Nation, Religion, and Theology: What Do We Mean When We Say "Being Kyrgyz Means Being Muslim?"

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Abstract

Scholars of Central Asia often view religion and ethno-national identity as being linked: "to be Kyrgyz (or Uzbek, Kazakh, etc.) is to be Muslim." The specific ways in which the relationship between ethno-national identity and religion is constructed and understood, however, have not been adequately researched. "Being Muslim" is not merely an ethnic marker: it can imply a range of different, perhaps even competing, theologies with different relationships to national identity. Drawing on fieldwork conducted in Kyrgyzstan in 2014, this article investigates the question of what it means to be Kyrgyz and to be Muslim by undertaking a comparative analysis of two Islamic discourses: Kyrgyz ethno-national traditionalism and the normative Maturidi Hanafism promoted by the Kyrgyz state and the religious authorities. What emerges is a portrait of a complex and variegated religious landscape, one in which the meaning of being Kyrgyz and Muslim is continually questioned and renegotiated.

Keywords

Islam – Kyrgyzstan – ethno-nationalism – religion – national identity

Introduction

In an era when nationalism seems resurgent and religious claims upon the public sphere more strident,[1] making sense of the messy relationship between

1 John Esposito, Tamara Sonn, and John Voll, *Islam and Democracy after the Arab Spring* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Parvis Ghassem-Fachandi, *Pogrom in Gujarat: Hindu*

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religion and national identity has become increasingly urgent. Such is certainly the case in Central Asia, where the continuing process of national consolidation in a diverse and multi-national context has proceeded alongside a remarkable Islamic fluorescence since the 1980s. Of course, the question of religion's connection with national identity has not been ignored by scholars interested in this region; academic writing on Central Asia has indeed often insisted upon a close connection between Islam and nationality. The two are understood as being so closely intertwined, in fact, that belonging to one of the Central Asian nationalities is often depicted as being essentially synonymous with being a Muslim.2 Thus, as David Radford argues, "For most indigenous Central Asians, to be Central Asian—be it Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Tajik, or Kazakh—isto be Muslim."3

That such a connection seems quite genuine for a great many Central Asians is unquestionable. But from an analytical standpoint, the tantalizing simplicity of this construction obscures a rather more complex relationship. What, after all, does it mean to speak of "Muslims?" Even in a small country like Kyrgyzstan, Islam is characterized not by its monolithic nature but by its extraordinary diversity and dynamism. Likewise, discourses surrounding national identity are contested and constantly evolving.4 The nature of Islam's relationship with nationality cannot, therefore, be treated as self-explanatory: Kyrgyz Muslims themselves often conceptualize the meaning of that relationship

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Nationalism and Anti-Muslim Violence in India (Princeton, nj: Princeton University Press, 2012); Ronalt Inglehart and Pippa Norris, "Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Populism: Economic Have-Nots and Cultural Backlash," *hks Working Paper* rwp16-026 (2016); Iga Kozlowska, Daniel Béland, and André Lecours, "Nationalism, Religion, and Abortion Policy in Four Catholic Societies," *Nations and Nationalism* 22, no. 4 (2016); Marlene Laruelle, "The Three Colors of Novorossiya, or the Russian Nationalist Mythmaking of the Ukrainian Crisis," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 32, no. 1 (2016).

2 See, for example, Adeeb Khalid, *Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia* (Berkeley, ca: University of California Press, 2007), 107; Julie McBrien, "Mukadas' Struggle: Veils and Modernity in Kyrgyzstan," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (N.S.)* 15, Supplement 1 (2009): S131; Mariya Omelicheva, "Islam in Kazakhstan: A Survey of Contemporary Trends and Sources of Securitization," *Central Asian Survey* 30, no. 2 (2011): 246.

3 David Radford, "Does Being Kyrgyz Mean Being a Muslim? Emergence of New Ethno-Religious Identities in Kyrgyzstan," in *Nationalism and Identity Construction in Central Asia: Dimensions, Dynamics, and Directions*, ed. Mariya Omelicheva (Lanham, md: Lexington Books, 2015), 55.

4 Marlene Laruelle, "The Paradigm of Nationalism in Kyrgyzstan: Evolving Narrative, the Sovereignty Issue, and Political Agenda," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 45 (2012); Asel Murzakulova and John Schoeberlein, "The Invention of Legitimacy: Struggles in Kyrgyzstan to Craft an Effective Nation-State Ideology," *Europe-Asia Studies* 61, no. 7 (2009).

in strikingly different ways, thus complicating the notion that "to be Kyrgyz means being a Muslim."

Although the social role of religion vis-à-vis politics has become a controversial issue in Kyrgyzstan in recent years,5 these debates have not played out solely in the realm of politics. Crucially, they are mediated by religious arguments, perspectives, and practices. Consequently, rather than treating religion and nationality as effectively synonymous, careful attention must also be paid to the ways in which theology6 interacts with, and indeed shapes, the discourses surrounding national identity.

Drawing upon ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Kyrgyzstan in 2014,7 this article analyzes two variants of Islamic discourse in contemporary Kyrgyzstan: ethno-traditionalism and normative Hanafism.8 It argues that these theologies situate themselves in relation to certain common narratives pertaining to Kyrgyz history and national identity. But the ways in which they mobilize and draw upon these traditions—and thus their conceptions of Islam and how it relates to being Kyrgyz—diverge substantially. Understanding theological discourses is therefore crucial for appreciating how Kyrgyz Muslims make sense of their national identity and its relationship with Islam.

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5 Eric McGlinchey, "Islamic Revivalism and State Failure in Kyrgyzstan," *Problems of Post-Communism* 56, no. 3 (2009); Emil Nasritdinov and Nurgul Esenamanova, "The War of Billboards: Hijab, Secularism, and Public Space in Bishkek," *Central Asian Affairs* 4, no. 2 (2017); Joanna Paraszczuk, "Radical Islam of is Poses 'Special Threat' to Kyrgyz National Identity," *rfe/rl*, November 4, 2014, http://www.rferl.org/content/islamic-state-kyrgyzstan-special-threat/26674192.html; Chris Rickleton, "Kyrgyzstan: President Signals Toughening Official Attitude on Islam," *EurasiaNet*, February 12, 2014, http://www.eurasianet.org/node/68036; Nate Schenkkan, "Kyrgyzstan: Hijab Controversy Changes Debate over Islam's Role in Society," *EurasiaNet*, October 12, 2011, http://www.eurasianet.org/node/64306.

