



Issue 1, August, 2022

## How Does It Feel to Be an Ethno-Religious Minority in Kyrgyzstan?

Galina Avdar-Kolodzinskaia

LLM in International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights,  
Geneva Academy, g.kolodzinskaia@osce-academy.net

### Abstract

This article tells the story of a young Protestant female whose family arrived in Kyrgyzstan in the aftermath of collectivization and became actively religious later, during the Perestroika period, when family members began searching for a safer and more decent life. The paper explores the shape of author's relations with Protestantism: first as a child, then as a teenager, and now as a young woman. It also provides a brief yet detailed overview of the major historical events of particular importance for relevant religious minority groups in the country. Altogether, the information presents an insider look at the mostly unwritten life of Protestants in Kyrgyzstan.

### Keywords

Ethno-religious minority, religious demography, Kyrgyzstan, Central Asia, autoethnography

### Introduction

"How does it feel to be an ethno-religious minority in Kyrgyzstan?" This was the first question I received from the Head of my would-be Alma Mater at the admission interview for an MA scholarship a few years past. "Actually, better than the majority!" was my response without a second of contemplation. I rushed to bring an example of my interactions with the Spiritual Administration of Muslims for Kyrgyzstan, describing how my rudimentary knowledge of Kyrgyz had helped me (a young Protestant blond woman in a western outfit) get an appointment with the Grand Mufti (chief Islamic jurist) of the country. He turned out to be so deferential and hospitable that he did not let me leave his office without a souvenir he had brought from Saudi Arabia, where he had performed the obligatory Muslim Hajj. Although I was used to enjoying such warm relations with many people in Kyrgyzstan, following this interaction, I kept wondering if and how my experience of being a Christian and an ethno-religious minority was representative of the experience of other non-Islamic minority groups in the country.

Perhaps this question has not since been stuck in my head in vain, as some years later, I was invited to write this autoethnographic essay. This sketch is an opportunity for me not only to delve

deeper into my own ethnic and religious identities but also to better understand the society into which I was born. This task, however, was not only an opportunity but a challenge. A challenge because while autoethnography as a research method utilizes personal experience to describe general beliefs and practices (Adams, Ellis, and Jones, 2017), no one can be a hundred percent certain that even one's most sincere self-told story will shed adequate light on the ethno-cultural and religious experiences of the spirit of the time. Put it simply, it is always a great responsibility to speak as an individual who purportedly represents many other people's thoughts and opinions. To open up space for others' voices in this autoethnography, I have decided to include stories I heard in my childhood, my family members' memoirs, and also cases from my graduate thesis. I commence my story from the first documented presence of Protestants in the territory of contemporary Kyrgyzstan, then I discuss the history of my family, and end with my own experience as a student and professional. This is a journey in time, and I invite readers to travel with me through the world of my previously untold story as an ethno-religious minority in Kyrgyzstan.

## History

Protestantism in Kyrgyzstan traces its origin to the arrival of the first German Mennonites from the Volga region in 1889 in the newly acquired lands of the Russian Empire in the Talas valley of western Turkestan (the old name for a territory covering nearly all of Central Asia). In spite of being hardworking and decent Christians, the Central Asian Mennonites were nonetheless poor, landless, and seeking a place to live in peace with their God and other humans of various ethnicities and faiths. The host community were ethnic Kyrgyz, whose ancestors had also had to leave their rangelands in Siberia nearly a millennium ago and who had found a relatively peaceful life in the high plateaus of Central Asia's Tien-Shan Mountain Range. The Mennonite newcomers and native Kyrgyz and Uzbek were able to co-exist harmoniously in the rapidly changing socio-political environment of the times. It is hard to say how active the interaction between the immigrant Christians and local Muslims and animists was, whether it involved any religious exchanges and teachings, or if it was limited only to mutually beneficial trade. A book dedicated to the 110th anniversary of Baptism in the region written by the Evangelical Baptist-Christian Union (EBCU) in Kyrgyzstan contains reports of the first ethnic Kyrgyz proselytes from the Talas region in the early 1900s (Barg, 2013). This suggests that the interaction went beyond simple trade.

