in Soviet bodies, did not conceal their respect for believers, of whatever religion.[80]

Developments in the Situation of Christians in Central Asia

The Brezhnev years confirmed the distance between centralized religious policy and less rigorous local practices in Central Asia.[81] Local administrations

78 S. Akiner, "Islam, the State and Ethnicity in Central Asia in Historical Perspective," *Religion, State and Society* 3 (1996), p. 109; M. Rywkin, "Islam and the New Soviet Man. 70 Years of Evolution," *Central Asian Survey* 4 (1987), p. 23.

79 "Fanatizm veruiushchikh i ravnodushie ateistov," *Pravda Vostoka* 24 February 1964; "Esli ty derevne ateist," *Kazakhstanskaia pravda*, 20 January 1970, p. 2; "Doiti do kazhdogo," *Sovetskaia Kirgiziia*, 6 February 1973, p. 2; "Kadry ateistov," *Kazakhstanskaia pravda*, 27 February 1982, p. 1; "Siloi pechatnogo slova," *Kazakhstanskaia pravda*, 4 September 1982.

80 Indeed, during the interviews, many believers and hierarchs mentioned the relative permissiveness of the "autochthonous" or "Muslim" administrators in the management of religious issues and therefore the relative freedom of the Brezhnev era.

81 J.W. Warhola, "Central vs. Local Authority in Soviet Religious Affairs 1964-89," *Journal of Church and State* 1 (1992), pp. 15-37.

were thus free to give their own subjective interpretations of legislation depending on the church or denomination. This created difficulties for churches, to which the Orthodox Church was no exception, especially in cases of communities guided by priests in disgrace. One such community in the Ferghana Valley had its application for official status refused due to its support for its previous head priest, whose religious zeal had earned him outlaw status.[82] The eparchy thus suffered a few setbacks, but it remained less troubled than other denominations by the difficulties involved in opening new places of worship. The Central Asian authorities held a firm position, maintaining a balance between the presence of Islam and that of Orthodoxy, and as a result they gave the right to few new places of Christian worship.

Combined with the benefits flowing from agreements with the Federal Republic of Germany signed under Khrushchev, the policy of officialization of certain religious movements also impacted the German minority living in Central Asia. A decree issued by the Supreme Soviet of 1964 confirmed its rehabilitation and cleared it of all accusations of collaboration during the war. The Mennonite Church was the most integrated and the release of its leader, D. Klassen, in 1965 was a sign of the changing relations between religion and state throughout Soviet territory.[83] Two years later, the Council for Religious Affairs accepted the registration of the Brethren Mennonite community of Karaganda in a framework similar to that of the Baptist and Evangelical Union, confirming this change.[84] This was the first time in the history of the Soviet Union that the Brethren Mennonites had obtained official status. Still, it would be another ten years before any new registrations were accepted – Georgievka and Merke in the South of Kazakhstan in 1976, and Novo-Pavlovka, near Frunze, in 1977.[85] The aim of the authorities was to bring the separate strands of individual movements, such as the Old-Mennonites and the Brethren, closer together in a bid to compel groups reluctant to register to make themselves known. Thus, in Central Asia, the authorities encouraged Brethren Mennonites to accept Old-Mennonites into their places of worship and invited the majority strand to makes overtures toward minority groups with a view to rapprochement.[86] As a result, the Brethren community's numbers in Karaganda rose considerably. Within a few years, more than 400 church-goers were registered there.[87]

82 *Khronika tekushchikh sobytii* 34 (December 1974), pp. 52-53.

83 H. Woelk, G. Woelk, *A Wilderness Journey. Glimpses of the Mennonite Brethren Church in Russia, 1925-1980* (Heinrich: Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, 1982), p. 98.

84 It was founded in 1956, when 21 Brethren Mennonite families decided to withdraw from the Baptist community in order to form a Mennonite group, see M. and L. Bourdeaux, *Ten Growing Soviet Churches,* Keston College book no. 17 (London: Marc Europe, 1987), p. 85.

85 Woelk, *A Wilderness Journey,* p. 133; G. Stricker, W. Sawatsky, "Mennonites in Russia and the Soviet Union: An Aspect of the Church History of the Germans in Russia," *Religion in Communist Lands* 12:3 (1984), pp. 293-311.

