

New Religious Landscapes of Kyrgyzstan

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In the quarter century since the fall of communism, the revival of organized religion has visibly altered public spaces—and the manner in which people engage them—in Kyrgyzstan. New minarets arise from urban and village centers,¹ pilgrimage sites attract increasing numbers of visitors, and new borders of social inclusion and exclusion are being drawn as faith assumes greater salience in the construction of ethnic and national identities. I propose research exploring Kyrgyzstan's new religious landscapes through the following: (1) a comparative examination of two recently constructed mosques, which I term “monumental mosques” or “mega-mosques,” one located in Bishkek and the other in Osh; and (2) a social survey of religious beliefs and practices in the Kyrgyzstani capital.

Research Question 1: How are state-affiliated “mega-mosques” implicated in nation- and state-building in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan?

To provide answers to this question, I will comparatively study the **Mahmud Kashgari Mosque**, which opened this year in Bishkek and reported as the “Central Asia’s largest mosque” (Daily Sabah 2017), and the **Suleiman-Too Mosque** in Osh, which was declared the biggest religious temple in Kyrgyzstan when it opened in 2012. My previous work (Derrick 2013) in Kazan, Russia—where I read a monumental mosque as landscape that “picture[s] the nation” (Daniels 1993, 5), a “text” that “transforms ideologies into concrete form” (Duncan & Duncan 1988, 117)—provides a model for field research in Kyrgyzstan. I will employ **participant observation**, actively reading the “mega-mosques” themselves, learning how to interpret the symbols inscribed in their materiality, their relative locations, and the human interactions that are facilitated in and around them; these and other observatory activities will occur regularly throughout the duration of my fieldwork, permitting my interpretive abilities to develop over time. Because landscapes are sites of narration (Diener & Hagen 2013), I will also conduct **discourse analysis** based on a range of textual resources I will collect over the course of my stay in the field; included among the resources that proved useful in my previous work are brochures and pamphlets produced by official religious institutions, newspaper reports and other archival data, and transcripts of official speeches and sermons. And I will conduct **semi-structured interviews** with elites (religious and political leaders) and non-elites alike to gain insight into attitudes toward the monumental landscapes and how their dominant narrations resonate with the public. These field activities, as illustrated in my work in Kazan, will allow me to ascertain how the “mega-mosques” serve to communicate and reinforce preferred (“official”) religious expression and the relationship of religion to dominant understandings of nationhood.

¹ Whereas only 39 mosques were in operation in 1990, the number reached almost 2,400 in 2014 (Galdini 2015).

Research Question 2: What is the nature of religious practices and beliefs among residents of Bishkek, and how does religion relate to political and societal relations between and within ethnic groups in this urban context?

To provide answers to this question, I aim to collaborate with a team of AUCA graduate students to measure and evaluate religiosity in the city by conducting a standardized **survey questionnaire** (N=500). The survey will be further supplemented by **semi-structured interviews** that I will conduct alongside student researchers. Scholarship on religion in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan has generally focused on elites (e.g. Fletcher & Sergeev 2002; Gunn 2003; Omelicheva 2010). Less studied is the everyday role that religion plays in the lives of Kyrgyzstanis, in terms of religious beliefs and practices, as well as the perceived role of religion and religious organizations in the eyes of non-elites; and lacking are robust survey data to evaluate and interpret the nature of any such revival among adherents to the country's traditional religions. As the country's capital and largest city, Bishkek provides an excellent context to conduct such a survey, as it is relatively diverse in terms of ethnic and religious groups as well as socio-economic status.

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