There is a reason why the Baptist community has preserved the memoirs of the first Mennonites in Kyrgyzstan. Although the two Protestant denominations initially existed separately, during the Soviet period they were forced to merge into one union in order to obtain a state registration permit. It was illegal to conduct religious activities without such registration and the EBCU was among the few non-Islamic religious groups of the time who were issued such a permit. That is why, if one decides to study the traces of Mennonites in Kyrgyzstan, there is no better place to start than the EBCU archives. These archives of course also tell the story of the Baptists themselves and how they started to settle in the Chui valley of northern Kyrgyzstan in the beginning of the twentieth century. Unlike the Mennonites, the Baptists were more ethnically diverse. However, they were initially also mostly represented by ethnic Germans. Along with the Baptists,

the first communities of Seventh-day Adventists and Lutherans arrived in the Chui valley and, in the 1920s, the Pentecostals joined the pool of Protestant denominations in Soviet Kirghizia (the old name for Kyrgyzstan). Some Protestants settled in towns such as Pishpek (contemporary Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan's capital) and Takmak (Tokmok), and interacted with the locals with relative ease, while others preferred to form their own ethno-religious villages (e.g. Rot Front) and led modest lifestyles until the 1917 October Revolution, an event that irreversibly changed nearly everyone's lives.

"Religion is a crime which we tolerate only up to a certain point," a Soviet prosecutor had said as late as in the 1980s in justification of the suppression of religious sentiments (Bourdeaux et al, 1984). The Protestant communities in Kyrgyzstan were not an exception in being at the receiving end of the communist government's wrath. There were stigmas against almost all religious groups in the Soviet Union: the Orthodox were "retarded," Muslims "religious bigots" and "extremists," Jews "Zionists," and Catholics and Protestants "Western agents." The militant atheists working on the construction of a bright Communist future considered religion to be an ideological rival and religious people to be political dissidents who deserved appropriate treatment.

In the early 1920s, the Soviet government had granted some "freedom" to all religious congregations except for the Russian Orthodox Church, which Bolsheviks had discredited on the grounds of its historical connections with the overthrown Tzarist regime. In this period, the number of Protestant communities slightly increased since the pressure from the pro-Orthodox government had been removed. However, by the late 1920s, Protestant leadership had already begun noticing the harbingers of upcoming repressions. Some pastors and presbyters were initially imprisoned and subsequently freed, then imprisoned and freed again. This continued until 1937 when the Soviet government held the all-republican census, in which Stalin had personally ordered the inclusion of the question on religious self-identification to see how successful the Soviet atheist propaganda had been (Miner, 2003). To Stalin and his anti-religious ideologists' surprise, the census revealed that two-thirds of the rural population and one-third of urban folk still associated themselves with religious traditions.

This ideological failure aggravated Stalin. First, many people involved in administering the census were executed. Second, the Great Purge, which had commenced in 1937, was also directed against religious leaders. In that same year, the majority of already imprisoned pastors and presbyters in the Soviet Union were executed and their detention cells were filled with new "prisoners of conscience," who this time included not only the clergy but also ordinary believers and independent thinkers. Here, it is worth mentioning that the number of political detainees, prisoners of conscience and those executed in Soviet Kirghizia, on a per capita basis, was the lowest among all of the Soviet republics, a trend that did not change during the entire seven decades of Communist rule. That said, repression and anti-religious policies continued in that era throughout the USSR well beyond the peak in 1939, including in Kirghizia. In fact, the Communist government would

---

<sup>1</sup> *Resolution XII of the 13th Congress of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks) on the Issues of Propaganda, Printing, and Agitation & on the Organization of Anti-Religious Agitation and Propaganda*, 17-25 April 1923.

have probably succeeded in wiping out all small Protestant groups and parishes scattered across the Soviet Union if not for the start of the Second World War (WWII, or ‘The Great Patriotic War’), which forced the Kremlin to soften its policies on religion in order to bring all on board against the invading army of Nazi Germany. Indeed, WWII stopped the threshing wheel of the bloody Moloch.<sup>2</sup> Soviet state policy on religion thus changed considerably during the war period. Ironically, the League of the Militant Godless, the principal body responsible for anti-religious propaganda, was even obliged by the Soviet law enforcement body, the People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs, to assist religious organizations (whether Muslim, Christian or Jewish) in the dissemination of proclamations with the calls for patriotic prayers.<sup>3</sup> Many restrictions on religious activities were thus lifted, at least temporarily.