6 As Graham Tomlin reminds us, "the vocation of theology is not just to describe God—although it is that—and certainly not just to describe human experience of God—but to describe God as he relates to us, and us as we relate to God." (Graham Tomlin, "The Future of Theology," Diocese of London, June 15, 2016, https://www.london.anglican.org/articles/the-future-of-theology-yale-divinity-school/.) The term "theology" as used here focuses on the ways in which people order their lives and make sense of their national identity with respect to the transcendent. This article is less concerned with more purely academic discourses regarding the nature of the divine as such.

7 In addition to participant observations at *mazars* and formal religious services, this fieldwork included interviews with representatives from the Muftiyat and the State Commission for Religious Affairs, madrasah directors, theologians, the *shaykhs* of *mazars,* pilgrims, and ordinary Muslims. The analysis was also informed by primary literature, including publicly available government documents and religious materials.

8 It should be noted from the outset that these terms are the author's own, and are used solely for analytical purposes.

The "National-Religious Symbiosis"

As the geographer Lily Kong has astutely pointed out, "race, class, and gender are invariably invoked and studied as ways by which societies are fractured, [while] religion is forgotten or conflated with race."9 A similar critique could be levied at the ways in which the relationship between Islam and national identity in Central Asia has traditionally been apprehended. Islam has often been positioned in the literature as one of the essential, defining elements of nationality in Central Asia. Indeed, "[a]cknowledging Central Asians as Muslim is so much a practice of common parlance that noun comfortably becomes adjective: *Muslim* Central Asia."10 Some have even theorized the emergence of a "national-religious symbiosis," in which there has been "a merging or overlapping of ethnic and religious sentiments and loyalties … in all aspects of Central Asian existence."11 From this perspective, the identification of Islam with ethnic and/or national identity is so deeply ingrained that the two are essentially synonymous. Indeed, the national/religious symbiosis is viewed as being so basic and fundamental that conversion from Islam has been described as nothing less than a "strike at the very heart of Kyrgyz ethnic identity."12

This notion of a national-religious symbiosis is problematic, however, in that it reifies both Islam and national identity, and treats the connections between them as self-evident. But while there is little doubt that many Central Asians do indeed think of national identity and religion as being closely connected, the ways in which they make sense of that relationship have not always been satisfactorily explored in the literature. Ultimately, religion *qua* religion is too often reduced to "something secondary, a possible attribute of the essential reality of national or ethnic self-consciousness."13 But by subsuming religion under nationality, we elide Islam's central concern with the transcendent and reduce it to merely one of a set of traits and markers that signify belonging to a particular national community. To wit, Radford has argued that "what it means

9 Lily Kong, "Global Shifts, Theoretical Shifts: Changing Geographies of Religion," *Progress in Human Geography* 34, no. 6 (2010): 212.

10 David Montgomery, "Towards a Theory of the Rough Ground: Merging the Policy and Ethnographic Frames of Religion in the Kyrgyz Republic," *Religion, State and Society* 42, no. 1 (2014): 23.

11 Michael Rywkin, *Moscow's Muslim Challenge: Soviet Central Asia* (Armonk, ny: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1990), 84.

12 David Radford, "Contesting and Negotiating Religion and Ethnic Identity in Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan," *Central Asian Survey* 33, no. 1 (2014): 15.

13 Devin DeWeese, "Islam and the Legacy of Sovietology: A Review Essay on Yaacov Roi's *Islam in the Soviet Union*," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 13, no. 3 (2002): 324–5.

'to be Muslim' has been largely, though not entirely, understood to be a marker of ethnicity and national traditions rather than a reflection of an individual person's adherence to Islamic religious belief and practice."14 In a similar vein, Gunn has suggested that "[t]he Muslims of [Central Asia] think of Islam as being a part of their social identity in a way similar to how they conceive of their ethnicity, family and mother tongue."15 Rather than constituting an active and dynamic religious tradition, Islam is thus transformed into something latent and reflexive, a "common denominator for the various Central Asian nationalities."16

What such explanations miss is the fact that, while the realignment of cultural imaginaries and social structures according to a "national" grid during the Soviet period17 was a crucial inflection point in the history of Central Asia, it did not unmoor its peoples from existing sources of tradition and authority, including religious ones. Treating an Islamic identity as synonymous with national identity is thus tautological: it recursively directs us back to the study of nationality if we wish to learn something about religion in Central Asia, since it assumes that national identity has effectively overcoded other forms of identity.18

However, if we turn our attention to the ways in which theologies mediate divergent imaginations of the community, national or otherwise, what we find is that this process of overcoding is not, and never has been, as total as the idea of a national-religious symbiosis might suggest. As Devin DeWeese reminds us, "basic communal identities, including familial and local and even so-called

14 Radford, "Does Being Kyrgyz Mean Being a Muslim?," 55.

15 T. Jeremy Gunn, "Shaping an Islamic Identity: Religion, Islamism, and the State in Central Asia," *Sociology of Religion* 64, no. 3 (2003): 391.

16 Rywkin, *Moscow's Muslim Challenge,* 84.

17 Adrienne Edgar, *Tribal Nation: The Making of Soviet Turkmenistan* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004); Saulesh Esenova, "Soviet Nationality, Ethnic Identity, and Ethnicity in Central Asia: Historic Narratives and Kazakh Ethnic Identity," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 22, no. 1 (2002); Francine Hirsch, *An Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005); Ali İğmen, *Speaking Soviet with an Accent: Culture and Power in Kyrgyzstan* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012); Adeeb Khalid, *Making Uzbekistan: Nation, Empire, and Revolution in the Early ussr* (London: Cornell University Press, 2015).

18 Deleuze and Guattari define overcoding as a process of "centering, unification, totalization, integration, hierarchization and finalization." (Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 41.) Read in this way, religion becomes little more than one element in an array of characteristics that, collectively, are both constituent of and inseparable from national identity.

