

Restoration of Islamic values and cultural traditions in post-soviet Kyrgyzstan

Cholpon Chotaeva

- I. Introduction
- II. Restoration of cultural traditions
- III. Islamic renaissance and Islamism
- IV. Modern religious situation
- V. Concluding remarks

I. Introduction

Disintegration of the Soviet Union and formation of new independent states gave further impulse to the processes of national and cultural revival, which have started in late 80-s. Reanimation of traditions has been observed in almost everywhere: from state and national identity, culture and religions up to various sorts of ethnic, clan, and regional peculiarities. The resurrection of traditionalization and Islamization has characterized development of Central Asia in the post-soviet era.

Islam is one of the elements of the Kyrgyz identity, as well as the language, belonging to clan, state, common historical destiny and territory. Reference to Islam is especially topical within the

frames of revival of the Kyrgyz national environment, mass revert to historical roots and moral values. Islam is part of historical memory of the people. Reislamization means not just the revival of Islam but also the emergence of the new Islamic trends.

However, retraditionalization doesn't mean demodernization and should not be considered as the movement back towards the pre-soviet era. On the contrary, the revival of state, national and cultural identity becomes of positive meaning as it reflects a deep process ahead.

Cultural revival with a strong religious component as determinative in the resurrection of traditionalization processes, the analysis of the modern religious situation and the role of Islamic factor in the post-soviet development of Kyrgyzstan, will be the subject of this article.

II. Restoration of cultural traditions

As a country of a rich historical tradition that dates to many thousand years back, Soviet and present-day Kyrgyzstan remains a traditional society, where tradition plays a leading role in society development. Like in any other developing country, traditional and modern, old and new here are strongly interlaced, so sometimes it is hard to say where one begins and the other ends. People seem to live in the two worlds, the past and the present. Social relations are regulated by traditions and customs.

Society is based on a group, a big collective, to which each individual is subject to. Dependence on a clan and community cultivates collective orientations or identity and a wish and an obligation to support existing social relations¹.

Of course, Kyrgyzstan, as the other post-soviet states, is not traditional in the strict sense of the word, at least for the reason that the former USSR was quite competitive with the modern developed countries, especially in regard to standards of education, science, health care, art and literature. But Soviet society mechanisms of development were based on traditional in content and social (collective) in form values. The communist regime was a mobilized regime that tried to establish alternative to capitalism forms of human activities. It rejected the mechanisms of private property, social inequality, market, competition etc, but replaced them with the politico-ideological methods of people mobilization: class and ideological values, political myths, and repressions. However, potentials of a system, based only on the politico-ideological mechanisms of people mobilization, are pretty limited. Therefore, all undertaken in 50-80-s attempts of modernization have failed, as they couldn't change the fundamental principles of the system.

Transition to market economy and integration into the world community contradict a usual world picture of the major population, their original cultural values. Increasing

¹ Muhaev R.T. "Politologia" (Politology). M., 1998, P. 318.

confrontation between cultural values, really functioning in the society, and social relations, forming on a new market-oriented base, leads to the discomfort of broad masses of population, causes their negative attitude towards reforms. That is why, reforming of the post-soviet Kyrgyz society requires establishment of the new basis and superstructure by transformation and evolutionary overcoming the previous ones, as well as success of reforming depends on settlement of the social-cultural contradictions.

Tied to the past and leaning towards an uncertain future, the new Central Asian states find that they must restore commitment to the absolute value of human dignity, when the ideology of Marxist idealism are seemingly being replaced by a harsh, self-interested and self-serving consumerist materialism, imported from the West. The promises of the Soviet socialism, the hopes and expectations for the better future, where there will be no “exploitation of man by man”, are now being replaced by the doctrine of individualist determination and self-reliance, a tenet that the principle of economy lies at the base of the social structure.

In these conditions, initiated in 1995 by the President of the Kyrgyz Republic, Askar Akaev, celebration of the 1000th Anniversary of the Kyrgyz heroic epos “Manas” was an appeal to the great historical past and an attempt to establish a national ideology.

The epos “Manas” is a genuine epic creation of the Kyrgyz people, which volume 20 times exceeds both Greek “Iliad” (15693 lines) and “Odyssey” (12110 lines). Originally, “Manas” was handed from one man to another orally but was written down in the beginning of the century.

The epos “Manas” was named after its main hero Manas, Kyrgyz legendary khan-Hercules, who led the Kyrgyz people in their struggle against foreign invaders. The epos reflects not just historic events, but also all sides of human activities, social, economic, political situation, struggle for independence, relations with other states. The epos widely portrays the life, goodness and evil, friendship and humanism, love for homeland, care for people’s well being. It describes main and decisive events of the Kyrgyz history from ancient times till the 18th century. The epos was undoubtedly influenced by significant events of the history of common Turkic ancestors: the powerful state of Huns, the Great Turkic Khaganate, the Khaganate of the Yenisei Kyrgyz, the State of Karakhanids etc, the heroic feats of historical figures Mode Shanyu (Ogus-Khan), Bars-Bek, Buur-Khan and others. The emphasis was made on the description of the struggle of the Kyrgyz for independence against Kara-Kytays (Kidans) and Mongols, Kalmaks and Manchjurs. The period of the epos completion coincides with the end of the struggle (17-18ths centuries).

The epos “Manas” is the subject of the Kyrgyz national pride, the peak of their spiritual life, which they inherited from their

ancestors. The epos praises common for all people values of social justice, honesty, humanism, love and tolerance. It is also a boundless source of the richness and expressiveness of the Kyrgyz language. “Today when Kyrgyzstan is on the way of its own development, the epos “Manas” became the symbol of unity and spiritual revival of the Kyrgyz nation, its culture, national dignity and self-consciousness“².

The Kyrgyz and Kazakh were the last among Central Asians to adopt Islam as an official religion. Islam didn't replace pre-Islamic believes, on the contrary, there was a peaceful interpenetration and adaptation of various cultural systems, later Mongol ideologies, and Islam that had led to formation of syncretistic culture. Syncretism of different cultural ideologies with the most viable ancient Turkic believes, laid the cultural foundation of the traditional mode of life of Kyrgyz society.

Esteem of ancestors, shamanism, tengrianism (worship of heaven), fetishism, totemism, and spiritualism were coexisted with Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism, Manichaeism for thousand years before arrival of Islam.

