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**The Religious Conversion of Women in Interfaith Marriages from Christianity to Islam: Reconstructing identity in the dialogue with self and others**

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts in Sociology at the American University of Central Asia

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## **Abstract**

This research aims to understand the phenomenon of the religious conversion of women in interfaith marriages from Christianity to Islam. First of all this paper explores the idea of a change of the self-identity of converts and the correlation between attachment to the family of origin of converted women and their decision to change their religion. In order to explain this phenomenon the Dialogical Self theory by Hermans (2001) and Attachment Theory were adopted in the research. Five in-depth interviews were conducted for further analysis and discussion on this topic.

The research has a specific significance in the area of sociology and religious study because it presents qualitative data with narrow analysis of religious conversion. It helps to examine the phenomenon on the individualistic level and explore deep analysis in this area. Moreover the study focuses on the topics of family institution, self-identity, and interethnic marriages in Kyrgyzstan.

## Introduction

The Soviet Union era in the history of Kyrgyzstan played an important role in terms of not only the political sphere but at the same time impacted a lot on the social and cultural spheres. First of all the ideology of the USSR was presented as an opposition towards any religious practices in the Central Asian region. Secondly during this period of time there were no borders between countries and people easily moved from one place to another.

Consequently Kyrgyzstan became a multinational country, where Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Russian and other nationalities and cultures started to settle and live. However after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Kyrgyz republic got its independence and tried to revive local traditions including religion, Islam. On the other hand, as Kyrgyzstan became a democratic state a rapid increase of different religious practices occurred. (Tabishalieva, 1997)

According to statistical data, before the collapse of the Soviet Union there were 6 religions in Kyrgyzstan, nowadays the number of religions have increased to 30 various religions.

(Duishenbiev, 2011) Consequently, nowadays there are 1648 mosques and 46 Orthodox churches, as well as 30 churches of other Christian denominations, of which 15 belong to the Protestant church. In addition, there are Buddhist and Jewish communities, and new religious movements for instance Jehovah's Witnesses, The Church of Jesus Christ and the Moon Church. In spite of a diversity of religions, the religious majority in Kyrgyzstan is the Muslim community. It consists of more than 80 % of the whole population. (Institute for Strategic Analysis and Forecasting [ISAF], 2013) At the same time the topic of religious involvement and practices is investigated by research. The data shows that in spite of the process of globalization and modernization about 90% of the population practice religious traditions and rituals in Kyrgyzstan nowadays. (Nikolaeva, 2012) Moreover Duishenbiev

(2011) stated that after the collapse of the Soviet Union the new religious ideological statement came with the revival of Islam.

According to religious scholar Denis Brusilovski, “In the contemporary Kyrgyzstan the problem of the relation and interaction between religion and democracy is extremely important because the future of social and state structure of the republic directly depends on the development of the religious situation” (Nikolaeva, 2012, p.3) The existing religious situation has few directions in terms of social structure. One of the main things is that democratic policy gave a rise to various religious movements and gave people freedom to choose. Therefore we can trace the tendency of religious conversion in different parts of the country. The studying and researching of the topic of religious conversion itself started few decades ago and has different perspectives and approaches within the field of sociology depending on the research objectives. However most of the studies relating in the field were quantitative researches and report on the statistical analysis of the level of religious conversion. (Cornwall, 1987; Salisbury, 1969; Sintang, Mohd, Hambali, Baharuddin & Ahmad, 2011)

In my study I want to raise the topic of religious conversion as well and give new vision on the phenomenon through the lens of gender and family institutional aspects. As Kyrgyzstan is a multinational country where a lot of ethnicities and cultures live with each other, interethnic marriages became a part of our everyday life. People with different cultural and social backgrounds meet each other, fall in love and consequently marry. However in some of the cases of interfaith marriages the phenomenon of religious conversion appears. For instance, a Christian woman gets married to a Muslim man and then converts to Islam or vice versa. However according to various sociological researches the tendency of religious conversion in interethnic marriages tends to occur with wives. In my

research I want to investigate the phenomenon of religious conversion in interethnic marriages, how the process of religious conversion happens either for wives, for their partners and their families of origin, what changes they have because of this conversion in their lifestyle and how their identity negotiation occurs between an “old” self (before the conversion) and a “new” self.