86 V.F. Krest'ianinov, *Mennonity* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1967), p. 79.

87 Stricker, Sawatsky, "Mennonites in Russia," p. 313.

The aim of the more numerous denominations like the Baptists, Adventists, and Pentecostals, was to broaden their network of places of worship to become more visible, but administrative pressures against them remained strong. In the 1970s, a community of Baptists in the town of Issyk in Kyrgyzstan found itself in an inextricable situation. The prayer house was closed on the orders of the local administration because the community was not registered, but registration was only granted if a place of worship already existed.[88] The few groupings of Old-Believers that remained in Central Asia, particularly in Alma-Ata, Dzhambul, and Frunze, also applied for official status, but the process was long, and, in the large majorities of cases, would never materialize. The authorities hoped that a lack of members would result in their extinction.[89] The ever-widening gap between official atheist policy and the enthusiasm held by sections of the population towards religion reached a climax when, at the beginning of the 1970s in Alma-Ata, authorities discovered a warehouse filled with Bibles published by the Seventh Day Adventists in an official printing house.[90]

The situation also continued to be difficult for the Catholic Church. The authorities could not force it into isolation, especially not in Central Asia where Karaganda was held up as the Catholic – Polish and German – center of the country. The communities of Kustanai and Alma-Ata were for some time the only ones to enjoy a (mere) verbal agreement on opening small chapels.[91] From 1976 on, a first step towards tolerance was taken with the opening of a certain number of Catholic buildings.[92] In 1977, Catholics were finally granted official status in Kazakhstan, in other words more than 20 years after the Lutherans were first granted rights.[93] This did not mean they had authorization to lead a genuine parochial life, since the authorities hindered Catholic priests from fulfilling their functions or strongly limited their activities.

There were also movements, such as the True Orthodox Christians or the Jehovah's Witnesses, to which the state never made any concessions. As for the former, Central Asia's isolation proved an asset. Believers lived their faith in autarky and did not wish to network with other fellow communities. The authorities, who thought they had dealt them a fatal blow during Khrush-

88 "Liberté religieuse et défense des droits de l'homme en URSS," *Istina* XXII (1977), pp. 84-85.

89 *Catacombes* 1 (1971), p. 11; "Rapport sur la situation des vieux-croyants en URSS (Janvier 69)," *Istina* XXII (1977), p. 58; D.V. Pospielovsky, *Soviet Antireligious Campaigns and Persecutions* (London: Macmillan Press, 1987), p. 152.

90 *Catacombes* (July-August 1972), p. 15. See also *Glaube in der Zweiten Welt* 9 (1979), p. 13 and 2 (1985), p. 8; *Chrétiens de l'Est* 45 (1985), p. 53.

91 *W stepie dalekim: Polacy w Kazachstanie*, p. 85.

92 A women's monastery also opened in Karaganda. The following year, two churches registered, one in Karaganda and one in Tainch, and in 1978 another was registered in Aktiubinsk in 1978.

93 *W stepie dalekim: Polacy w Kazachstanie*, p. 87.

chev's anti-religious campaign, saw some groups of true Orthodox Christians re-emerge in 1986, in particular in the Temirtau region near Karaganda. Comprising only a few dozen people, one of these communities was brought immediately before the courts.[94] Isolation also seriously handicapped the Jehovah's Witnesses, being spiritually dependent on the see located in New York. However, they managed to obtain some religious books, in particular the journal *The Watch Tower* (*Storozhevaia bashnia* in Russian), so they could maintain the necessary relations with Brooklyn.[95] They stayed in restricted communities until they were recognized under Mikhail Gorbachev.[96]

The Progressive Roots of Religious Dissidence

A twofold phenomenon characterized the Brezhnev era. On the one hand, the development of an intellectual and religious dissidence (the Catholics of Lithuania, the Jews, the intellectuals from the Baltic states, Ukraine, Georgia, and Armenia, the Catacomb Orthodox Church, etc.) and, on the other, a continual degradation of the Soviet Union's image abroad because of its human rights situation. The Orthodoxy dissidence remained essentially within the bounds of the Slavic republics, although the political authorities also had to cope with some demands and contentions in Central Asia. None of them, however, had the actual means to grow into a developed network, as did, for example, Gleb Iakunin's Christian Committee created in 1976. The local Orthodox hierarchy was generally submissive to the authorities, and it was always going to be improbable that any of its clergy members would join anti-establishment movements operating thousands of kilometers away from Central Asian parishes. If the isolation of Central Asia led the political authorities to make more concessions to Protestants to prevent them from going massively underground, in the case of Orthodoxy this isolation was disadvantageous, since the number of members of the Catacombs Church was quite insignificant.