Still today the Kyrgyz retain very much of their pre-Islamic believes and traditions. Spiritualism as belief in spirit of dead ancestors (*arbak*) is very popular among the Kyrgyz. They believe that *arbak*, accompanying living, protect them against

² See: The Kyrgyz Republic President's Degree on preparing and celebrating the 1000th Anniversary of the Epos MANAS, June 1992.

spiteful people. As a consequence is a special respect for graves. The Kyrgyz used to build monumental mausoleums (*kumbez*) for their most favorite relatives, intimates and heroes. Among them are *Manas kumbez* (Mausoleum of Manas hero) in Talas, mausoleums in Osh, Uzgen, Safid-Bulan, Arslan-bob, Issyk-Kul, and Chui etc. Many people wear talismans with hidden inside suras from Quran, which they believe, may guard them from evil eye. Origins of many Kyrgyz tribes are bound up with animals: deer, wolf etc.

The Kyrgyz particularly honour *mazars*, holy places, where people pilgrimage and sacrifice. *Mazars* usually include objects of nature, mausoleums, and cemeteries. Historically, *mazars* substituted mosques for nomadic Kyrgyz. Pilgrimage to graves of saints has recently sharply increased.

The patriarchal social relations, combined with the nomadic life style, have been reflected in household and daily life. Family traditions, accumulated the wisdom of many generations, have been preserved until today. The high morals are manifested in the respect for elder people and the readiness to provide possible assistance to a relative or a neighbor in fortune and misfortune. The Kyrgyz hospitality, when the host may sacrifice the last of his sheep in honor of a casual guest, distinguishes the Kyrgyz today. Games, rope pulling, song competitions and horse racing take place at all big celebrations. During summer pasture in the mountains (*jailoo*) present Kyrgyzs pitch *booz ui* (Kyrgyz house-tent), drink *kymyz*, *bozo*, *jarma* (Kyrgyz

traditional drinks), herd sheep the same way as their ancestors did long time ago.

One of the most interesting places of any Kyrgyz city is bazaar. In bazaar one can get a concrete sense of the daily contact of modernity with tradition. In bazaar the merchants smile and offer goods, fruits, vegetables in the same way as their predecessors offered and smiled many centuries ago. Handicrafts as well as modern techniques and fashionable clothes are found here. In bazaar the contrast between the traditional and the modern is the most obvious, but the contrast can be found everywhere in Kyrgyzstan.

One of the pre-Islamic popular people's festivals, *nooruz*, has been announced an official day off of independent Kyrgyzstan. *Nooruz* is a holiday of Zoroastrian origin. It welcomes spring on 21st of March, the Day of Vernal Equinox, marking the beginning of a new year.

Several measures have been taken to preserve cultural traditions and heritage of the Kyrgyz. The law about Culture, the Presidential Decree on "Madaniyat" ("Culture") Program, the Concept on Madaniyat State Program of Development and Preservation of Culture and Art for 1997-2000, has been passed³. The Kyrgyz Ministry of Justice has registered 28

³ National Human Development Report for the Kyrgyz Republic 1999, Chapter IV: Social aspects of Development, Education and culture.

national cultural centers of ethnic minorities, living in Kyrgyzstan⁴.

Traditional culture of the peoples of Central Asia is the synthesis of originally Turkic and Iranian elements. Ancient Turkic culture, first of all, was affected by ancient eastern Iranian culture Zoroastrianism. “Turkisms” as a cultural phenomenon are mainly connected to the nomadic mode of life and cattle breeding, “Iranisms” - to oasis, farming and cities. Historical interaction and inter-enrichment of two cultures of Turkic and Iranian peoples make it is hard to discover which of the two components is primary and secondary as well as their correlation in the culture.

If we refer to the tradition of food in two cultures we will see some differences between Turkic and Iranian speaking peoples. Islamic custom of funeral repast had been transformed in both Turkic and Iranian cultures. For example, the Turkic has an ancient Turkic tradition to slaughter cattle at funeral. As more food (and meat) is eaten at funeral is as better for the soul of deceased. Settled Uzbek, Tajik, Persian, based on Iranian culture, didn't have such a meat tradition. On the contrary, their food were only vegetable dishes as well as the number of food and commemoration repasts were much less. Besides, there was

⁴ Namatbaeva T. “Democratic Kyrgyzstan: What lies ahead?"/ Central Asia: Conflict, Resolution, and Change, Section Two, Center for Political and Strategic Studies, December 1995.

a strict ban to prepare food in the house of departed within 3 days since the death. The ban was explained by the conception of sacral uncleanness of the dead body, which was Zoroastrian originally. During the Soviet desacralization of traditional pre-Islamic customs, struggle of Muslim clergy for religious “cleanness” of customs in order to bring them to conformity with the norms of classical Islam intensified. In a number of cities they persuaded people from slaughtering cattle at funerals, which started to be hold with praying only. *Aksakals* (old people, “white beard”) protested this innovation, insisting on implementation of the ritual according to the law of ancestors.

In Islam slaughtering cattle is not prohibited at funeral or latter commemoration repasts. It is said that souls of dead will be saved by prayers and fed with them. But most Mullahs, prohibiting to slaughter cattle, refer not to Koran but to the Iranian idea of invisible blood of the dead in his house, by this spreading the idea out. Muslim clergy were very active in propagation of this belief without thinking of its Iranian origin. As well as they were not always able to set limits between Islam and traditional believes and customs⁵.

Researches have proved the fact that Islam in Central Asia is mostly concentrated in domestic life and therefore, called it “domestic Islam”. “Domestic Islam” is Islam that is very much

⁵ Berdyev M. “Ocherki po Islamskoi kulture Turkmenistana” (Essays on Islamic culture of Turkmenistan)/ Central Asia and Caucasus, 1997, # 12.

“diluted” by pre-Islamic believes, or, on the contrary, so it depends on the extent of the people Islamization⁶. “Domestic Islam” involves customs, norms of behavior in domestic life, prescribed by Islam, *shariat* and *adat* (“habit, custom”, pre-Islamic system of customs and rules of behavior), from man’s birth till his death. In people’s consciousness Muslim is the one who lives according to this scenario.

Orozo Ait, the end of Muslim fast in the holy month of Ramadan, and *Kurman Ait*, the end of pilgrimage to Mecca and Muslim holiday of sacrifice, became official holidays of post-soviet Kyrgyzstan. Presently, more people observe *Orozo*, Muslim fast in Ramadan, especially in rural area; more children are being involved. *Orozo Ait* is also considered the Day of remembrance. In this day people visit graves of their dead relatives, invite Mullah and pray.

The first years of independence were marked by debates in the Kyrgyz Parliament, *Jogorku Kenesh*, on the restoration of an old Kyrgyz custom of polygamy. Restoration of that custom of ancestors was explained by the necessity to follow Muslim traditions and to increase the number of the Kyrgyz. The law didn’t pass as it wasn’t supported by the most deputies. Moreover, within developing the Constitution the issue to “adhere to moral values of Islam” was also raised.

⁶ Same.