The following research questions are investigated in the research:

- How do women come to the decision to convert to the religion of their husbands?
- How does becoming a Muslim influence the process of identity negotiation of self?
- How does Christian family of origin influence the decision making process of the converted Muslim women?

The first part of the paper will discuss the previous researches that were conducted in Kyrgyzstan. Secondly I will introduce Attachment theory, which explains the religious conversion in general. After that the chapter of explaining religious conversion of women in Kyrgyzstan will be presented. The last part of the literature review will discuss the Dialogical Self theory.

The second one will explain methodology, the ethical statements and limitations of the research. The last part will be discussion and analysis of gathered data and its connection with theoretical framework.

## Literature Review

The topic of religious conversion has been investigated during last few decades in the field of sociology, anthropology and psychology. It has different dimensions and perspectives. Few related researches were conducted in Kyrgyzstan.

The one of the recent study, which was conducted in Kyrgyzstan, was investigated by David Radford (2008). He studied particularly the religious conversion from Islam to Christianity in post-Soviet space and conducted in depth interviews with converts. He touched upon the topics of the religious market, Kyrgyz identity and social networks. His ethnographic study gave an explanation how Kyrgyz Christians interact within the Muslim community and what changes happen within their own identity due to the conversion to Christianity. (Radford, 2008) According to Radford, Kyrgyz Christians face great opposition from their Muslim families. However over some period of time the tensions between Christian converts and their families decrease. “The family and community come to some level of rapprochement and toleration with Kyrgyz Christians...” (ibid p.125) Another similar study was conducted by Pelkmans (2010), where he reconstructed the conception of religious conversion in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan and Georgia. His main focus related to Kyrgyz converts who became Christians. He argues “in Kyrgyzstan conversion was often a reaching out to new horizons in order to escape the destitute socio economic situation or to overcome a personal crisis, crossing ethnic and religious boundaries in order to undo exclusionary social effects and gain entrance into a new moral community.” (Pelkmans, 2010, p. 126) Moreover he made a comparative study between these two countries and explored the idea of the revival of Islam after 1991. (ibid) These researches did not mention gender aspects and the topic of interethnic marriages. Also they investigated specifically the conversion from Islam to Christianity.



According to Richardson (1985) the study of religious conversion has been investigated within old and new paradigms in contemporary sociological and psychological fields. Conversion in the old paradigm is presented in passivist and deterministic terms. Kilborne and Richardson (1989) explain the old paradigm, introducing the conceptualization of religious conversion as “sudden and dramatic, irrational or magical in nature, involving a powerful, external .... change from one static state.”(ibid p.1) On the other hand, the new paradigm suggests an idea of an active individual involving in the process, the importance of motifs and personal change as well as “rational interpretation of experiences, gradual and continuous conversion(s), negotiation between the individual and the potential membership group, and belief change that follows behavior change, as the individual learns the role of being a new convert.” (ibid p.2) Despite these two paradigmical approaches are perceived to be opposite theoretical frameworks, the researches adopted the mixture of these two into the studies depending on particular topic of analysis of religious conversion. According to numerous researches (Sintang, Mohd, Hambali, Baharuddin, Ahmad, 2011; Hacker, 2009;), religious conversion in interfaith marriage can be explained as active individual processes that should be examined through the personal experience of women.

There are various interactionist theories that explain both active involving of an individual in the process of conversion and an influence of social context and surroundings. This approach supports the idea of an individual choice of people to convert, following changes and reconstruction of the self-identity. All these internal processes cannot be viewed without an impact of external ones such as community, family, and the quality of interaction within society in general. (Kilborne and Richardson, 1989) This perspective does not explain why the conversion occurs, but how actually the process of the transformation of an individual happens and what kind of social interaction a convert has before and after it.