Orthodoxy thus remained the most controlled of the Christian denominations in Central Asia. The authorities, whether federal or republican, organized kangaroo court trials to justify imprisoning refractory priests serving in large parishes. In 1969, an Orthodox priest of Kagan (Uzbekistan), P. Adelheim, was sentenced to three years of hard labor to set an example. His dynamism was strongly frown upon by the authorities. He denounced Marxism, criticized the isolation in which the communities of the region lived in total absence of Christian literature, and above all declared his support for Gleb Iakunin.[97] Further trials held after this one did not have the same repercussions, but they

94 Fletcher, *L'Église clandestine en Union soviétique*, p. 241.

95 V.V. Konik, *Istiny svidetelei Iegovy* (Moscow: Politicheskaia literatura, 1978), p. 80.

96 A. Bruskin, "Svidetel'stvuet svidetel' Iegovy," *Kazakhstanskaia pravda*, 16 and 17 March 1968.

97 *Pravda Vostoka*, 12 and 26 July 1970; *Catacombes* 18 (1973), p. 9. On the reasons for Adelheim's sentencing, see also *Vestnik russkogo khristianskogo dvizheniia* 97 (1970), pp. 157-163.

all demonstrated the difficulties members of Orthodoxy faced in organizing effective dissident actions in Central Asia.

For the Catholics, the policy of *détente* between the two blocs provided an opportunity to reaffirm their demands in the USSR. Each community entertained hopes of being helped by international organizations, whether religious or non-religious. Making contact, generally by mail but sometimes by radio messages, was risky, as each community remained under strict control. Geographic distance further increased the difficulties of this approach. There were many reported trials in the press about Catholic priests in Central Asia who had tried to develop foreign contacts. In 1973, a priest and a nun in Kazakhstan were put on trial for attempting to get assistance from Rome.[98]

The Baptist, Adventist, and Pentecostal movements, which had branches throughout the country, had well-organized dissidence movements and were thus a major target of the authorities. Each of them saw at least one of their leaders in Central Asia charged and sentenced.[99] Action taken in 1979 in Tashkent against the leader of the reformed Adventists, V.A. Shelkov, provides one of the more remarkable cases in the history of repression against dissenting denominations in Central Asia and the Soviet Union more generally.[100] Shelkov had been the leader of the reformed Adventist movement since 1949 and had founded a clandestine publisher, *Vernyi svidetel'* [The Loyal Witness], which published abundant amounts of religious literature as well as many reports on the situation of the movement.[101] Chosen by the political authorities as the symbol that had to be removed, he endured multiple trials and served one of the longest prison sentences in the history of Soviet dissidents.[102] As his influence extended beyond the limits of the Uzbek SSR, a press campaign in Central Asian and Russia was launched against him.[103] At a fixed trial, during which he had no access to a genuine defense, he was again sentenced to serve five-years in a high-security camp in Yakutia.[104] His sentencing elicited many reactions

98 *Action Évangélique pour l'Église du silence* 21-22 (1973), p. 4.

99 The Pentecostalist leaders were particularly targeted. See for instance *Sovetskaia Kirgiziia*, 18 August 1985.

100 Extensive literature has been written on the trial, the sentencing, the conditions of imprisonment, and the death of V. Shelkov. See M. Sapiets, *True Witness: The Story of Seventh Day Adventists in the Soviet Union* (Kent: Keston College, 1990).

101 K. Murray, "Soviet Seventh-Day Adventists," *Religion in Communist Lands* 2 (1977), p. 90.

102 *Pravda Vostoka*, 27 May 1979.

103 "Izuver' v roli apostola," *Pravda Vostoka*, 27 May 1979; *Vechernii Tashkent*, 28 May 1979. The movement tried to answer these articles through a clandestine publication refuting the accusations and the assertions of one of the authors, who claimed to be an former member of the movement: *Pravda gazety Pravda Vostoka ili kto takoi Illarionov?* (Tashkent: Vernyi svidetel', 1979). On the perception by the authorities of the activities of the reformed Adventist Church, see also "Maestro iz 'vernogo ostatka'," *Pravda Vostoka*, 17 April 1984, p. 4.

104 The Adventists officially accused the administration of causing his death. *Cahiers du Samizdat* 74 (1981), p. 15.

in the dissident world. The Christian Committee of Iakunin responded first; Andrei Sakharov then called for assistance Pope John-Paul II, the Ecumenical Council of the Churches, as well to the heads of state who signed the Helsinki Accords, but it was in vain. He also went to Tashkent during the trial In 1981, the Soviet press announced Shelkov's death in the camps at the age of 85.