Despite high level of literacy and education most of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan practically don't know the basic duties of Islam: *Shahadah* (telling a basic formula of Islam), a five-times prayer a day, a fast in the month of Ramadan, *Zakat* (deduction in favour of paupers) and *Hajj* (pilgrimage). These are norms of religiousness at an individual level and people who follow them don't amount to more than one among one hundred adults of Central Asia. It is much less than the number of people considering themselves Muslims. Thus, pursuing the five duties doesn't reflect the religiousness of Muslims in Central Asia. Most of Muslims of Central Asia adhere to ritual side of Islam. Nevertheless, adherence to Islamic rituals in Northern Kyrgyzstan is not that strict than in the South and neighboring Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

Circumcision, marriage and funeral are of the main rituals, implemented by the all Muslim population of Kyrgyzstan. These rituals were not even hidden in Soviet times as the population considered them as national customs.

According to accepted classification in the Soviet ethnography, all rituals are divided into calendar and family rituals. Family rituals consists of three large ritual cycles: children's, marital and funeral. These cycles replace one another, fixing the most important in social sense events in life of an individual.

Circumcision, or *Sunettee Toi*, is of children's customs, dedicated to the important event in life of boy-man. The holiday

symbolizes joining Muslim community. To celebrate circumcision is a duty of every Muslim. In this sense, it doesn't mean just the fact of circumcision, but has a wider social meaning towards not only boy but also his parents. Celebration of circumcision is a duty before society and community. It is of especial importance for his father and even elder male relatives grandfather and great grandfather.

In post-soviet Kyrgyzstan *Nike*, Muslim wedding, became popular among young couples. *Nike* is an Islamic tradition, sanctifying establishment of a new family. Invited *Mullah* contracts marriage according to the norms of *shariat*. Within research study on the subject of “purchased marriage” (with paying *kalym*) the students of the five Central Asian republics were asked a question: How many marriages do you think are contracted with invitation of Mullah? According to the answers the percentage of Muslim marriages was estimated: Tajikistan – 86.5%, Uzbekistan – 84.8%, Turkmenistan – 80.1%, Kyrgyzstan 70.3%, Kazakhstan – 32.4%⁷. So, the highest rates are observed in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. Kazakhstan has the least percentage of traditional marriages. As for Kyrgyzstan it is very close to Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. Herewith, it is worthy to note that the frequency of *Nike* in Southern Kyrgyzstan is much higher than in the North, where

⁷ Berdyev M. “Ocherki po Islamskoi kulture Turkmenistana” (Essays on Islamic culture of Turkmenistan)/ Central Asia and Caucasus, 1997, # 12.

much more people practice secular marriage as a result of developed city culture. Another distinctive feature of the last years is the revival of a tradition of early marriage, mainly caused by the decrease in the prestige of having a higher education as many other factors.

Nike is usually followed by organization of *Toi* (large feasts on the occasion of merry events). As in the case of *Sunettee Toi*, wedding *Toi* is of big social importance. Many people are invited. The most of them are relatives and friends of bride's and bridegroom's parents. Not to invite a relative or a friend may cause offence. Therefore, the both sides' parents try to settle many details of traditional ceremonies (payment for bride *kalym*, exchange of cloths *kiyit*, bride dowry *sep* etc) and of *Toi* celebration (cattle slaughter, number of guests, dishes etc) in advance. The most respectable guests are usually given special gifts.

All Muslims and even those who are not considered to be good ones follow *janaza*, funeral as per Muslim norms. It is a very important social event, where many peoples come and a lot of cattle are slaughtered. Right after farewell with the deceased people are invited to have a meal. As more they eat is as better for deceased⁸.

A distinctive feature of the Kyrgyz is incredible generosity within celebrations of *Ash* (1-year commemoration) and *Toi* that

⁸ See above about traditional food of Turkic people.

is usually explained by following Muslim traditions. On the other hand, members of the family have to demonstrate their new social status to all people they daily communicate. Not to entertain guests is shame and people prefer to get into debts and even ruin themselves to keep customs. Traditions are as strong that none can avoid to keep on following them at the risk of his good name⁹.

Telling about high expenditures, researches usually forget to mention profits that any celebration brings. In reality any family event includes definite losses and profits. For such events all guests bring gifts or money to compensate the family's expenses. All money is carefully recorded. Later on, the family has to return the money or gift of equivalent cost to the guests when they have their own celebration.

Outstanding of all Kyrgyz traditions is a tradition of bride kidnapping. The practice was outlawed during the Soviet era, and remains illegal under the Kyrgyz criminal code. Conviction carries a prison term of up to seven years. Nevertheless, kidnapping has surged since Kyrgyzstan declared independence in 1991, largely because it is seen as a Kyrgyz cultural identity marker that was denied the Kyrgyz by Soviet rule.

Historically, the rituals associated with bride kidnapping were very much different. The severe climate and lifestyle mandated

⁹ Abashin S. "Vopreki "zdravomu smyslu"?" (Regardless of "common sense"?)/ Vostok, 1997, # 5.

capable and equal male-female partnerships. Nomadic life was authentically democratic and feminist, men and women sought partners who could provide an above average chance for survival.

When a man decided to marry a woman he first asked her father permission to challenge the woman to a horse race. The woman received a fifteen-second start and a thick leather whip to beat off the man. The man followed the woman and if he could catch her and kiss her despite her use of the whip and while on horse back, only then the man would win “the right” to ask for her hand in marriage.

Today, the tradition has been corrupted. Bride kidnapping often occurs when a man, 18 to 25 years old, decides it is time to marry. If the man has no one in mind, he may start searching the streets of the village until he can find some attractive woman. When he finds the woman, he will stop the car and “kidnap” her, taking her by force, or by tricking her, into the vehicle.

In most cases, the man’s family may already has a full wedding preparation at home waiting for a “new bride”. He might bring her to a large feast with his family and village elders, and once she crosses the threshold, the oldest woman in the man’s family put *jooluk*, or scarf, on her head. The moment when the veil is placed over her head is considered her to be married. Still others claim that she is married if she spends one night at her “husband’s” home. Often the woman is afraid to reject the marriage because her family may consider this a

dishonor. In such cases, if she rejects the marriage, as sometimes happens, she will not be allowed to come back into her own home or village again.

In other cases, especially in the capital city of Bishkek, kidnapping occurs with the full consent of the woman and her family. Usually, in such instances, the man and the woman agree about date and time. Staged kidnappings, with the consent of both parties, seems to be the exception rather than the rule in Kyrgyzstan. However, there is no statistics completed on the actual number of kidnappings. According to by Ms. L. M. Handrahan¹⁰, when the Kyrgyz people were asked to name Kyrgyz local traditions, one out of ten respondents answered that bride kidnapping is one of their traditions¹¹.