In the meantime, the flow of refugees from the western Soviet territories occupied by Germany was directed to the hinterland. Kyrgyzstan became one of such shelters for those Soviet citizens fleeing the war. And here, what I call the true greatness of the Kyrgyz people, revealed itself. Many elderly Kyrgyz women and couples, some of whom remembered the horrors of the Great *Ūrkün* (Exodus) of 1916, where up to 100,000 Kyrgyz may have been killed or died from the cold, starvation, and disease as they were fleeing the persecution of the Tsarist Army, agreed to accept the children of Russians, Ukrainians, Belarussians, and other Soviet citizens, often sharing their meager food with them as if they were their own children and grandchildren. Many refugees who stayed or left the country later told their descendants about these acts of kindness emanating from the Kyrgyz people, without which they would not have been able to survive the miseries and shortages of the war period. I recall the story told to me by an old Catholic Polish woman in Bishkek whom I interviewed in 2017. She had described to me in vivid detail how her 27-year-old father was executed by the regime after the occupation of Poland by the German and Soviet troops in 1939, and her young widowed mother was exiled with three children to Frunze (the Soviet name for Bishkek) in Kyrgyzstan. When they arrived in a train carriage, they had nothing to eat and no place to live. They would probably have died there during their first days after arrival if not for an old Kyrgyz man who had come to the central railway station to trade camel milk and, seeing the young woman and her kids, gave them his milk supply and other food. Other locals, in turn, found them a temporary home. She described how well she was treated by the local Kyrgyz: “Without them we would not have been able to survive.” I believe the experience of that Catholic Polish woman’s family was not unique. I have heard many similar stories from the members of ethno-religious minority groups in Kyrgyzstan. The fact that many war-refugees evacuated from western parts of the Soviet Union preferred to stay in the republic after the end of the war speaks for itself.

The evacuations of people from Europe and their resettlement in Central Asia before, during, and after WWII made the diverse ethno-religious landscape of Soviet Kirghizia even more colorful. Protestants of various denominations arrived in the country, some voluntarily, others

<sup>2</sup> A Canaanite god associated in the Bible with the notorious practices of human sacrifice.

<sup>3</sup> Georgii, Karpov. *Letter to Comrade Yaroslavskiy on Six Appeals of Religious, Patriotic Appeals of Church and Sectarian Leaders*. 3 July 1942, NKVD: Division 4, 3rd Directorate, 1.

forcefully. During another interview with a Seventh-day Adventist man, I learned about the story of his father, who was a committed believer but was persecuted and left unemployed by the Soviet authorities in neighboring Kazakhstan and who chose to move to Kyrgyzstan in an attempt to find a job. One of the frequent Soviet practices against practicing Protestants was to deprive the believers of the opportunity to work as means of forcing them to rebuke their faith. Many Protestants found themselves in desperate situations across the Soviet Union, including, to a much lesser extent, in Soviet Kirghizia. Here, the local authorities adapted a very lenient approach towards believers of different confessions and were even often criticized by Moscow for the low compliance with the Kremlin's anti-religion instructions. So, the father of the above-mentioned Seventh-day Adventist, like many other believers, was able to settle down in Kyrgyzstan with relative ease and had more or less a normal life in the still atheist-led Soviet society.

One of my former professors at the Kyrgyz-Russian Slavic University, herself an Orthodox Christian, also told me stories about Orthodox nuns sent to Kyrgyzstan and how, after the end of their forced exile, they did not wish to return to Russia or other parts of the western Soviet Union since a semblance of normal life for believers had become possible in this remote republic. Just as was the case with the wartime survival, a number of old practicing Protestants I interviewed in Bishkek claimed that the state policy towards religion was softer in Soviet Kirghizia as compared to other parts of the Union even if some degree of pressure from the Communist authorities was always present.