'ethnic' and 'national,' were … framed in terms whose fundamental meanings could not be understood without recourse to 'religious' worldviews and practices."19 A similar argument can be made concerning the ways in which contemporary national identity is often theologically inflected.20

At the same time, in broadening our frame of analysis to account for the- ology we must not overlook the discursive, political, and practical hegemony that the idea of nationality exercises:

> If we live in a world of states, and if out-of-state existence is impossible, then we all must live as national citizens;21 plainly, this includes Muslims as well. So although certain Islamist groups like Hizb ut-Tahrir may seek to do away with the nation-state system in favor of some form of pan-Islamic government, attitudes among the majority of Muslims regarding the nation-state range from accepting "national pluralism [as] a fact of life which cannot be ignored and must be accepted" to viewing the nation-state as a "natural institution."22

Indeed, very few Kyrgyz today, regardless of their individual religious beliefs, would seriously question the modern system of territorial nation-states; fewer still would deny the material and historical reality of the Kyrgyz nation as a focus of communal devotion.23

But if the nation-state and national identity are acknowledged by most Kyrgyz Muslims, their meaning and significance are by no means agreed upon. As the remainder of this article will argue, it is the divergent theological view- points among Muslims themselves that often play a decisive role in shaping how they understand, embody, and perform their national identity. We will begin with an examination of what is here termed "ethno-traditionalism," a theological paradigm in which indigenous religious traditions, which are often

19 De Weese, "Islam and the Legacy of Sovietology," 325.

20 Indeed, secularism itself can be read in this way. As Justin Tse argues, even "a secular theology that has little patience for transcendence—indeed, even an interpretation that regards transcendence as false consciousness—is itself a position on the transcendent." See Justin Tse, "Grounded Theologies: 'Religion' and the 'Secular' in Human Geography," *Progress in Human Geography* 38, no. 2 (2014): 208.

21 Wael Hallaq, *The Impossible State: Islam, Politics, and Modernity's Moral Predicament* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 106.

22 James Piscatori, *Islam in a World of Nation-States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 82–9.

23 Madeline Reeves, "'We're with the People!' Place, Nation, and Political Community in Kyrgyzstan's 2010 'April Events'," *The Anthropology of East Europe Review* 32, no. 2 (2014).

coded as "national traditions," are conceptualized in Islamic terms. The discussion will then turn to normative Hanafism, which, despite being a more recognizably "orthodox" theology, is itself situated vis-à-vis Kyrgyz national identity, albeit in a rather different fashion.

Ethno-Traditionalism and the Performance of National Identity

Many descriptions of Islam in Central Asia have noted its "syncretic" character and referred to the persistence of "shamanistic" or "pre-Islamic" traditions and beliefs alongside—or, more dismissively, as merely a "thin veneer" over—more recognizably "Islamic" practices.24 In Kyrgyzstan, such traditions are typically associated with the nebulous concept of *kyrgyzchylyk*, which is usually translated as "Kyrgyzness" or "the essence of being Kyrgyz."25 *Kyrgyzchylyk*, which, among other things, encompasses divination, pilgrimage to sacred places, the Manas mythos, esoteric healing methods to cure disease, and various life-cycle rites, is infused with spiritual significance for many Kyrgyz people.26 Moreover, as the term itself implies, *kyrgyzchylyk* is closely associated with Kyrgyz history, identity, and culture, and comprises "the totality of definite characteristics and qualities inherent to Kyrgyz ethnicity."27 As one traditional healer from Talas put it: "*Kyrgyzchylyk* keeps us Kyrgyz."28

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24 Rafiz Abazov, *Culture and Customs of the Central Asian Republics* (Westport, ct: Greenwood Press, 2007); Shirin Akiner, "Melting Pot, Salad Bowl, Cauldron? Manipulation and Mobilization of Ethnic and Religious Identities in Central Asia," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 20, no. 2 (1997); Daniyar Ashymov, "The Religious Faith of the Kyrgyz," *Religion, State and Society* 31, no. 2 (2003); Radford, "Contesting and Negotiating"; Cynthia Werner, Holly Barcus, and Namara Brede, "Discovering a Sense of Well-Being through the Revival of Islam: Profiles of Kazakh Imams in Western Mongolia," *Central Asian Survey* 32, no. 4 (2013). For a critique of this interpretation, see Devin DeWeese, "Survival Strategies: Reflections on the Notion of Religious 'Survivals' in Soviet Ethnographic Studies of Muslim Religious Life in Central Asia," in *Exploring the Edge of Empire: Soviet Era Anthropology in the Cauca- sus and Central Asia*, ed. Florian Mühlfried and Sergey Sokolovskiy (Münster: lit-Verlag, 2011).

25 Murzakulova and Schoeberlein, "The Invention of Legitimacy."

26 Gulnara Aitpaeva, "Sacred Sites in Kyrgyzstan: Spiritual Mission, Health and Pilgrimage," in *Nature, Space, and the Sacred: Transdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. S. Bergmann, P.M. Scott, M. Jansdotter Samuelsson, and H. Bedford-Strohm (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009),254.

27 Ibid., 253.

28 Kanikei eje, personal communication with the author, Bishkek, November 6, 2014.

Despite *kyrgyzchylyk*'s seemingly esoteric nature, many Kyrgyz Muslims understand the practices associated with it as being both closely intertwined and consistent with Islam: "The guardians and bearers of this kind of traditional knowledge … believe that *kyrgyzchylyk* in no way offends Islam, but that it is a way of praising the Almighty."29 Thus, while Islam and *kyrgyzchylyk* are not necessarily understood as being identical,30 the boundaries between the two are often indistinct. A closer look at the ambiguous relationship between the two will shed light on the ways in which theology informs nationalidentity.

A revealing example of the comingling of theology and nationality can be found in the phenomenon of *ziyarat*, the practice of making pilgrimages to sacred places. These sacred places are typically referred to as *mazars*,31 an Arabic term that refers to a tomb or a grave. Over time, *ziyarat* became closely identified with indigenous religious customs in Muslim communities throughout the world,32 and *mazars* came to include not just graves and tombs, but also places that are sacred because of "the presence of spirits or of a supernatural power."33 In Kyrgyzstan, *mazars* fall into two broad categories: "natural sites, which include springs, mountains, forests, stones, trees, lakes, caves, and the like; and then *mazars* created by humans, which include mausoleums of famous people, ancient buildings, and graves of martyrs."34

29 Gulnara Aitpaeva, "The Dispute on Pilgrimage to Sacred Sites among Kyrgyz Muslims," in *Sacred Sites of Ysyk-Köl: Spiritual Power, Pilgrimage, and Art*, ed. Gulnara Aitpaeva and Aida Egemberdieva (Bishkek: Aigine Cultural Research Center, 2009), 233.

30 Aitpaeva, for example, distinguishes between *moldochylyk*—"the totality of obligations and practices concerned with being a *moldo*" (mullah)—and *kyrgyzchylyk*—"the totality of folk customs and traditions." (Ibid., 229.).