¹⁰ Handrahan L.M. is director of the Finvola Group, a human rights and gender consultancy. She is completing her dissertation "Understanding Implications and Impacts of Gendered Ethnicity in Consolidating Democracy: The Case Study of Central Asia's Kyrgyzstan" at the Gender Institute of the London School of Economics and Political Science. L.M. Handrahan has spent two years living and working on human rights and gender issues in Kyrgyzstan.

¹¹ Handrahan L.M. "International Human Rights Law and Bride Kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan", Parts I, II, 24 January-1 February 2000.

III. Islamic Renaissance and Islamism

Islam is the defining feature of the native societies of Central Asia. It is not just a creed or a system of theological beliefs but a way of life. It is not a religion that exists only in the hearts of the believers; it is also the fabric of civilization. Islam is contemporary life and the direction of the future. In the agricultural valleys of Central Asia the call of Islamic heritage is the strongest. In the large urban areas and cities Islam is a shared commitment to the past. In Kyrgyzstan's mountains Islam is tradition and heritage, a mode of life rather than a set of laws.

Whatever it is strong or weak, Islam is manifested in the social order, the family structure, and the accepted canons of interpersonal behavior. Central Asia is basically conservative; the appeal of revolutionary doctrines, whether of the Islamic variety, the Marxist variety, or any other, is not strong in Central Asia¹².

Islam remains one of the main factors of confessional-cultural identification of the Central Asian States. Under the Soviets such identification existed non-officially. Officially national tradition was considered separately from religious one. Today, dual self-identity "Kyrgyz-Muslim" has been fully restored and

¹² Gregory Gleason "The Central Asian States: Discovering independence", Westview Press, 1997. P.170-171.

sounds naturally. In the middle of 90-s 95 % of the Kyrgyz considered themselves Muslims¹³.

Islamic renaissance, started in Gorbachev's perestroika and intensified in 90-s, was not just revival but restoration of "full Islam value", reconstruction of its natural shape, legalization of its non-legal religious and public structures.

Despite the campaign of atheization, undertaken by the Soviets, Muslims of Central Asia remained Muslims. Even in the Soviet era Islam was a regulator of social relations and affected social consciousness. Of course, in this case we can talk about so-called "domestic Islam", norms of traditional, authorized by *shariat* domestic behavior, and family relations.

At the same time, "high" dogmatic Islam was destroyed: the system of religious education of Islam was annihilated; Muslim community was bereaved of mosques; the most intellectual Islamic clergy, the carrier of religious culture and traditions, was liquidated. Islamic reforming that tremendously moved ahead Muslim community in Arabic countries, Iran etc. towards modernization didn't take place in Turkestan. And finally, Islam was deprived of the right to participate in the political life of the society. As a result Soviet Central Asian Islam became "defective" compared with Islam of the Middle East, with which it was organically connected.

¹³ Sultangalieva A.K. "Islam v Kazakstane. Istoriya, etnichnost', obshestvo." (Islam in Kazakhstan. History, ethnicity, society.), Almaty, 1998, P. 63.

The following basic features can characterize Islamic renaissance in Kyrgyzstan and the rest of Central Asia:

- Sharp increase in the number of people, considering themselves Muslims;
- Sizable increase in the number of mosques and theological institutions as well as the number of visitors, students and listeners of Islamic institutions;
- Recognition of religious Muslim holidays as official holidays of Kyrgyzstan;
- Legal distribution of Islamic literature through mass media (publications, TV and radio broadcasting);
- Enlargement of international contacts with Muslim states; participation of Kyrgyzstan into international Islamic organizations (OIC, ECO etc);
- Establishment and activity of Islamic political movements

Actually up to 1993 Muslims of Kyrgyzstan didn't have their own religious authorities and submitted to the Muslim Religious Board for Central Asia and Kazakhstan (Russian abbreviation SADUM), situated in Tashkent city. Until 1991 there was not a single Islamic institution in the republic. If someone desired to acquire Islamic knowledge he had to go to Uzbekistan, where there was the biggest medrese Miri 'Arab in Bukhara city.

Gradually *Muftiyat* (the Muslim Religious Board) of the Kyrgyz Republic became independent as well as Spiritual Boards of Muslims were established in every oblast. Dozens of religious institutions of secondary and higher education have been opened for recent several years: *Medrese* (Islamic school), Islamic Institute, Theological Faculty in Osh State University etc.

The majority of the Kyrgyz, Kazakh, Turkmen, Tajik, and Uzbek are the followers of the most liberal Hanafi School (*mazhab*) in Islam. *Sufism* played a great role in history of Muslim Central Asia. Sufis were the ideologists of Islamization of local population. Sufi missions of Naqshbandiya, Yasawiyah, Qadiriyyah brotherhoods were dispatched to nomads from settlements and cities of Maverannahr. Sufis were the basic carriers and interpreters of Muslim rules and rituals. This fact caused the existence of local forms of Islam, which organically combined pre-Islamic and Islamic concepts. Unlike other Muslim regions Sufi brotherhoods were not considered to be heretical, so, there was no definite separation between official and local Islam. Reislamization and independence of the Central Asian states has set up favorable conditions for Sufi brotherhoods to restore their activities, and allowed them operating legally. Activities of Sufi brotherhoods have renewed in the Fergana Valley. Sufis take an active part in social and political life. *Mazars*, graves of the most famous Sufi leaders, are objects of pilgrimage.

Islamic renaissance in Kyrgyzstan is characterized by speedy growth in the number of mosques and people went to Mecca for Hajj. During Soviet years there were just a few mosques, but today there are more than 2000. Annually about 3000 people go on pilgrimage from Kyrgyzstan to Saudi Arabia.

For the first time Quran, the holy book of Muslims, has been published in the Kyrgyz and the Uzbek languages. Islamic newspaper is being issued. A specialized on Islamic literature Iranian bookstore has been opened in Bishkek city¹⁴.

It is necessary to point out striking changes that have happened in the spiritual life of a village, where every settlement wants to have own mosque and man's authority is measured by his religiousness.

Meanwhile, "geography" of Islam in Kyrgyzstan is not uniform. It depends on ethnic population of the republic. So, regarding the extension of Islamization Kyrgyzstan can be divided into three zones.

First zone includes the capital Bishkek and the Chui Valley. In Bishkek the Kyrgyz is an ethnic minority that amounts to 33 % of the population while the Russian, Ukrainian and other ethnic groups of European origin (Christians) are majority - 54 % of

¹⁴ Alisheva A. "Religious situation in Kyrgyzstan"/ Central Asia and Caucasus, 1999, #4, P. 52-53.

the population¹⁵. Big cities of the Chui valley with developed infrastructure were traditionally cultural and trade centers. High level of education and multinational composition of local population caused the establishment here of moderate forms of Islam.