The years leading to the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and Mikhail Gorbachev's "glasnost" (openness) policy beginning in 1986, brought additional relief to practicing Protestants and other believers. More freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) was granted to them. However, there was no time to fully enjoy the moment as an avalanche of socio-economic hardships was tumbling upon all. Many believers who were forcefully sent to Kyrgyzstan by the Soviet regime were granted the right to leave the country. This opportunity for migration back to their place of origin was not wholeheartedly embraced by some devoted Protestants who preferred to stay in Kyrgyzstan to continue sharing the Gospel. However, the majority of Protestants accepted this reverse "exodus" with grace when the economic crisis became unbearable. People were desperate and former community members who had already left the country began sending tithes to their home churches in Kyrgyzstan from abroad. These remitted funds helped many community members who had chosen to stay not only to survive but also to purchase new buildings to expand their religious activities. It should be mentioned here that such humanitarian aid attracted many people in the post-atheist society who came to church at the invitation of their friends who were practicing Christians. Many of them left when the initial stream of material aid ceased; others remained, given the new sense of community and faith they had discovered. There was also a segment of newcomers who were bitterly disappointed in the communist ideology and had started seeking answers to their existential questions in religion. My mother was among the latter.

## Family

My mother, Elena, has an ethnically and socially diverse heritage. Her father's family origin is hard to trace since her grandparents died in Russia not long after the 1917 October Revolution when her father, Boris, was only five years old. What we know is that, despite the family being relatively well off and Boris' mother (my great grandmother) having given birth to 16 children, only three of them survived to adulthood. Later, after WWII, out of the 16, only my grandfather Boris remained alive. In the early 1950s, Boris moved to Frunze, where he met my grandmother Anastasiya who had arrived in Soviet Kirghizia in the pre-war period. She was born in the Altay region of Russia, where her parents had moved and settled from Eastern Ukraine sometime toward the end of Stolypin's agrarian reforms (1906-1917). By the time of the October Revolution, Anastasiya's family was dispossessed of all their property and had had to migrate to Central Asia. Before these dramatic events, my grandmother's family had led a calm and rather prosperous life as middle-class Orthodox peasants surrounded by a great many relatives, several of whom had converted to Protestantism. These people were known for their unusual practices, such as the tradition of "praying on empty corners", which meant not praying to icons which vividly contrasted against regular Orthodox prayers. I would not have bothered mentioning this fact if it was not so crucial for my mother's conversion to Protestantism in the 1990s. Although brought up in an atheist society, her parents, just like many other Soviet citizens, secretly preserved their religious beliefs and identities, and one of the very few things my mother was taught in her childhood was that she should never leave the teachings of the Orthodoxy and the faith of her ancestors. According to my mother's own confession, this idea kept her hesitant from converting to Baptism in Kyrgyzstan for several years until she had heard the story of the "empty-corner praying" of her Protestant relatives, told to her, ironically, by her Orthodox aunt. This gave my mother the courage to change her faith. Her conversion into a minority Christian denomination in Kyrgyzstan, however, was unwelcome by almost all relatives: whether atheist, agnostic or Orthodox Christian. Despite experiencing pressure and having confrontations with several members of her extended family, my mother remained firm in her decision.

My mother's firmness stemmed not only from the family's connection with Protestantism but more so from her personal life and her spiritual journey. One of her first religious experiences of remarkable value occurred on the Easter of 1959. My mother's family had migrated back to Astrakhan, where her father had many elderly friends, among whom were former revolutionaries such as the Bolsheviks, Mensheviks, left-wing Essers, and even one of Lenin's associates who had smuggled the "Iskra" (Spark) newspaper from Geneva to St. Petersburg during the Tsarist era. This intellectual and former activist company of people who fought for the revolution and the advent of the social utopia in their youth was then so completely disappointed by the victorious Soviet regime that they no longer even listened to the state radio or read the official newspapers. On the day of Easter, when my grandparents and their friends had gathered to celebrate, my mother was returning home from school, and when she entered the house, she, an eight-year-old Oktyabryonok,<sup>4</sup> was

---

<sup>4</sup> A child preparing to become a 'young pioneer', a form of a Soviet scout program.

introduced by her father to the Bolshevik Sergey Ageev about whom my mother had already read in a leaflet. Can you imagine my mother's surprise and confusion when this old Bolshevik greeted her with the traditional Easter exclamation "Christ is risen!" She did not know how to react to this form of bold religious expression due to the atheist propaganda in her school. My grandfather encouraged my mother to respond appropriately to the Easter greeting, but the old Bolshevik stopped him, saying that she should not be forced to do it. Despite being a child, my mother found this situation, in which the former revolutionaries respected the religious traditions they had fought against in the past, rather paradoxical. Many other minor incidents like this passed without causing any big changes in my mother's life at that particular moment, but they nevertheless got stuck in her memory and influenced the spiritual directions she ultimately chose as an adult, in turn influencing me.