31 The word *mazar* is sometimes used interchangeably with Kyrgyz terms like *kasiettuu zher* ("a site that has a special spiritual power and impact") and *yiyk zher* ("holy" or "sacred" site). See *Sacred Sites of Southern Kyrgyzstan: Nature, Manas, Islam* (Bishkek: Aigine Cultural Research Center, 2013), 6.

32 Rachel Harris and Rahilë Dawut, "*Mazar* Festivals of the Uyghurs: Music, Islam and the Chinese State," *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* 11, no. 1 (2008); Dervla Zaynab Shannahan, "'I Love You More': An Account of Performing *Ziyarat* in Iraq," *Performing Islam* 4, no. 1 (2015); Sufia Uddin, "In the Company of *Pirs*: Making Vows, Receiving Favors at Bangladeshi Sufi Shrines," in *Dealing with Deities: The Ritual Vow in South Asia*, ed. Selva Raj and William Harman (New York: State University of New York Press, 2006); Peter van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India* (Berkeley, ca: University of California Press, 1994).

33 Aitpaeva, "Sacred Sites in Kyrgyzstan," 249.

34 Ibid.

From a religious perspective, *ziyarat* fulfills a number of important functions. Jamilya eje, the *shaykh* (caretaker) of the Baytik *baatyr*35 *mazar* near Bishkek, explains how visiting *mazars* has benefits both for the living and for the dead:

> No matter what difficulties a man has, if he prays [at a *mazar*] throughout the entire night, blessings will come from Allah and his wishes will come true. In *mazars,* the souls of seven generations of ancestors are waiting for you. When you come and read Qur'an and say "*omin*," the spirits of the ancestors will be grateful to you. If the spirit is in hell, it can only visit *mazars*. They cannot come home … To purify oneself of all bad things, one needs to come to *mazars*. It is preferable to make a sacrifice in such sacred places. Wishes are only are granted one hundred percent of the time in *mazars*. When people read the Qur'an at home, spirits cannot enter the house, and it does not always work.36

Jamilya eje's reference to the souls of ancestors indicates one of the ways in which religious practice and national identity are subtly imbricated. In the years following independence, nationalist ideology in Kyrgyzstan elevated "the ancestors" to the status of moral exemplars for the modern Kyrgyz nation. As David Gullette notes, "[t]he celebration of the ancestors in the new ethno-nationalist rhetoric has given [Kyrgyz] … a framework to realize the importance of the ancestors in their lives."37 *Ziyarat* is one means of reaffirming this relationship, and thus serves as a medium through which living members of the nation can commune with their progenitors, honor them, and perhaps receive aid from them. But as a religious practice, *ziyarat* also facilitates the performative fusion of the national and the theological.

This connection can likewise be observed, albeit on a much larger scale, in the religious and nationalist veneration of the mythic Kyrgyz hero Manas. In the nationalist imaginary, Manas is not only the father of the nation and the exemplar of all of its best qualities (bravery, strength, loyalty, etc.), but also the embodiment of the Kyrgyz people's will to statehood.38 The epic *Manas*

35 The Baytik *baatyr mazar* is the tomb of a nineteenth-century Kyrgyz warrior.

36 Jamilya eje, personal communication with the author, Baytik *baatyr mazar*, September26, 2014.

37 David Gullette, *The Genealogical Construction of the Kyrgyz Republic: Kinship, State and "Tribalism"* (Kent, UK: Global Oriental, 2010), 151.

38 Askar Akaev, *Kyrgyz Statehood and the National Epos "Manas"* (New York: Global Scholarly Publications, 2003), 272.

is thus considered to be both the wellspring of Kyrgyz national culture and its most significant achievement. As Cholponbek Kaparbek uulu, an ideologist with a nationalist youth organization that has ties to the Kyrgyz government, explains:

> [The epic] is our history. That is why we have to recognize *Manas* as a treasure that contains the traditions, customs, history, and values of our nation. Even though it has been adapted to the demands of the present day, it is necessary to understand that the epic *Manas* is the proof of the history and origin of the Kyrgyz nation.39

In particular, the themes of unity, sovereignty, and patriotism in the epic are interpreted with respect to, and rendered appropriate for, Kyrgyzstan's contemporary socio-political context:

> The dream of unifying the people permeates the whole ideational pathos of the epic *Manas*. The basic idea of the epic is the struggle for independence, for the unification of the Kyrgyz people and tribes, for an independent, bequeathed homeland—Talas and Ala Too. The idea of unity finds new meaning and resonates with the problems of contemporary Kyrgyzstan while it is undertaking the enormous task of building an independent democratic state.40

The mobilization of *Manas* in the service of nationalist ideology has been facilitated by the fact that Manas himself is reputedly buried in a mausoleum, known as *Manastyn Kümbözü* (the Mausoleum of Manas), near the city of Talas. The government has developed a memorial complex adjacent to the mausoleum called *Manas Ordo*. Apart from its didactic purposes, this complex is intended to concretize the *Manas* myth and connect it with the political legitimacy of the contemporary Kyrgyz nation-state.

Manas Ordo consists of several structures, including a hippodrome for exhibitions of traditional Kyrgyz mounted sports, a *Manasovedenie* ("Manas studies") center, and a *tülöökhana* (place of sacrifice). The most important building, however, is the historical museum, which contains exhibits pertaining to the *Manas* epic, famous *manaschis* (reciters of the *Manas* epic), and various historical artifacts connected with the history not only of the Kyrgyz

39 Kaparbek uulu, Cholponbek, personal communication with the author, Bishkek, November 10, 2014.

40 K.K. Imanaliev et al., *Manasovedenie* (Bishkek: Izdatel'stvo krsu, 2011).

people, but also of the territory of what is now the Kyrgyz Republic. Thus, while the museum is officially named the "Museum of the Manas Epos," its larger purpose is to present a coherent, didactic narrative about Kyrgyz national history and culture and its culmination in the modern Kyrgyz nation-state. At the center of this narrative is the *Manas* epic.

Similarly, at the center of a plaza adjacent to the museum there is a statue of Manas himself, gazing down at visitors from atop a tall pillar. The hero is surrounded by monuments depicting his forty companions, each of whom is identified by name and depicted in a characteristic pose. As a monumental space, the plaza is symbolically laden: from the air, it resembles a *tyndyk,* the smoke hole in the top of a yurt that also serves as a Kyrgyz national symbol. Manas stands in the middle. The statues of Manas' diverse companions also reify a particular conception of the Kyrgyz nation as a people who, despite their differences, have been unified by Manas.