Second zone are northern regions of the republic with the overwhelming Kyrgyz majority. There are Naryn, Talas and Issyk-Kul oblasts. Historically, Kyrgyz nomadic tribes populated this zone. They accepted Islam very late in 18 century in lightly nomadic variation. This factor occasioned moderate attitude towards Islam, preservation of domestic Islam with elements of shamanism and local cults.

The majority of Muslim population always concentrated in the southern part of the republic, in the Fergana Valley: Osh, Djalal-Abad and Batken oblasts. Third zone was always the most Islamized because of prevailing ethnic Uzbek and Kyrgyz over the minimum rate of non-Muslim population. Originally, the Uzbek were “better” Muslims than the Kyrgyz nomads. Under the new conditions the Uzbek play the role of the initiators of reislamization.

The Fergana Valley, surrounded by high mountains from all sides, was geographically isolated from the rest part of

¹⁵ Tabyshalieva A. “Vzglyad na religioznuyu situatsiyu v Kyrgyzstane” (A glance at the religious situation in Kyrgyzstan)/ Central Asia and Caucasus, 1997, #6.

Kyrgyzstan. So, the population here since long time ago had much firmer relations with the Uzbek of neighboring Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, living in the valley, than with the other Kyrgyz of the republic. This fact conditioned the more religious South of Kyrgyzstan and the less religious North.

Presently, there are the most active Muslim centers here: Osh, Djalal-Abad, Uzgen, Safid-Bulan, Iski-Naukat, famous for their ancient holy places. One of the most popular is Suleiman Too (Suleiman Mountain) with the holy Mazar of Suleiman on the top. During Ramadan and Kurman Ait hundreds of pilgrims come here from other states of Central Asia.

There are 677 mosques, including 4 medreses¹⁶, in Osh oblast, but it is much less than the pre-revolutionary number amounted to 154 mosques and 7 medreses in Osh city. In Djalal-Abad oblast 127 religious organizations have been registered, including 123 mosques and 1 medrese.

According to the social poll, conducted by the Institute of Regional Studies in 1998 in the south of Kyrgyzstan, more than half of respondents have the holy book of Quran in their houses. 21.6% of respondents visited mosque once a year in Osh oblast and 24.4% - in Djalal-Abad oblast. Among mosque regular visitors the Uzbek are prevailing¹⁷.

¹⁶ Alisheva A. "Religious situation in Kyrgyzstan"/ Central Asia and Caucasus, 1999, #4, P. 53.

¹⁷ Same, P. 54.

Another aspect of Islamic renaissance is politization of Islam (Islamism). This phenomenon can be explained by the specificity of Islamic tradition and the current situation in the region. In Islam there is no division into spiritual and worldly. It is a total religion that covers all spheres of life, including politics. On the other hand, disappointment of the population at different socio-political forces of Central Asia, deterioration of the economic situation, urges them to appeal to other means of stability and welfare, among which is Islam¹⁸.

That is, Islamism occurs in response to sharp and universal social crisis, which produce critical environment: crisis of identity, crisis of legitimacy, bad management, repressions, cultural crisis etc. Under these circumstances people turn to traditional symbols and rituals. Reference to Islam gives people the feeling of stability, but soon they realize that the new religion is very limited. Official Islam as an agent between the authorities and citizens doesn't always provide reverse connection to the population, as the official clergy usually acts under the patronage of authorities. In societies of tremendous social polarization official clergy doesn't oppose social injustice. Of course, power and influence of political Islam are different in different Central Asian states. It depends on Islamic

¹⁸ Malashenko A. "Religion in socio-political life of the Central Asian States"/ Central Asia, 1997, #6, P. 58-59.

tradition in various Central Asian states. However, the tendency of political Islam to grow up appeared practically everywhere.

Corruption as a result of the ineffectiveness of ruling regime, social polarization and confrontation in society, spiritual disorientation and moral vacuum worked for the emergence of radical movements. Political extremism and terrorism, taken place in many Muslim countries, became reality for Central Asia.

1990 marked the beginning of Islam participation in political life of CIS countries. It was the year of establishment of All-Union Islamic Party of Rebirth in Astrakhan. Republican branches of Islamic Party of Rebirth as well as Islamic political organizations “Adolyat” and Islamic Party of Turkestan in Uzbekistan, “Alash” Party of National Freedom in Kazakhstan, Islamic Cultural Center in Kyrgyzstan, were established within that period. Most of those Islamic formations were not stable political organizations; authorities cut off activities of others. Despite this in 1996-1997 political Islam is strengthening in Kyrgyzstan. The influence of fundamentalist ideology is especially noticeable in the Fergana Valley, which became the base of Islamism and extremism in Central Asia.

The Fergana Valley, spanning parts of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, is one of the most vulnerable and explosive area of Central Asia. With 40 % of Kyrgyzstan’s territory and 51 percent of its population, the Fergana Valley has become an area whose economic importance is disproportionate

to its political influence and where social, political and ethnic tensions are higher than in the rest of the region. The independence of three states in 1991 has led to the division of the valley that has always been a common economic unit. The division has imposed special difficulties on the inhabitants as it has disrupted economic exchange, educational and cultural ties, and even family relations. All these changes have taken place in the conditions of a higher population density, more economic distress than other parts of Central Asia, insecurity, bred by the continuing wars in Tajikistan and Afghanistan.

The wars in the southern Tajikistan and Afghanistan have profoundly influenced the Fergana Valley in both direct and indirect ways. Some participants in these wars have developed ties to the groups in the Fergana Valley. The drug trade these wars have spawned is penetrating to Kyrgyzstan. Refugees have fled both conflicts, some have ventured into the Fergana Valley and nearby areas.

Kyrgyzstan with fairly open and democratic system became the harbour for political dissidents and religious figures from Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, who are imposed restrictions on their activities there. Growing presence of political exiles in the southern Kyrgyzstan has already resulted in the crisis that took place in Batken oblast in August 1999.

About 25 hostages were captured in Batken (in the Fergana Valley) in August 1999 by members of radical Islamic movement of Uzbekistan. Among them were four employees of

a Japanese company. The hostage takers' demands were the release of Muslims imprisoned in Uzbekistan and the pass to the Uzbek territory. Uzbek President Islam Karimov ordered to imprison hundreds of Muslims, pushing them into opposition to the government and toward an alliance with existing radical Islamic circles in Tajikistan and Afghanistan. In October the hostages were released under unknown conditions. The Kyrgyz government denied that any ransom was paid. Anyway, apart from the money that might be exchanged for ammunition and automatic weapons, the Batken fighters received a boost from the hostage crisis¹⁹. The Batken crisis underscores the fact that Islamic radicals are active through Central Asia.

Among the factors, stimulating Islamic revival in the region, should be mentioned the affection of foreign Muslim countries – Arab countries, Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, - as well as Islamic organizations that definitely feed political Islam in the region.