Figure 1: Family photo with my mother, family archives

While growing up, my mother, Elena, had also learned about the story of one of her grand uncles, Alexey, who was exiled and imprisoned by the Soviet authorities in a labor camp far away in freezing Magadan at the age of 17 for his attempt to stop the Red Army soldiers who came to take his family's property and possessions in the Altay region. My mother's great grandmother, who was a practicing Orthodox Christian, regularly prayed for her son Alexey's wellbeing and return from Magadan, preserving his clothes in a trunk and telling everyone around that he would need them when he returned home. After almost 20 years, not only did she get her son back, she also met his wife and children who were born in exile. Many times, in the family circles, Alexey shared the story of how camp guards in Magadan, after killing someone, would come up to him and put a handgun to his forehead, but how they never pulled the trigger. Those who knew the Soviet camp system understood that it required a miracle to survive there. Such accounts served as a lesson for all

members of the family and established the firm belief that even in desperate situations there was hope, and that the essence of this hope was the belief in God. This is what my mother reflected upon when desperate times stormed into her life after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

### **My personal experience**

Interestingly, my first religious experience happened before my mother's conversion to Protestantism and had nothing to do with any religious congregation. I was about four years old and was playing in our apartment while my grandmother was tidying up the corridor. The entrance door was open, and I went to the stairs leading to the floor above us. I was jumping from one shoe shelf to another when our neighbor and my grandmother's friend entered. Although I felt it was wrong, for some reason I was reluctant to greet her and hid behind the door instead, thinking that it had all gone unnoticed. The old lady, however, had noticed me and was offended by my behavior. She later mentioned the incident to my grandmother, who in turn reported it to my mother. In the evening, my mother and I had a serious conversation on the matter. I denied ever having seen the neighbor to justify my actions, and after several inquiries, my mother pointed to a picture hanging above my bed. It was a sketch depicting Jesus Christ surrounded by children and women listening to him attentively. She told me that I could trick her or any other human, but I could never trick Him because He, the Lord, was able to see everything that I did, and He knew the truth. This news sounded horrible to me as I now recalled that I could never be indiscrete. This increased my shame exponentially. I felt that I had done something bad in not having greeted our old neighbor and was not thus as innocent and good as before. However, I still managed not to show that to my mother and left the room, pretending that I had told her the truth. When night came and I had to retire to my bed, I could not sleep because of the shameful thoughts occupying my head. To make the situation more dramatic, the moon was very bright that night and its rays illuminated that exact drawing of the Lord that had caused so much anxiety in me. Eventually, I settled on the idea that I needed to ask Him to forgive me for my bad deed and, after crying, a bit I fell asleep. The next morning brought me some relief and, after a while, I forgot about the incident.

After several months when my mother was invited by her Protestant colleague to attend the Baptist church for the first time, she asked me if I wanted to go with her. It was a special occasion, she told me, a celebration of Jesus from the picture in my room—Christmas. There was a special program prepared for children that she promised would end with presents. Needless to say, after my previous experience, this idea did not invoke much enthusiasm in me, and even an attempt to entice me with a present failed completely. Nonetheless, my mother somehow found a way to lure me to that church ministry, which I found a bit long and boring. My mother's subsequent attempts to bring me to church did not result in success until I turned six.

Despite rejecting her proposals to attend church, I already clandestinely believed in God, I just never wanted someone else to know about it. From the age of six onwards, I attended some Sunday school lessons at the Baptist church and even participated in summer camps with various degrees of engagement and interest. When I was 12, however, I informed my mother that I did not want to go to church anymore and would prefer not to hear anything about God and her church.



My mother did not insist on taking me to church and allowed me to enjoy my right to the freedom of belief. In the seventh grade, I met my two best friends (Yulia and Alina), one of whom, Alina, turned out to be a Pentecostal Christian. Alina was a devout believer and tried to invite me and our joint friend to church, but we always rejected her invitations. She tried especially hard that summer, inviting us to join her at the Pentecostal youth summer camp; we remained immovable. After several years of friendship, Alina and I experienced a period when we fought bitterly, and at one point did not communicate for close to half a year.