But apart from its nationalist symbolism, the "centering" of Manas also operates in a different register. Yi-fu Tuan41 once noted that the root of the word "sacred" carries a sense of demarcation and differentiation from the profane, yet the line that divides the two is sometimes indistinct. Such is the case at *Manas Ordo*, a site that is "sacred ground" from both a nationalist and a theological standpoint. After all, Manas himself is said to rest in *Manastyn Kümbözü,* just a few hundred meters from the statue plaza and the historical museum. As such, while *Manas Ordo* as a whole is a cultural, historical, and political site "of republican and even wider importance,"42 the mausoleum itself is a *mazar*. According to one pilgrim, the light of Allah (Kyr.: *nur*) shines on *Manastyn Kümbözü*, and all the ancestors of Manas—and indeed Manas himself—bless those pilgrims who visit there.43 *Ziyarat* to *Manastyn Kümbözü* thus serves a dual purpose: it is both a religious pilgrimage and a means of participating in the Kyrgyz national mythos as mediated by the state.

This comingling of the national and the religious is illustrated by the story of Nurassyl eje, a traditional healer who lives in a village near Bishkek. By her own account, throughout her life, Nurassyl eje has fallen severely ill on several

41 Yi-fu Tuan, "Sacred Space: Explorations of an Idea," in *Dimensions of Human Geography: Essays on Some Familiar and Neglected Themes*, ed. Ed Butzer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 84–6.

42 Gulnara Aitpaeva, Aida Egemberdieva, and Mukaram Toktogulova, eds., *Mazar Worship in Kyrgyzstan: Rituals and Practitioners in Talas* (Bishkek: Aigine Research Center, 2007),27.

43 Anonymous pilgrim, personal communication with the author, Baytik *baatyr mazar*, September 24, 2014.

occasions: once when she was five or six years old, once more when she was twenty, and, most seriously, at the age of forty-five. At the time of the final incident, she had been planning to make a pilgrimage to *Manastyn Kümbözü* to participate in a *toi.*44 Instead, she found herself suddenly unable to walk. Her daughter decided to take her to visit a traditional healer for treatment, and her symptoms soon subsided enough that she was able to travel to Talas.

Upon arriving there, however, she felt weak, and was also suffering from a high fever. To her disappointment, she was not well enough to attend the *toi:*

> On the way to Talas, I was thinking about Sypatai ata.45 I was thinking about collecting enough money to make a sacrifice, reading the Qur'an for his spirit. When we arrived in Talas, the others celebrated: they ate and drank. But I was … thinking only about getting to Manas ata.46 I was really intending to get there and read the Qur'an. A whole day of the *toi* passed, and it was really difficult. I was not able to dance, sing, or even eat. I had a high temperature and I wanted to rest, but I could not. I made ablutions several times. And when I was very tired, I asked Manas ata's spirit to help me have rest and sleep. I told him that I would get up early in the morning and go to him, and when I told him that, he let me lie down and sleep … he let me have rest.47

Keeping her promise to Manas ata, Nurassyl eje went to the mausoleum early the next morning to pray and to perform ablutions. There, she encountered a *moldo*,48 who prayed for her while she embraced the Qur'an and gave her some medicinal treatments to purify her. He then told her to return home.

According to Nurassyl eje, meeting the *moldo* at *Manastyn Kümbözü* was a watershed moment in her life. It became clear that her most recent sick- ness, and indeed the maladies that she had suffered throughout her life, were not ordinary illnesses but *ayans,* a kind of vision or premonition.49 According

44 A *toi* is a celebration. In this instance, the *toi* was a religious ceremony at which peopleread the Qur'an and made sacrifices in honor of Manas.

45 Sypatai ata, also known as Sypatai *baatyr*, was a 19th-century Kazakh warrior who protected the Kyrgyz from the Kokand Khanate.

46 That is, to *Manastyn Kümbözü.* But note how she personifies the mausoleum.

47 Nurassyl eje, personal communication with the author, Bishkek, November 6, 2014.

48 The Kyrgyz word for "mullah."

49 According to one account, there are two kinds of *ayans*. The first kind are dreams; the second, more powerful kind is experienced in waking life, and can take the form of an illness or an encounter with a legendary figure like Manas (Ulan Ismailov. Quoted in Aitpaeva and Egemberdieva, *Sacred Sites of Ysyk-Köl*, 62).

to Kyrgyz tradition, people who ignore *ayans* frequently become gravely ill—physically, mentally, or both. Only by answering their true calling, perhaps to become a *manaschi,* to take up the *komuz*, or to practice the healing arts, can they finally end their afflictions.50 Nurassyl eje indicated that it was through making *ziyarat* to *Manastyn Kümbözü*, and with the help of Manas himself, that she was able to purify herself and realize her fate:

> I was told to clean my house of all evil things, and I threw everything away. I gathered up new clothes and went back to Talas. I felt like I was in a maze—a totally changed person. Once we got to Talas, I went to a holy place, the *mazar* called Zulpukor….51 After that, I read from the Qur'an, and went back to [the mausoleum of] Manas ata. When I got there, I saw forty *moldos*! I greeted them all and asked them for ablutions. I gave *bata* [blessings] for about an hour. I did it with the support of Manas ata … I stayed there [at *Manastyn Kümbözü*] for forty days, and I made a sacrifice. This all helped to purify me.52

Nurassyl eje reported that during her time at *Manastyn Kümbözü*, her ailments completely and permanently disappeared. She attributes her apparently miraculous recovery to the fact that she finally answered her *ayan*. To hear her tell it, the bouts of sickness that she had suffered throughout her whole life were not ordinary medical problems. Rather, they were signs from the spirit world that she possessed powerful *kasiyet,* "an extraordinary gift that has been given to a person, land, or animal from above."53 In Nurassyl eje's case, her gift was curing others; today, she performs exorcisms, heals wounds and eases pains, and assists women in their pregnancies, all using traditional Kyrgyz methods.

Considering the important role that the *Manas* epic plays in indigenous religious practices that are lionized as "Kyrgyz national traditions," as well as in statist discourses and nationalist ideology, Nurassyl eje's remarkable story illustrates the indistinct boundaries not only between Islam and *kyrgyzchylyk*, but also between theology and nationality: "[Islam] is in our blood," she says, "and it [has been] passed to us by our ancestors from seven generations ago."54

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50 Ormush Choiunbaev personal communication with the author, Manas Ordo, November22, 2014.