“Conversion settings vary in social support, specific kinds of interaction, number of roles, types of rituals, normative pressures, status and power hierarchies, patterns of communication, organizational structure, and degree of community, degree of continuity with other socialization experiences, resources and opportunity structures and so on.” (ibid p. 10) The situations where religious conversion happens have a diversity of settings, and it leads to different behavioral patterns and self-perception of converts. Depending on the situation and motifs why people decide to change their religion, the following reconstruction of behavior and self-identity happen.

### **Attachment Theory**

The one of the grounded theory that was adopted in order to explain religious conversion of adults is Attachment Theory. The main focus of the theory is based on the relationship between children and their caregivers (in most cases, a mother and a father). It is claimed that “The attachment figure alternately serves two key functions: He or she provides (1) *a haven* of safety and comfort to which the infant can turn in times of distress or threat, and (2) *a secure* base for exploration of the environment in the absence of danger.” (Kirkpatrick, Shaver, 1990, p. 317) The founder of attachment theory is Bowlby (1969), who stated that this attachment factor can explain different behavioral patterns of adults. According Kirkpatrick and Shaver, there is great correlation between childhood attachment to their parents and their adulthood religious beliefs and involvement. Through quantitative analysis they proved that children whose family ties were not that strong and the attitude of parents was not caring, they tend to change their religion when they become adolescence or during adulthood. At the same time religious affiliation of parents is also one of the factors, which lead to religious conversion. The study of Kirkpatrick and Shaver proves that people usually converted to another religion when there was lack of religious practices in their

families. Also mother plays more important role in attachment with children and consequently her relationship with children became a most important factor for children. “The findings on sudden religious conversion were striking: More than 25% of the respondents reporting avoidant attachment relationships with their mothers also reported having had sudden conversion experiences during adolescence; 44% in this category reported such experiences at some time in their lives. In contrast, fewer than 5% of respondents in the other maternal attachment groups reported adolescent conversion, and fewer than 10% of these respondents reported ever having experienced such conversions.” (ibid p. 330)

Therefore the conversion of women to religion of their husbands can be also explained by relationship with her family of origin and its religiousness.

### **Explaining Religious Conversion of Women in Kyrgyzstan**

Examining the topic of religious conversion in interfaith marriages, the gender implication should be taken into account. The previous analogical researches that were done in the field state the idea that female conversion in interfaith marriages is a more common phenomenon than males' conversion. Salisbury (1969) explains this situation with Sex Role Model, “because of the females' traditionally subordinate family role, they should convert more frequently than their husbands; i.e., the sex role of women in the family constrains them to adopt the husband's faith.” (p. 126) Also Windson and Sandomirsky (1991) discussed the women's role in religious affiliation. They state that even though there is a same pressure of husband and wife toward each other in order to make marriage religiously homogeneous, women are more likely to be religious affiliated and involved in religious practices. Using Sex Role Model, it is evident that women's role in the family relates to

taking care of household and bringing up children. It means that women tend to be more active in the process of the socialization of their children. Therefore women are responsible to build religious identity of their children, which is identified by paternal side. In order to give such knowledge to children it makes women convert into the religion of their husbands.

The current situation of religious conversion of women in interfaith marriage in Kyrgyzstan has the same gender implication. Moreover the fact that Christian women convert to religion of their Muslim husbands can be explained by Gordon's idea of assimilation of a minority group. As Islam is a major religion in Kyrgyzstan, the Christians as a minority religion are more likely to convert in interethnic marriages. (Roer-Strier, Ezra, 2006) "Members of a minority group lose their distinctiveness, such as their ethnic and religious identities, and assimilate into the majority culture by intermarrying within the dominant group." (ibid p.4)

Examining the reasons behind the decision to convert to religion of husbands, one of the important questions is not why it happens but actually how this religious conversion is occurring within an individual identity. There are various perspectives in this field and one of the new and innovative one in the contemporary social science is Dialogical Self theory.