It was the last summer of high school when one evening, I was sitting near the window in our living room in Bishkek and pondering my future. Suddenly, I recollected the days of my childhood in the Christian summer camps where I had experienced deep peace and God's presence. My second thought was a regret that I could never participate in such camps again and that Alina, who could invite me to such a place, was not communicating with me any longer. To add insult to injury, I was no longer a child, already 17 and past the acceptance age for the Christian youth camps. At that very moment when I was having those regretful thoughts, the phone rang. I picked up the receiver and heard Alina's voice. To my surprise, she was calling to invite me to the upcoming summer camp. I tried to hide my amazement and said as indifferently as I could that I should talk about it with my mom first. In only seconds, after hanging up the phone, I was telling my mother about this invitation. Surprisingly, she was not so enthusiastic this time about my interest in religious activity. This was unusual as, in the past, she had wanted me to attend the Christian youth summer camps. I insisted and she reluctantly gave me her permission. Minutes later, I was informing Alina that I was in; it was now her turn to try, rather unsuccessfully, to hide her amazement. Discussing the situation with me later, she admitted that she had called me only "to tick the box" off her attempts. She had not expected me to listen to her, given our past discussions surrounding religion and Pentecostalism, and she had not held hope for a positive response. I, to her amazement, had not only agreed to join her but, in fact, was very much striving to attend the camp.

My time at the Pentecostal Christian summer camp turned out to be a crucial period in my life. Once again, I experienced a profound sense of internal peace and God's presence. As usual, I did not display my true feelings on this matter to the people around me and, despite my voluntary presence at the camp, was perceived as a hardcore "non-believer." However, more and more questions about my purpose in life and the existence of challenges had emerged in my head, and the camp and discussions on Christianity and spiritualism were resolving some of these. After my return home from the camp, I decided that I wanted to learn more about God and Christian beliefs. Covertly, I took my mother's Bible and read it when there was no one around. I was specifically focused on two books in it – the Proverbs and the Psalms – which I found the most appealing to my internal inquiries about the world around me and the One who created it. In two months of clandestine Bible investigations, I decided that I wanted to become a Christian and start attending church. My only problem was how to do this. Which Christian denomination and congregation was I to join?

Given my past experience, the same Protestant Baptist church in which my mother partook did not sound too attractive. The logical alternative fell to Alina's Pentecostal congregation. I, however, still did not want to seem outwardly excited about this issue and had to devise a plan. It was simple: I knew that the Protestants, including Pentecostals, usually invited people to their ministries once you began conversing with them about God or church. So, I resumed my visits to Alina's home and while there, I periodically raised the topic of God and church with her and her relatives, many of whom were devout Pentecostals. To my indignation, however, they rejected all chances to invite me to their ministry! I thus had to seek an alternative. From my childhood, I remembered that the Protestants celebrated Harvest Day in August. So, I decided to visit Alina again to seek out her ideas on this topic, hoping all the while to be invited to the celebration. Once again, she and her family were very much willing to describe the feast and its meaning in detail; however, they still did not invite me to join them for the ceremony. I then simply asked outright whether I, too, could attend the upcoming event. They were not overwhelmed with my proposal, perhaps knowing my past doubts, and remained speechless for a while. After a long pause, they asked me my reasons for wanting to attend. I won't go into further detail on our ensuing discussion, but I finally made it to the Harvest Day feast at the Pentecostal church in Bishkek. This is how my life as a practicing believer began in the summer of 2006 in Kyrgyzstan.

My spiritual conversion in the final grade of high school did not considerably change my relations with the people around me, including my immediate family. My mother, who remained a devout Baptist, and my non-religious father had no major problems with my religious explorations and respected my personal choices and beliefs as I did theirs. However, my studies (as a college freshman) at the Department of Religious Studies at the Kyrgyz-Russian Slavonic University (KRSU) turned out to be quite a challenging experience in the beginning. Firstly, prejudices against the Protestants inherited from Soviet propaganda were rather overt and strong among some of the old-generation professors. Secondly, my new decision to change my Christian denomination from Pentecostalism to Methodism—as I had found the former too conservative and the latter far more moderate and to my spiritual taste—was not well understood by my professors and peers. Despite such challenges, my formal study of religion at the university was incredibly enriching in terms of knowledge, skills, and interactions with people from various cultural backgrounds (Christians, Muslims, Jews, shamanists, atheists), and I will be forever thankful to my professors and groupmates for this wonderful journey into the world of comparative religions and beliefs.