51 Zulpukor is near the village of Aral, not far from *Manastyn Kümbözü*. The name is derived from *Zulqifar*, the legendary sword given to Ali by the Prophet Muhammad.

52 Nurassyl eje, personal communication with the author, Bishkek, November 6, 2014.

53 Aitpaeva and Egemberdieva, *Sacred Sites of Ysyk-Köl*, 350.

54 Nurassyl eje, personal communication with the author, Bishkek, November 6, 2014.

Ethno-traditionalism, then, is an Islamic theology that is bound up with particular conceptualizations of Kyrgyz myth, culture and history. The *Manas* epic plays an important role in this theology. If the epic's connections with ide- ology and national identity are central to its role in contemporary Kyrgyzstan, then it is important to note that *Manas* also operates in a transcendental register. The spirit of Manas himself, as well as those of his forty companions, the great *manaschis*, famous warriors, and the ancestors of the Kyrgyz nation as a whole, are seen as active interlocutors in the lives of the Kyrgyz people, visiting them in dreams and sending them *ayans*, warning them of impending danger, granting them the power to heal others, and awakening their spiritual powers and artistic talents.55 The ethno-traditionalist paradigm is thus a theology in which Islam and national identity are organically related, bound together through *kyrgyzchylyk*, the *Manas* epic, veneration of ancestors, and the various rites and traditions that surround them.

Ethno-traditionalism, of course, represents only one mode of Islamic belief and practice in Kyrgyzstan today. As the next section describes, Kyrgyzstan's official Islamic institutions see ethno-traditionalism as incompatible with a more "orthodox" Islamic theology rooted in the Hanafi *madhab*. At the same time, however, this "normative Hanafism" is itself understood as being connected with Kyrgyz history and culture. Yet as we will see, the relationship between nationality and Islam is articulated in strikingly different ways than in ethno-nationalist Islam.

Normative Hanafism as "Traditional Kyrgyz Islam"

If ethno-traditionalism is in many respects a recognizably "syncretic" permutation of Islam, then normative Hanafism can be understood as a self-consciously "orthodox" theology. It is important to note that the term "orthodoxy" is used here in the sense indicated by Talal Asad, who suggests that orthodoxy should refer not to "a mere body of opinion but a distinctive relationship of power. Wherever Muslims have the power to regulate, uphold, require, or adjust *correct* practices, and to condemn, exclude, undermine, or replace *incorrect* ones, there is the domain of orthodoxy."56 Kyrgyzstan's official Islamic governing body, the Muftiyat,57 wields precisely this sort of power. Through its control

55 Aitpaeva and Egemberdieva, *Sacred Sites of Ysyk-Köl*, 43.

56 Talal Asad, "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam," *Georgetown University Center for Contemporary Arab Studies Occasional Paper Series* (1986): 15.

57 The Muftiyat's full name is the *Kyrgyzstan Musulmandarynyn Din Bashkarmalygy*, or the Religious Board of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan. The term "muftiyat" refers to the fact that the head of the organization is a mufti, or an Islamic legal authority.

over the content of sermons given in mosques, the curricula used in institutes of religious education, the evaluation of imams to test whether they "correctly" understand Islam, and (not inconsequentially) its relationship with the state, the Muftiyat has fostered the development of an orthodox Islamic theology that is firmly grounded in the Hanafi *madhab*.

In practice, this regulatory power has also meant the exclusion of putatively deviant beliefs. In some cases, this has resulted in attacks on "extremism" and "radicalism";58 at other times, heterodox and other "un-Islamic" practices have come under fire. As the preceding discussion of ethno-traditionalism might suggest, the relationship between normative Hanafism and concepts like *kyrgyzchylyk*, which are sometimes associated with Islam, is fraught with tensions. On the one hand, the Muftiyat promotes a theology that seeks to be identifiably "Kyrgyz," as opposed to "Arab" or "Pakistani," and which is often referred to as "traditional Kyrgyz Islam" or simply "traditional Islam."59 But at the same time, the religious establishment is often deeply ambivalent about the spiritual component of Kyrgyz national tradition:

> These days, it is important to be able to differentiate "kyrgyzchylyk" and "musulmanchilik."60 There are still many superstitions in Kyrgyzchilik [sic] that go against Islam and are sinful. In the Qur'an it says Allah will gather all *mushriktun* [those who deny the oneness of God] and ask the angels if these people worshipped them … the angels will say to Allah, you are our friend, not them. These people worshipped jinn … Shirk is the one sin God will not forgive. The Qur'an says, "if you commit shirk, all your good work will dissolve." The one who commits shirk certainly can expect to be thrown into the fires of hell.61

58 R. Eratov and K. Zharkynbaev, *Bor'ba protiv ekstremizma* (Bishkek: Dukhovnoe upravlenie musul'man Kyrgyzstana, 2016).

59 Z. Chotaev, G. Isaeva, and Z Tursunbekov, *Metodicheskie materialy: Gosudarstvennaia politika v religioznoi sfere: Zakonodatel'nye osnovy 'Kontseptiia "Traditsionnyi Islam" v Kyrgyzstane'* (Bishkek: Gosudarstvennaia komissiia po delam religii Kyrgyzskoi Respubliki, 2015), 19.

60 "*Musulmanchylyk*" is usually translated as "Muslimness." According to Toktogulova, "*Musulmanchylyk* means practicing only according to Islamic rules and rituals. *Musulman- chylyk* requires strict adherence to Islamic rules and clear distinction from folk beliefs." (Mukaram Toktogulova, "Syncretism of Religious Beliefs (*Kyrgyzchylyk and Musulman- chylyk*)," in *Mazar Worship in Kyrgyzstan*, 512.).

61 Quoted in Noor Borbieva, "Parallel Worlds: Male and Female Islam in the Central Asian Republics" (paper, "The Turks and Islam: An International Conference," Bloomington, in, 2010), 7.

Some religious scholars (*ulama*), such as the popular theologian Kadyr Malikov, have sought to resolve such tensions by arguing that national traditions can inform religious practice, as long as they remain within the boundaries of orthodoxy. As Malikov notes in an introductory book on Islam intended for a popular audience:

> National traditions and customs … are one of the sources of the *Shariat* if they do not contradict the purposes of Islam. But there are among the peoples of Kyrgyzstan customs and traditions that are against the norms of Islam. The *Shariat*, first and foremost, is against any custom that violates the principle of monotheism.62

However, as an examination of orthodox attitudes toward *ziyarat* suggests, such attempts to frame national tradition as integral to normative Hanafism have not entirely succeeded in reconciling the two.