The two decades of power under Brezhnev thus constituted a significant period in the history of Soviet and Central Asian Christianity, and the policy directions taken prefigured many of those pursued after independence in 1991. The region enjoyed relative prosperity due, among other things, to a certain decentralizing of economic and administrative power, as well as to the increasingly stable position of local officials. Islam was then reinforced as a national tradition and allowed a kind of tolerance of the "Muslim" local government officials towards the Christian minorities. Religious policy thus turned out to be more than wavering. The Christian communities were encouraged to become instruments in the legitimization of a political power searching for a consensual image, but even when they rallied around this cause, they continued to undergo harassment and daily administrative inconveniences. The leaders of the dissident movements had to cope with a continual desire of the authorities to find points of dispute, that is, with a power that no longer agreed with the idea of exerting mass violence against believers, but that still sought the most effective means to limit the religious reality.

Conclusion

The Bolshevik regime's basic premise was that religion, and any resurgence of the old values and symbols of tsarist Russia, had to be eradicated once and for all. Yet, during the second half of the 1980s, Mikhail Gorbachev was obliged to recognize that religion would provide an essential role in the context of the reforms being envisaged for Soviet society. If Soviet power aimed to eliminate the phenomenon of religion from the entire geographic space it dominated, the reality of multiple regional specificities forced authorities to adopt various policies. What started out, then, as an ideological perception of faith became gradually and often involuntarily segmented in practice – geographically, denominationally and temporally. Central Asia was never fully integrated into the general policy of anti-religious struggle. Despite all the specificities of tsarist and then Soviet colonization in contrast to Western models, as a "colonial" land Central Asia compelled the Soviet authorities to revise their atheist policy. As a consequence, there existed an almost permanent contradiction between general atheist policy and a kind of "religious necessity" in Central Asia. Faith persisted thanks to the long history of the region as a land of exile and deportation and the indispensable feature of a massive Russian presence in these peripheral regions of the Soviet Union.

These specificities do not mean Central Asia should be considered a unique and fully-fledged entity, as if it could be systematically differentiat-

ed from the rest of the Soviet Union. There were many different tendencies within the region itself. Khrushchev's economic projects, for example, affected part of Siberia and notably Kazakhstan, but not the other republics of Central Asia. The Kazakh authorities were granted more leeway to let some religious movements develop. Considering that nearly uninhabited areas had been exploited as much agriculturally as industrially, they could not maintain as strict a control as that defined by Moscow. However, local authorities of other isolated regions, like Turkmenistan, sometimes undertook more severe repressive measures. As a result, some Christian leaders who were considered too active were eliminated with no trial. Yet in Kazakhstan, the elimination of Protestant personalities required at least a trial, even if it was a fixed one.

The regime thus displayed its uncertainties and its flexibility in the different approaches it adopted towards religions. Central Asia's isolation proved favorable to certain kind of movements (mostly Protestant) and unfavorable to others (Orthodox and Catholics). For instance, the authorities granted some concessions to Protestant groups from Central Asia that refused to submit to registration or to enter official unions. Numerous communities of Mennonites and Lutherans managed to function in this region, while elsewhere they were repressed. Other groups such the Russian schismatic movements, which were less important and in decline, were by contrast subject to more persecution in Central Asia than in Russia, where their numbers were greater. The regime was also quick to see the risks of any direct and immediate confrontation with Islam, whereas in Russia itself it immediately moved to implement repressive policies against Orthodoxy. During the last decades of the Soviet Union's existence, both religions were no longer on an equal footing. Islam was more favored in practice, especially with the entering of titular officials into local political governing bodies.

There are some aspects of these last decades of Soviet power that came to foreshadow the situation of Christianity in the post-1991, independent republics.[105] The Christian movements underwent a great change, going from a world in which all religion tended to be excluded from public life, to a situation in which they became a minority in Islam-dominated countries. One cannot help but wonder about the degree of continuity between the Soviet and post-Soviet periods, and of the relevance of the 1991 breakpoint regarding religion. The gap – already perceptible in the Soviet era – between so-called "national" Churches and proselyte Protestant movements continues to widen today. Missionary movements, which regard Central Asia as a new promised land and a space of evangelization, now question denominations traditionally present on the Central Asian territory. Thus, three questions arise here: the relationship between these divergent conceptions of Christianity, the competition created

105 On the post-Soviet period, see S. Peyrouse, *Des chrétiens entre athéisme et islam. Regards sur la question religieuse en Asie centrale soviétique et post-soviétique* (Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose, 2003).

by the new "spiritual market" of Central Asia, and, above all, the conversion of titular nationalities. Is Christianity destined to remain the religion of the former colonizers, or can it hope to "autochthonize" and root itself among the eponymous nationalities?