### **Dialogical Self Theory**

The founder of the Dialogical Self theory is Hubert Hermans, which gives a new explanation of self in the contemporary globalized world. He argues that dialogue happens not only between people who are involving in communication, but at the same time it happens within one's identity. Hermans argues that the emergence of the dialogical self has its importance in the globalized world where a lot of cultures, ideas and experiences exist. People are not framed in local cultures anymore. They can move, meet new people and

communities. All these opportunities create different identities within one person.

Sometimes these identities could contradict and oppose each other. However the dialogue exists not only within one person, but at the same time the dialogue with community, to which an individual belongs to, plays an important role in self-identity. “Dialogues not only take place between different people but, closely intertwined with them; they also take place between different positions and voices in the self” (Hermans, 2001, p. 6)

Joanna Krotofil (2011) in her study of Polish women who migrated to the UK and converted to Islam applied the dialogical theory to the examining the phenomenon of conversion. Krotofil (2011) studied religious conversion and its impact on identity negotiation of an individual. The findings of in depth interviews with converted women showed “they make clear distinctions between their past self – before they became Muslims, and their current self – as Muslims. From the dialogical perspective adopted it can be argued that the very act of naming or recognizing one’s own beliefs as a particular religious tradition means engaging in dialogue with both adherents and those opposed to that religion and taking particular position in relation to them and it therefore marks a very significant moment in the identity negotiation process.” (Krotofil 2011 p.2) According to Herman, an identity should not be conceptualized as essence but rather as existence, which always involves in the process of positioning, repositioning, negotiation and recreation. That is why “this basic assumption of the Dialogical Self theory allows conceptualizing the conversion to Islam not only as a change in religious domain but also as renegotiation of social, gender and national identities.” (ibid p.2)

## **Methodology**

The qualitative in-depth interviews were conducted within the research. The method of data gathering was chosen based on the research questions. The religious conversion is investigated through the lens of women's stories and experience who currently converted from Christianity to Islam in order to analyze the process of identity negotiation of these women. Therefore a one-to-one interview is the most appropriate way for data collection for the study. The participants were recruited through personal contacts, and snowball network selection was adapted in the study as well.

### *Participants*

Overall five in-depth interviews were conducted in the research. All the interviewees were asked for voluntary participation in the research and offered to provide additional interviewees. All the respondents were provided with confidentiality and anonymity. The fieldwork was carried out in 2014, in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. The target population was married women who are currently converted from Christianity to Islam. An economic status and age did not play an important role for the study for the study. Therefore the main criteria were marital status and the type of conversion (particularly from Christianity to Islam). All gathered data are used in data analysis and help to answer the main research questions.

All women were at age from 27 to 57 years, all of them have Christian family of origin subsequently converted to Islam. Four women were born in Kyrgyzstan and one was from Russia. The women had been married 5 to 31 years and it was the only marriage for them. All women have children from age from 3 to 30 and one is pregnant. At the same time all participants have higher or professional educational level. Four of them do work and one of them is housewife. All women currently live in Bishkek.

### *Procedure*

The interview schedule was developed on the basis of research questions and has been analyzed and constructed in accordance with previous research questionnaires related to the topic. Moreover interview questions had a pilot version and have been pre tested before the actual data gathering. Each participant was interviewed separately and the same questions were asked. The questions were constructed from the general to more specific. The questionnaire consists of three major parts: socio-demographic information (age, profession, number of years married, number of children and etc.), the encounter of the partner and its influence on the relationship (how, when do you meet, doubts and concerns about the relationship, adaptation of the relationship in their lives, the process of marring and conversion, the influence of husbands in the process of conversion) and self and family identification (self-identification before and after conversion, the relationship with family of origin and husband's family). As the interviews were semi-structured some additional questions were asked during the interviews.