Many theologians argue that, in light of evidence from the Qur'an and Hadith,63 "the authenticity and firmness of *ziyarat* [to] graves is so obvious that it is needless to produce proofs and reasoning to a great extent."64 But *ziyarat* remains a contested practice, and many purists argue that any form of non- *hajj* pilgrimage is a deviation from the correct practice of Islam. Consequently, pilgrimage to natural sites like sacred groves and rock formations, common in Kyrgyzstan and elsewhere, has been derided by some as an unwelcome innovation (*bid'a*) in Islam, at best, and paganism and denial of the oneness of God (*shirk*), at worst.65

These sorts of debates, which at first glance seem to revolve largely around questions of theology, also have a subtle national inflection. Regarding *ziyarat,* the theologian Malikov explains that "[a]ccording to the Salafi understanding [of Islam], or that of the Wahhabis from Saudi Arabia, *all* visitation to *mazars* is forbidden. But this is not a good thing, and it is not correct."66 Likewise, Zamirbek Tursunbekov, a scholar at Kyrgyzstan's State Committee for Religious

62 Kadyr Malikov, *Kratkoe posobie po islamu* (Bishkek: Independent Analytical Research Center of Religion, Law and Politics, 2014), 161.

63 Sophia Arjana, *Pilgrimage in Islam: Traditional and Modern Practices* (London: One world Academic, 2017), 18.

64 Jafar Subhani, "Visitation (Ziyarat) of Graves of Believers from the View-Point of the Holy Qur'an and Sunnah," *Al-Islam.org*, https://www.al-islam.org/wahhabism-ayatullah-jafar-subhani/visitation-ziyarat-graves-believers-view-point-holy-quran-sunnah.

65 Arjana, *Pilgrimage in Islam.*

66 Malikov, Kadyr, personal communication with the author, Bishkek, December 18, 2014.

Affairs, counterpoises the religious practices of Kyrgyz Muslims with those of Arabs:

> [I]n traditional [Kyrgyz] Islam, when a man dies the Qur'an is read. Arabs do not read the Qur'an at a funeral. Kyrgyz arrange an anniversary of a person's death after forty days. These are our customs. It is in our culture. Arabs do not have such traditions. When [Kyrgyz] people go to *mazars* they read the Qur'an. It shows that Islam and Kyrgyz culture areinterrelated.67

In recent years, similar concerns about the erosion of Kyrgyz national identity have fueled debates over the growing visibility of more conservative forms of veiling, which are likewise viewed as being influenced by Arab or Pakistani culture.68 While the Muftiyat has been generally supportive of veiling,69 some Kyrgyz nationalists have argued that "traditional" Kyrgyz styles, such as the conical *elechek* or traditional headscarves known as *jooluks*, are more culturally appropriate forms of veiling for Kyrgyz Muslim women than other, more "foreign" styles.70

But if the stewards of orthodoxy in Kyrgyzstan will defend practices, like *ziyarat*, that are associated with "traditional Kyrgyz Islam" against "foreign" interpretations of the faith,71 there is also considerable suspicion of the theological ambiguity of many of those same practices. While the general permissibility of *ziyarat* is admitted, there is nevertheless an insistence that a clear distinction be made between *legitimate* and *illegitimate* forms of pilgrimage:

> In our traditional understanding of Islam … [*ziyarat*] is not problematic. We even have *hadiths* that tell of our Prophet making *ziyarat* to cemeteries … because these visits remind us about our ancestors. It is good for *iman* … for faith. But sometimes people practice it incorrectly. They perform

67 Tursunbekov, Zamirbek, personal communication with the author, Bishkek, December 2, 2014.

68 Nasritdinov and Esenamanova, "The War of Billboards"; "Atambaev: Pust' luchshe khody- at v miniyubkakh, no nikogo ne vzryvayut," Radio Azattyk, August 1, 2016, https://rus .azattyk.org/a/27892201.html.

69 Schenkkan, "Kyrgyzstan: Hijab Controversy."

70 Nazgul' Begalieva, "Chorotegin: Naviazyvanie chuzhoi kul'tury—Put' nashego naroda v riady Igil!," *Vechernii Bishkek*, July 15, 2016, http://www.for.kg/news-370144-ru.html.

71 Aksana Ismailova and Emil Nasritdinov, "Transnational Religious Networks in Central Asia: Structure, Travel, and Culture of Kyrgyz Tablighi Jama'at," *Transnational Social Re- view* 2, no. 2 (2012); Nasritdinov and Esenamanova, "The War of Billboards."

> *ziyarat* and pray to … not God. They pray to the dead, to their spirits. This is not good. So we must explain to people, to believers, where this border is. Between good things and *shirk* … paganism … So, for example, if somebody says to me: "I want to visit a *mazar*…" Well, okay! But before that, I must explain the culture of *ziyarat* … the etiquette … [People] can make *ziyarat* about their relationship between themselves and their God. Unfortunately, some people are ignorant about the Islamic understanding of monotheism.72

Ziyarat, and indeed the notion of tradition itself, thus occupies an interstitial position in orthodox theology, a position that is often defined in starkly national terms. As Malikov argues, "traditional Islam is our culture—*not com- promised by Arabic culture*—but nevertheless with an Islamic basis."73 And yet much of what falls under the rubric of national tradition is viewed as being inconsistent with orthodox Islam as defined by the Muftiyat.

Besides *ziyarat,* normative Hanafism is also ambivalent toward other aspects of Kyrgyz tradition, including the *Manas* epic. As we have seen, in the ethno-traditionalist paradigm the epic is not simply a story. Rather, *Manas* is a whole cosmology, and the fates of individuals, and even the nation as a whole, are shaped through their encounters with the spirits. From an orthodox perspective, however, such beliefs are at best concerning. As a teacher at a madrasah near Bishkek explains: "[The Mausoleum of Manas] can be visited as a museum, but not as a place to pray. It is said that Manas ata was a Muslim. But people are praying to him. This is not right."74 Suspicions that practices surrounding the *Manas* epic, including *ziyarat*, border on polytheism highlight the uneasy relationship between normative Hanafism and prevalent under- standings of Kyrgyz national tradition.75

But despite such tensions, the *Manas* epic's value as a piece of Kyrgyz national heritage—and, moreover, one with relevance to Islamic history writ large—is still recognized. As such, though the theologian Malikov argues that the epic is "not a real, true story," he nevertheless views *Manas* as being in some ways analogous to the role played by Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* in Persian

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72 Malikov, personal communication.