My studies at the KRSU were fateful in regard to my professional career as well. During my junior year at the university, our academic coordinator arranged internships at government bodies for several students, including me. At the end of this internship, I was invited to work with the State Commission on Religious Affairs (SCRA) of the Kyrgyz Republic. As a result of my work there, my experience with inter-religious communication grew exponentially and I learned that many believers from different religious traditions – Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam and new faiths in Kyrgyzstan – had been facing similar challenges and had more in common than I initially had assumed. Although in the beginning it was challenging for my own religious beliefs to take such a

tolerant and embracing approach toward various religious groups, I soon clearly understood that empathy and understanding were absolutely necessary to promote justice in our diverse post-conflict society and that such an approach was what Christ the Lord would want as well.

It was 2010 and the country had experienced inter-ethnic conflict in the south while criminals had begun harassing minority faith believers and also posing danger to the security of the state. This was the time when I had internalized the importance of diversity and tolerance, without which no peace or stability would be possible anywhere on the planet, let alone in Kyrgyzstan. As a result of working at the SCRA, further good relations between myself and various religious groups in Kyrgyzstan were solidified. This allowed me, among other things, to assist in facilitating inter-religious dialogue between the European Council of Religious Leaders, SCRA and the representatives of religious groups in Kyrgyzstan. Up to the present, I consider my contribution to the establishment of the first institutionalized “Interfaith Council” in Kyrgyzstan as my most important professional achievement. But I also understand that all this might have been unthinkable for a young female representing an ethno-religious minority in a Muslim-majority country were it not Kyrgyzstan, a society which has historically been known as one of the most free and tolerant in the greater Central Asia and Caucasus region.

I thus cannot resist highlighting the strength and beauty of the Kyrgyz people’s culture and the hospitality that has made my homeland of Kyrgyzstan a relatively tolerant and peaceful place, allowing so many ethnic and religious minorities to live alongside the Muslim-majority population. I firmly believe that, despite all the challenges that the country has gone through, Kyrgyzstan will further blossom not only because of its natural resources or someone’s political will but due to its overall open-hearted people and spirit of religious and ideological tolerance.

## Conclusion

Without fear of sounding banal, I would like to reiterate that we are all children of our time and origin. The historical and cultural legacy of the previous generations remains invisible watermarks on our mindset. Looking back at the history of my homeland, Kyrgyzstan, and my family, I often ask myself whether my religious views would mean so much to me if the people before me with whom I share my religious identity had not had to go through all the trials of history, including the Bolsheviks’ regime, the Great Purge and Repression, the war against religion in the USSR, and its dramatic collapse and ensuing profound socio-economic crises. I do not think I have an absolute answer as to whether it is more my personality (nature) or the environment around me and my upbringing (nurture), which has made me the devout believer I consider myself to be. Perhaps, this can be a subject for further exploration within the scope of possible future ethnographic sketches. In the meantime, I am quite certain about one thing: while growing older, one notices more and more often that most things in life happen for a reason; we just may not see it in the moment when life tests us. With the temper of time, we understand the overarching goal behind every circumstance we were put in. As a scholar and as a believer (which might surprise some people), I also hope that one day I will be able to find a clear understanding for myself regarding the events my country, community, and family are going through today.

## References

- Adams, T. E., C. Ellis, and S.H. Jones (2017) *Autoethnography*, in Matthes, Davis and Potter (eds) *The International Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods*. New York: John Wiley & Sons Inc.
- Barg, A. (2013) *Do Sego Mesta Pomog Nam Gospod'* [The Lord Has Helped Us Up to This Place]. Bishkek and Steinhagen: Samen Korn.
- Bourdeaux, M., K. Matchett, C. Gerstenmaier, J. Ellis and M. Menconi (1984) *Religious Minorities in the Soviet Union*, London: Expidite Graphic Limited.
- Karpov, G. (1942) *Letter to Comrade Yaroslavskiy on Six Appeals of Religious, Patriotic Appeals of Church and Sectarian Leaders*, NKVD: Division 4, 3rd Directorate, 1.
- Miner, S. (2003) *Stalin's Holy War: Religion, Nationalism and Alliance Politics, 1941-45*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.
- Resolution XII of the 13th Congress of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks) on the Issues of Propaganda, Printing, and Agitation & on the Organization of Anti-Religious Agitation and Propaganda*, 17-25 April 1923.