As the respondents were found by personal contacts, they were firstly reached by their acquaintances and told about interviewer. After that I was telling them about the topic of my study, some personal information and asked for interviews.

The location and time were chosen by respondents. Three interviews were face to face and two of them were conducted by phone. All of them were recorded and afterwards transcribed. The length of all interviews lasted from 40 to 80 minutes. In order to get reliability of phone interviews, member-checking procedure were conducted. The women, who were interviewed by phone, were invited for meeting in order to ask some more questions about the topic. Afterwards the answers were compared to the phone interviews.

### **Ethical Statements**

The topic of religion is considered to be quite sensitive for respondents the important part of the interview was building the rapport with interviewees. Because of this each interview was started from information about researcher and ice-breaking or general questions that respondents had. The permission from respondents was taken about recording during the interviews. Also the interviewers were assured that getting information will be confidential and will be used only in academic purposes. That is why all the names used in the paper are fictional. Moreover respondents were informed that they could refuse to answers any questions.

### **Limitations**

Because of the limited quantity of respondents the data could not be generalized to all converted women. Moreover presented data particularly focuses on the religious converted women from Christianity to Islam. Also the personal characteristics of the researcher should be taken into account.



## **Analysis and Discussion**

### *The starting point of religious conversion*

In spite of the fact that religious conversion happened due to marriage in all cases, there are a lot of differences of respondents' narratives how they came to the decision to change religion, how the process occurred and what their own reflections on their conversion process. As the research findings show the Islamic law does not allow Muslim men get marry non-Muslim women, therefore the religious conversion in most cases happened before marriages. However from five interviews two women told that the decision to change religion was taken during the marriage.

- “My husband never asked me to change my religion and become a Muslim; I came to this decision by myself after 2 years of being married... Islam became very close to me.” – Nataliya
- “I have never been too religious person... Yes, my family was Christian however we have never been too close to religious practices in my family, therefore when I got married I have chosen to be closer with my husband and share the same values as he does.” - Tatyana

From these interviews it is clear that the decision to transform into the religion of their husbands and become Muslim, women have taken by their own will. It was conscious decision to become Muslim women. However the interesting point is that, what the reasons behind of these women were to convert. As two respondents used the word “closeness” to Islam, to husband, they explained the process of conversion as spiritual change and their own eternal desire to become a Muslim. However they also mentioned a lot about the benefits that they got after the conversion. It relates to the

change of the attitude of husbands and especially husbands' relatives toward them. They got respect from the relatives of their husbands and they were very proud of it. Therefore I can say those social rewards were very important part of their transformation and becoming Muslims.

Three of women decided to convert in order to get married. It means that the fact of conversion was based on the rational choice or was like a prerequisite for women to get married Muslim men because of religious traditions.

- “My future husband told me before the marriage that I have to convert to Islam, because he cannot marry me because I am a Christian. His religion does not let him do it.” – Nadejda

Two other women told similar stories about how this conversion happened to them due to “need”. However this conversion became a very important transformation point in their lives for all the respondents. It has changed their lifestyle, social surroundings and their identities. The women stated that even though the conversion happened unconsciously in some cases, the further transformation process was totally under their control and their own choice. But the thing is that these wives got information about Islam, Islamic rituals and traditions from the husbands and their relatives. Only one woman went to mullah by herself (Muslim men educated in Islamic theology) in order to get knowledge about Islam. It means that there was an influence of husbands anyway, because the information that they know about Islam is based on the husbands' and relatives' explanation and interpretation.