Collapse of atheism and religious boom of late 80-s – early 90-s allowed Muslim states to find access to Central Asia. They have provided Kyrgyzstan with humanitarian and financial assistance, organized and equipped Islamic centers, funded construction of mosques and medreses, printed and distributed Quran and other Islamic literature.

¹⁹ Erika Dailey “The politics of Hostage-taking: The crisis in Kyrgyzstan”, 2000.

Strengthening of Islam in social and political life of Kyrgyzstan made some political circles of these countries regard Islam as an effective instrument to influence its economic and political course. They considerably encouraged development of non-orthodox radical Islam, by training students studying in their countries and supporting extremist political movements in the region. Islamic missionaries of different Islamic trends, parties and religious organizations, penetrating into the region, have provided the population with illegal propagandist literature, translated into the Uzbek, Tajik and Russian languages. They have established contacts with local Islamists, who adopted their methods, organizational structures, and theoretical theses. The missions are very active in the Fergana Valley and southern Kazakhstan. Repressive measures made them operate secretly, and intensify illegal and underground ideological activities. Among them are activities of “Hizb ut-Tahrir”, “Akramiyyah”, “Brothers Muslims” etc. Adopted for local readers, books with the contents of main ideas, aims, and methods, call to revive the Islamic *Ummah* and restore the Islamic Caliphate. The goals purpose to be achieved through ideological work among the population. The members of these organizations in the Central Asian states are considered a part of the Muslims and are obliged to participate in Jihad. “Akramiyyah” that was founded by the former member of “Hizb ut-Tahrir”, Akram Yuldashev, used the experience of “Hizb ut-Tahrir”, but had some differences in its methods and organizational structure. For

example, the organization was based on productive-distributive community that managed small agricultural enterprises, some funds and storages. It organized own business, shops etc, to provide the members with work. It distributed own property to support poor and those families having many children. In conditions of unemployment such a socio-economic program became an effective mean to extend its influence. Such a group has been operating in Osh. Presently, the leader of “Akramiyyah” has been arrested by Uzbekistan authorities and accused. The activity of this organization has been banned²⁰.

The attractiveness of Turkish model of development and intensification of contacts with Turkey during the early years of independence didn't mean to strengthen the influence of Turkey upon Kyrgyzstan. The idea of Pan-Turkism and the creation of Great Turkistan was very popular among Turkish leading circles. Although the Great Turkestan has never existed in reality, for at least a century the idea of uniting all Turkic-speaking nations has inspired political revolutionaries in all Turk regions of Asia. As a political concept, the idea of Great Turkestan belonged to the post-World War I Turkish nationalist leader Kemal Ataturk, who engineered the creation of the modern Turkish state following the collapse of the Ottoman

²⁰ See for details Babajanov B. “The Fergana Valley the source or the victim of Islamic fundamentalism?”/ Central Asia and Caucasus, 1999, #4, P. 129-130.

Empire. In the modern period, the idea of Great Turkistan has been bound up with the expectation of some cultural and political confederation of the Central Asian states. During his tour of the Central Asian countries in April 1992 the Demirel, Turkish president, then pointed out the common with Central Asia historical and cultural roots, saying: “Both our history and culture begin here”²¹.

Turkish government has started to take care of the new states in the international scene and render economic and cultural assistance. In October 1992 a first meeting of the heads of Turkic states of Central Asia took place. Economic and humanitarian connections of the republics with Turkey have extended. Thousands of students were sent from the Central Asian states to higher educational institutions of Turkey. However, in late 1993 the interest to Turkish model of development has calmed down. Low economic potential of Turkey, discordance of the Turkish and the Kyrgyz mentalities, and the fact that Kyrgyzstan is more secular than Turkey, caused gradual weakening of Turkish image and rejection of Turkish model. Of course, it is impossible to say that Turkey has already lost its influence on Kyrgyzstan. Still today Turkey actively participates in many economic projects, develops trade and appears to be an important link of Transcaucasian corridor to

²¹ Gregory Gleason “The Central Asian States: Discovering independence”, Westview Press, 1997. P.174.

export raw materials from Central Asia to Europe. Still it is obvious that the Central Asian region will not be under the influence of Turkey as it was supposed before.

During the first years of independence all of the Central Asian presidents stressed the separation of church and state, and spoke against the formation of federation of Islamic governments. Adopted in 1993 the Constitution of the Kyrgyz Republic proclaimed the country a secular state. Contemporary political leaders – both in power and in opposition – find as little attractive in the ideas of Islamic political unity as they find admirable in the ideas of Islamic and Pan-Turkic cultural unity. The real support for the nationalist doctrine of Pan-Turkic unity comes from political activists outside Central Asia, particularly those influenced by European concepts of nationalism and nation-building. It is elemental and widespread unanimity of feeling – “cultural Islam” and not “political Islam” – that is destined to play a determining role in Central Asia’s future²².

Central Asian leaders appeal to Islam on purpose to strengthen their authority in the Muslim world. In order to support relations with Muslim countries they refer to the common religious identity and demonstrate their adherence to the idea of Islamic solidarity. All presidents of the Central Asian countries went on

²² Gregory Gleason “The Central Asian States: Discovering independence”, Westview Press, 1997. P.174-175.

obligatory for every Muslim pilgrimage to holy Mecca and Medina.

Since 1992 Kyrgyzstan is a member of Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC). It provides economic and technical assistance to the Kyrgyz Republic. Islamic Bank of Development has developed the program of investing a number of projects in Kyrgyzstan.

OIC is not indifferent to the choice of the models and ways of development by new sovereign Muslim states, their relations with Muslim and world communities. Another painful question is activities of Islamic political parties and their radicalization in the context of development of political Islam in the region and in the Muslim world as a whole. Specialists of OIC developed various recommendations in order to optimize them towards the Central Asian states. Among them are: to conduct systematical and deep analysis of domestic and foreign policies of the Muslim states of CIS; to decrease possible radicalization in activities of Islamic political organizations, prevent terrorism and extremism; to have a reasonable influence upon the regional situation, prevent conflicts; to search for the balance of interests of different states-members of OIC in the region, to prevent conflicts between them²³.

²³ Hasanov R. "Organization of Islamic Conference and Muslim states of CIS"/ Central Asia and Caucasus, 1997, #11.

Rapprochement in relations between the Muslim states of CIS and Islamic community will continue. OIC as a subject of international relations promote these processes, trying to balance interests of both sides.