#### *The relationship with the families of origin of converted women*

As Sintang, Mohd, Hambali, Baharuddin and Ahmad (2011) argue in their research the interaction and relationship of new converts with their family of origin is one of the

important topic for discussion. They conceptualize four types as contentious, neutral, accommodative and supportive. (ibid) In my research I focus on the attachment theory hypothesis in order to explain why these women convert and the relationship of family ties and future decision to change religion. Moreover I try to connect the relationship in the family of origin to religion in general and the reaction and attitude toward the decision of their family member to convert.

According to my data, the respondents faced a lot of difficulties with their family of origin. First of all this happens because the family was opposing to the decision of women to convert to Islam. As Uliya and Anya said their parents worried about this decision because they were afraid of “losing connection with their daughters”.

- “My mother is not against Islam, she highly respects Muslim people, but when I came to her and told that I am going to become a Muslim as my husband, she was very upset. She did not support me and now I realized why... She was just afraid to lose her lovely daughter.” – Anya

In three other cases the families treated this decision either well or sometimes support it. But the interesting fact is that how religion was presented in these families. According to attachment theory, people change their religion during adulthood because their family ties were weak in childhood with parents. Nataliya, Nadejda and Tatyana said that they did not have so close connection with their parents in childhood. Moreover Nadejda was brought up with grandparents. Her parents were working abroad and she rarely saw them. Nataliya and Tatyana were raised without their biological father and had a difficult relationship with their mothers. Therefore when they grew up, the decision to change their religion was taken easily and they did not discuss it with their family of origin. On the other hand, Anya and Uliya had pretty close relationships and interactions with their families and

that is why for them the process of religious conversion was a little bit different. They went through personal challenges and contradictions in order to become Muslims.

- “As I converted before marriage I did not realize how I will change because of this conversion. First of all I took this decision only because of my husband’s faith. But then I started to find out Islam for myself and I was coming more deep in this sense. But at the beginning I hid this transformation from my family of origin. Sometimes when I came to mother’s house and she cooked pork for dinner I did not eat it and said that I am not hungry, but honestly I just do not eat pork at all.” - Uliya

From Uliya’s interview it was mentioned a lot of times that there were some difficulties because of her attachment to the family was stronger than for the other respondents. As she said sometimes she had some doubts about her decision because of her family of origin and its opposition.

The topic of relationship with the families of origin became a quite sensitive for the respondents. And sometimes they did not want to discuss this thing or refused to answer some question related to family relationships. This situation can be explained by the facts that they felt some troubles and misunderstandings with their families. Even if the families do support their daughter in this decision, sometimes the conflict situations happen.

The difficulties happen not only with the families of origin, but in some cases there are misunderstandings occur with other social surroundings as old friends, relatives and community to which the respondents belonged to before the conversion.

The findings from in-depth interviews illustrate how the process of religious conversion happens for Christian women who marry Muslim men. This type of religious

conversion is a special topic in the study. Firstly because of the factor of marriage, it becomes a push factor for women to change their religion. After that the process of identity negotiation occurs, it becomes the other stage for women who face the dialog within themselves and with social surroundings. Also the fact that some women converted during the marriage shows that there was a huge impact of socialization and interaction with Muslim community.

### *The eternal dialog of converts*

As Dialogical Self theory was adopted in the research, which explains the dialog of women with themselves and the division between before and after “me”, the interviews’ data clearly explain this idea. When they were saying about their lives before and after becoming Muslims, they claimed that there were a lot of changes that this conversion brought to their lives. It was not only about social surroundings and environment; it was also about the dialog within them, how they change their behavior, lifestyles and “change of mind”, as one of the respondents called it.