IV. Modern religious situation

The religious situation in Kyrgyzstan in the second half of 90-s was marked by instability and was described as alarming by issued by the Kyrgyz Government the Degree “About the religious situation in the Kyrgyz Republic and the tasks of authorities on forming the state policy in the religious sphere”²⁴. Kyrgyzstan has become the scene of activities of many non-traditional sects from outside. Societies Krishna Consciousness, Baptism, Bahaism, Buddhism etc, subsidized by rich foreign donors, have become very popular among Kyrgyzstan’s population. Their activities became possible in terms of passed in 1991 the Law “About freedom of denominations and religious organizations”, where all citizens of Kyrgyzstan were guaranteed the right to pray any religion and propagate their believes. By August 1996 the Ministry of Justice has registered

²⁴ Degree of the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic N 345 “About the religious situation in the Kyrgyz Republic and the tasks of authorities on forming the State policy in the religious sphere” dated 10th of August 1995.

120 religious communities (in reality about 200) that belong to 40 confessions.

A purposeful introduction of various religious creeds and doctrines raise anxiety of the public structures and official acting religious centers and units. First of all, for the reason that more youth is being involved. Under the conditions of universal crisis and ideological vacuum they become more interested and engaged in the activities, pretending to play the role of mediator between the God and an individual, but in reality pursuing their own political interests.

Analysis of the religious situation showed that hitherto the authorities have neglected the issue. The situation was complicated by the fact that under the new changed conditions official religious centers of the Muslim Religious Board and the Episcopate of Russian Orthodox Church organizationally and financially had failed to implement their duties. As a result, activities of many registered missions that seemed to lie within the jurisdiction of these religious units remained out of control.

In March 1996 a State Commission on issues of religions was set up. The Commission has defined three main activities: 1) to control adherence to the Law about activities of religious organizations; 2) to promote tolerance between confessions; and 3) to protect spiritual freedom of an individual.

Later on powers of the Commission were extended by the Degree of the President of the republic dated 14th September 1996 “About the measures to realize the rights of the citizens of

the Kyrgyz Republic to the freedom of conscience and faith”. In order to determine an exact number of religious units and to control their activities three Temporary provisions: about registration of religious organizations; about registration of missions of foreign religious organizations and foreign citizens, arriving to the country with a purpose of religious activity; about religious education, were approved by the Degree. A new Law “About religions and religious organizations” is under development²⁵.

Temporary provisions state that all religious organizations in order to obtain the status of juridical person are registered in the Ministry of Justice of the Kyrgyz Republic. The others may operate on the base of registration in the State Commission on issues of religions. According to the provisions all foreign citizens, arriving to the country with a purpose of religious activity, foreign missions and organizations are obliged to register in the State Commission on the issues of religions.

Registration can be rejected in cases, if the activity of the religious organization contradict the Law of the republic, if it is a threat to state and public security, social stability, inter-ethnic and inter-confessions’ concord, social order, health and morality of the population. The organizations that are not registered will be banned.

²⁵ Marat Z. “Kyrgyzstan: crisis in relations between the State and the clergy is increasing”/ Central Asia and Caucasus, 1997, #7.

Islamization of the South and Christianization of the North are the main trends that characterize the religious situation in Kyrgyzstan. Present Kyrgyzstan has witnessed the crisis of traditional for Central Asia religious doctrines of Islam and Christianity. Protestantism has been superseded Orthodox Christianity. Traditional for Central Asia Sunni Islam of the Hanafi Mazhab and Sufism have been replaced by more radical Islamic ideology of the Hanbali Mazhab.

The Fergana Valley is often referred as the source of Islamic fundamentalism. Here Muslim community has divided into two: “true believers” and the followers of traditional Islam. “True believers” adhere the concept of “pure Islam” or so-called Wahhabism²⁶. They oppose luxury and pilgrimage to graves of saints; come out with restoration of Islam of the era of prophet Muhammad and four righteous Caliphs, modesty in domestic life. Carriers of fundamentalist ideology are basically ethnic Uzbek, middle-aged people and youth.

The idea to restore Caliphate became especially topical after liquidation of the Kokand Khanate in 1876. Adherents of the idea initiated fighting against inadmissible innovations in Islam

²⁶ The name came from Uzbekistan in early 90-s. It became popular through media and statements of Uzbekistan authorities. Wahhabism is the official ideology of Saudi Arabia. In reality radical movements in the Fergana Valley have a little common with Wahhabism of Saudi Arabia except for both are fundamentalist trends.

and pre-Islamic traditions. Local population didn't support the fight. Within hundreds of years "domestic Islam", kept on functioning in the shape of rituals and customs, became a part of their life, the system of values, and implanted their consciousness.

Reanimation of Islam in early 80-s in the Fergana Valley, especially of its local forms, was considered a threat to the Soviet mono-ideology. The position of opposed to SADUM non-official radical groups, not accepting the practice of heretical "domestic" rituals, suited authorities that regarded reviving "domestic" Islam a more danger. They agreed to use fundamentalists in propagandizing against "cults of saints". Grown up under the patronage of authorities fundamentalists became very active spreaders of "pure Islam". Despite further repressions they took deep roots in the Fergana Valley. Perestroika and reislamization made them operate legal. Moreover, many politicians appealed to Islam in their statements, trying to ingratiate Islamic leaders.

Awakening of national consciousness in the Fergana Valley should be regarded as a natural result of reislamization. Traditionally Islam has penetrated all aspects of spiritual and domestic life of its inhabitants. On the one hand, the alliance of fundamentalists and atheists has caused an irreplaceable damage to local forms of Islam, which always served as the balance against fundamentalism. On the other hand, the workers of SADUM as well as the carriers and interpreters of Hanafi

mazhab were small in number and were not ready for such speedy reislamization. Leaders of SADUM discredited themselves with Muslims, taking conformist position towards authorities. Non-official Hanafists could not take up a definite attitude in reislamization processes: some of them joined fundamentalists and Islamists; the others were satisfied by the liberal attitude of authorities²⁷.

Presently, among 1000 operating mosques there are 500 unregistered mosques in Osh oblast and 157 in Djalal-Abad oblast. New mosques are under construction. Almost all mosques have a students' group of "small medrese" type. Missioners from Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Iran, and Pakistan through big donations and under cover of religion have been disseminating here extremist concepts, interpreting theses of Quran and Sunna according to the political interests of their states. Aimed at establishment of Islamic state, many of them have tried to impose a negative attitude of the locals towards Jewish and Slavic peoples. Such efforts might lead to miscomprehension of the essence of the religion, fanaticism, and religious intolerance.

Some separatist tendencies to establish own Spiritual Board intensified in Muslim community of Osh oblast. Activities of so-called davatists (Islam callers) from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan,

²⁷ Babajanov B. "The Fergana Valley the source or the victim of Islamic fundamentalism?"/ Central Asia and Caucasus, 1999, #4, P. 126-127.

who urged to replace Imams, loyal to the authorities, by true fighters of Islam, have spread widely for a few recent years. Another group of Muslims propagated the idea of establishing the Uzbek Autonomy in the south of Kyrgyzstan. Two illegal schools have appeared in Suzak district of Kyrgyzstan, where the students were taught the principles of Islamic fundamentalism, including ideas of Jihad, and instigated to create an Islamic party. Local authorities had successfully neutralized the attempt to establish an Islamic party, undertaken at the meeting of the representatives of 5 mosques in Suzak village.