- “When I became a Muslim I realized that I had to change my life drastically. I could not be the same person anymore, do the same that I have done. It was a little bit challenging because I wanted to be a “real” Muslim. However as my life before conversion was far from Islam and I started to change myself step by step.” – Nataliya
- “Islam helped me to become the person that I really am. This religion opened my eyes and helped me to find a truth in this world. I am pretty sure that I was a Muslim in previous life. [laughing]” – Nadejda

- “I was familiar with Islam before the marriage; I have a lot of Muslim friends. I had an interest toward this religion but never got into it. But with a help of my husband and his family I explored Islam for myself and became a better person.” - Uliya

From these words it is clear how they separate their lives before and after the conversion. In spite of, they came to Islam in slightly different ways all of them have this conception, of “new me”. They perceive themselves better people after the conversion. Consequently they associate Islam as something good and right and on the other hand Christianity is presented as opposite to “right” Islam. Also two women mentioned a concept of “real” Muslim. As they explained it they wanted to become a Muslim in their soul. It was not only following religious rituals and traditions; it was more about reconstruction of their identities. They used a lot of phrases like “me before the conversion”, “old and new me”, “my personality”, “my soul”. It shows that they perceived the process of conversion as something very personal and private which is happening to their own identity. Sometimes women denied the change due to their religious conversion. Nataliya said “Actually I did not change; I am the same person that I was before...” However later in the interview she mentioned that she started to behave in different ways and sometimes her decisions now depend on her Muslim religious identity because it contradicts Islamic law. It proves that despite they denied the change of identity in some cases, it happens anyway. However the process of is not that easy for them in terms of renegotiation of religious identity with other identities like ethnicity.

As the respondents were Russian Christians, after the conversion their perception of their ethnic identity was changed somehow. It happened because of some controversy identifying themselves as Muslim women and Russian at the same time. Nataliya was the

only one who clearly stated “in spite of being Muslim now, she is still pure Russian woman.” On the other hand, four other respondents felt difficulties to define their ethnic identity. First of all the situation was challenging because of language. Three women stated that they not only convert to Islam, they also learnt Kyrgyz language. In one case the woman speaks in Kyrgyz with her husband and his family. Also the traditions that they now are following do not coincide, the traditions that they were following before. It creates the contradictions for their ethnic identity. Hermans (2001) in Dialogical Self theory argued about this renegotiation of other identities due to one is changed.

## Conclusion

The study is focused on the religious conversion on the individual level, which relates to self-change and related to it the interaction with the family of origin. Therefore the theory of Dialogical Self by Hermans is taken as a ground theory for the study. The gathered data shows how a person came into the dialog not only with social surrounding but at the same time within themselves. This type of conversion relates to the deep process of renegotiation of self-identity, the changes in lifestyle and behavioral patterns.

There were certain limitations in the study therefore this research cannot not be generalized and applied to all converted women in Kyrgyzstan. This paper conveys to provide insights into the complex topic of religious conversion. According to women's interviews, there are a lot of changes that happened to their identity, relationship with their community and the way of life. However this process is going as a dialog within themselves and others the phenomenon of religious conversion neither the beginning, nor the final point of their identity negotiation. Over time converts engage into the process of interaction with external and internal voices that leads to change and reconstruction of their selves.

Becoming a Muslim and coming into the new symbolic world, Christian women involve into the huge process of Islamization in Kyrgyzstan. Therefore it becomes a part of stream of religious conversion nowadays. From that point it is very important investigating the religious conversion to take into account gender aspects and family institutions.



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## Appendix

### Interview Guide for Respondents

- 1) Can you please tell me little bit about yourself (about our family of origin, school period, profession)?
- 2) How was religion practiced in our own family when you were child?
- 3) What relationship do you have with your parents? Is it closed enough from your own point of view?
- 4) Tell me please about your husband. How did you meet? What characteristics does he have?
- 5) When was the question of religion or religious conversion raised?
- 6) Was there any influence of other people that pushed you to convert?
- 7) How did you come to decision to change religion? Was it important for your husband our other people?
- 8) What was the attitude of your family of origin toward this decision?
- 9) How was the process of conversion happening? How long did it take? Was it difficult for you?
- 10) What changes in your lifestyle do you have after conversion?
- 11) Do you have any changes in your personality after that? If yes, can you tell what kind of and why?
- 12) How do you practice your religion now? What rituals tradition do you follow?