As a result of the operation, conducted by the Ministry of National security of the Kyrgyz Republic in spring 1998, a few Wahhabists, engaged in dispatch of Kyrgyzstan's citizens to the extremist training camps of Pakistan, have been arrested. The number of Kyrgyzstan's citizens being trained in those camps is estimated about 200 people²⁸.

The Spiritual Board of Muslims during last years were not able to settle problems, connected to organizing Hajj to Saudi Arabia. There was no committee responsible for pilgrims. Analysis of the results of the Hajj in 1995 has showed that during the Hajj the Spiritual Board couldn't provide transportation to go to Saudi Arabia and come back; some pilgrims were not citizens of Kyrgyzstan as well as they held

²⁸ "Vechernii Bishkek", 1 May 1998.

passports of the Kyrgyz Republic; three people died during the Hajj.

The crisis has been accompanied by penetrating into the country a great number of non-traditional religious missions and sects from abroad, both of Christian and Muslim origin. However, the overwhelming majority are missions of Christian orientation, such as “Jehovah’s Witnesses”, “Life-giving Grace”, “Adventists of the Seventh Day”, etc. More indigenous Kyrgyz are converted to Protestantism. Officially about 10,000 Kyrgyz accepted Christianity; somewhere conflicts between Kyrgyz-Muslims and Kyrgyz-Christians have arisen on that ground. Other conflict situations have appeared between the adherents of traditional Islam and Bahaism, a modern Islamic trend.

Supported by financial and methodological assistance from abroad, religious organizations set up their centers and units, spread religious books and magazines among the locals. Some of them broadcast their programs on private TV channels. Many Evangelic churches are widely engaged in charitable activities. They organize free lunches and rest rooms for old people, participate in construction of schools and hospitals, distribute humanitarian goods etc. Many of them open their schools, where students are taught theology as well as general school subjects. Often these schools give better secondary education than state schools, especially those in periphery. In the south more children are being sent to study at mosques’ schools.

Protestantism in Kyrgyzstan has a long history. The first Baptist Church was established in 1880 and since that time it has been always legal (not to account a few pre-War and War years). In the Soviet era Baptists were mainly Germans, Russians, Ukrainians. Since most of Slavic population has emigrated, more Kyrgyz are successfully converted into the new religion.

The most popular among the Kyrgyz are “Jehovah’s Witnesses”. Their Congress in Bishkek gathered 2,437 people, including the Kyrgyz amounted to one tens of the total number. In September 1997 among 7,000 people there were 1,000 Kyrgyz.

The religion of the second popularity is Christians-Baptists. They attract the greatest number of the indigenous population. Presently Christians-Baptists have 3,000 permanent members and visitors are ten times as large. United Church of Christians of the Evangelic Faith, “Grace”, “Antiohia” Protestantist Evangelic-Christian Church, “Adventists”, “Emmanuel” have a big influence upon the citizens. They are successful not only among the youth but among middle-aged people also.

Some evangelic churches put into practice to hold meetings in the Kyrgyz language. Bible College and Educational Center of Protestantist Church of “Emmanuel” train protestantist preachers for Kyrgyzstan and rest Central Asia. There are first Kyrgyz-priests. The Bible has been published in the Kyrgyz Language.

Women are the most sensitive in religious issues and active propagandists of religious creeds. Most converts of the new imported religions are women. In early 90-s women were first welcomed by Protestantist communities. 80 % of “Jehovah’s Witnesses” new comers are women²⁹. The women, graduated from clerical educational institute, are possible to preach. Those, obtained Muslim education, are deprived of the opportunity to be employed.

For long time the Soviets had cultivated intolerance toward different-thinking peoples. And even today racially and culturally mixed religious communities for many people seem to be wrong. They hardly accept the freedom of faith. So, Kyrgyzs, turned into Christianity, have to suffer from a negative attitude, mockery and disdain, sometimes even violence. A lot of conflicts have been bound up with the practice of funeral. Traditionally the Kyrgyz bury their relatives in family cemeteries. As soon as some Kyrgyz become Christians, local Muslim community opposes to bury them with other Muslims.

The advent of wealthy missionaries from USA, Germany, and South Korea alarms both Muslim and Orthodox leaders. In spring 1995 they appealed to the President of the Kyrgyz Republic to outlaw all missionary activities in Kyrgyzstan. In October Tashkent hosted a Central Asian Conference of Muslim

²⁹ Sitnyanskii G. “Cross or crescent: Kirgiziia in front of the choice of belief”/ Central Asia and Caucasus, 1997, #12.

and Orthodox representatives to coordinate efforts in resisting Western missionary movements. The participants tried to persuade Central Asian governments to ban missionary activities, especially Protestant, and set up conditions favorable for traditional religions.

V. Concluding remarks

Resuming the importance of Islamic factor in socio-political life of Kyrgyzstan, we will make the following concluding remarks:

1. Islam is not the factor of consolidation of Kyrgyzstan's society. It may be explained by the presence of numerous Russian-speaking population in the republic. On 29th May 2000 the parliament passed a law, which recognized Russian as an official language of the Kyrgyz Republic. The efforts are being made towards creating a civic society for all regardless of ethnicity and confessional belonging, which is enshrined in President A. Akaev's oft-quoted slogan: "Kyrgyzstan is our common home".
2. Islam is not the factor of consolidation of the ethnic Kyrgyz. Regional, tribal, clan interests are of priority over belonging to common religion of Islam. Within the frames of started retraditionalization tribalism has been legalized and got an opportunity to participate in State

building. Practice of the last elections of the Kyrgyz President and Parliament has showed that despite political disagreements the President and the majority of national deputies were elected only due to support of kinsmen.

3. Islam is not the ideology of State building. Adopted in 1993 the Constitution of the Kyrgyz Republic proclaimed the country a secular state, where politics and religion are separated. Islamic slogans, widely applied to implement worldly activities and develop economic and social strategy in many Muslim countries, don't take place in Kyrgyzstan.
4. Islam is not the factor of political stabilization. It is "cultural Islam" and not "political Islam" that is destined to play a determining role in Kyrgyzstan's development. Contemporary political leaders find as little attractive in the ideas of Islamic political unity. It is elemental and widespread unanimity of feeling – "cultural Islam".
5. Islam is not the factor of inter-state consolidation of the Central Asian states at the regional level. Central Asian leaders very rarely refer to the common Islamic identity.
6. Nevertheless, despite its limitation Islam in Kyrgyzstan remains some social and political reality. It is part of the system of values, a regulator of social relations, which keep on affecting the population consciousness.