73 Ibid., emphasis added.

74 Anonymous teacher at a madrasah, personal communication with the author, Bishkek, October 1, 2014.

75 Zamirbek Bayalinov, a prominent *manaschi* in Bishkek, complains that he has in the past been barred from reciting *Manas* inside a mosque on the grounds that it constitutes *shirk*, or polytheism.

culture. That is to say, not only does *Manas* constitute part of the larger corpus of "Islamic cultural heritage,"76 but it also situates the history of the Kyrgyz nation within the wider narrative of Islamic history. Moreover, just as the *Shahnameh* sought to imbue pre-Islamic Iranian history with "a positive valuation: as a matter of chronological certainty, for its pedagogical lessons, as a point of curiosity for filling out the history of the world's peoples, and/or as a point of nostalgic pride,"77 the *Manas* epic serves as a document of numerous aspects of Kyrgyz national culture, not least of which the Kyrgyz people's historical connection with Islam. As Malikov argues:

> In *Manas*, of course, there are some places that are contrary to Islam. But, on the whole, there are no problems. Because our grandfathers were Kyrgyz … they had their traditions, but they were Muslims. They prayed five times a day, but they were traditional Kyrgyz. They wore *kalpaks*, they ate *besh barmak*, they played *komuz*, they sang *Manas*. But, at the same time, they prayed five times a day.78

Beyond the ways in which it connects the Kyrgyz nation to the wider arc of Islamic history, moreover, *Manas* is also read with an eye toward specific narratives and lessons that can be interpreted through an orthodox Islamic lens. Indeed, *Manas* contains numerous episodes that revolve around the characters' faith in Islam, the personal sacrifices they make for their beliefs,79 and the lessons that can be drawn from them in the present day. As Almanbet, a Deputy Kazi at the Bishkek Central Mosque, argues:

> My own father has no connection with Islam. But I studied Islam and now I know all about it. Likewise, Manas' father did not know about Islam. But because Manas understood Islam, he was able to unite the split Kyrgyz tribes into a whole nation. He read *namaz.* He died while reading *namaz* … Manas is our history. Our hero. He followed Islam.80

Thus, though certain elements of *Manas* might be problematic from an orthodox Islamic standpoint, the broader narrative of the epic, as well as its

76 Malikov, personal communication.

77 Sarah Bowen Savant, *The New Muslims of Post-Conquest Iran: Tradition, Memory, and Conversion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 147.

78 Malikov, personal communication.

79 For example, Manas's companion Almanbet, the son of a powerful khan, forsook his people to become a Muslim; Manas himself was martyred while he was performing *namaz*.

80 Almanbet, personal communication with the author, Bishkek, November 11, 2014.

contemporary importance as "the encyclopedia of the Kyrgyz nation,"81 is understood as validating what Malikov refers to as the "harmony" between Islam and Kyrgyz national identity.82 In this way, *Manas* serves as a way not only of demonstrating the Kyrgyz people's historical connection with Islam, but also of establishing its place in the wider Islamic world. Whereas in the ethno-traditionalist paradigm the relationship between Islam and national identity is reaffirmed through embodied practices like *ziyarat* and traditions related to *kyrgyzchylyk*, the way in which normative Hanafism relates to national identity vis-à-vis Islam foregrounds the ways in which the local is an expression of the universal, in "being part of the greater Muslim world and awareness of being such."83

Conclusion

David Montgomery reminds us that "[a]s a moral foundation for life, Islam is not fashioned by most who identify as Muslims as a fragmented aspect of life, but rather a fully integrated explanation of life and requisite behavior."84 Thus, the points of intersection between religion and national identity cannot be understood as simply given, but rather as generative moments through which ideas of national and religious community are elaborated and performed. By employing the analytical categories of ethno-traditionalism and normative Hanafism, this article has sought to illustrate the importance of theology in shaping such conceptualizations.

As we have seen, both ethno-traditionalism and normative Hanafism mobilize Kyrgyz history and myth to validate a connection between Islam and national identity. Moreover, the two paradigms draw upon a common pool of cultural symbols and resources: collective memory, the ancestors, the *Manas* epic, embodied practices like *ziyarat*, and so forth. However, they mobilize these resources in remarkably different ways, and indeed to different ends. In the ethno-traditionalist paradigm, it is the embodied performance of "national

81 Ashymov, "The Religious Faith of the Kyrgyz"; Eva Wasilewska, "The Past and the Present: The Power of Heroic Epics and Oral Tradition—Manas 1000," *Central Asian Survey* 16, no. 1 (1997); Imanaliev et al., *Manasovedenie*.

82 Malikov, personal communication.

83 Muhammad Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change* (Princeton, nj: Princeton University Press, 2002), 167.

84 David Montgomery, "On Muslims and the Navigation of Religiosity: Notes on the Anthropology of Islam," in *Ashgate Research Companion to Anthropology*, ed. Andrew Strathern and Pamela Stewart (Burlington, vt: Ashgate, 2015), 233.

tradition" itself—through *ziyarat*, traditional healing practices, *ayans*, and personal encounters with the spirits—that serves as the medium through which the relationship between Islam and nationality is established and reaffirmed. Normative Hanafism, meanwhile, conceptualizes nation and religion in historical and cultural terms, as well as in terms of Hanafi tradition. Here, national tradition is only valid to the extent that it does not contradict Islamic orthodoxy as interpreted by the Muftiyat. Indeed, as Zaman has noted regarding the ways in which Indian Muslims have interpreted "Indian influences" on Islam, the Muftiyat's ambivalent attitude toward problematic aspects of Kyrgyz "national tradition" has served "to shape the sense of an immutable Islamic essence, which the Muslims have preserved and cultivated and which ultimately remains pure and distinct from any such influences."85

From a purely theological standpoint, the divergences between ethno-traditionalism and normative Hanafism, even on certain basic questions of belief and practice, are not insignificant. Indeed, as disagreements over *ziyarat* and the *Manas* epic suggest, the line between what is and what is not Islam is constantly being contested. Ultimately, however, these questions are not purely theological—they also have important ramifications for the ways in which people make sense of their national identity. Thus, while on some basic level the idea that "being Kyrgyz means being Muslim" may be valid—96 percent of Kyrgyz, after all, report that they were "raised Muslim"86—this is not, in the end, an especially useful point of departure. After all, this point of view largely effaces the discourses and narratives that inform both nationhood and Muslimness; the disputes and negotiations; the geographies; and, ultimately, the theologies that make this relationship meaningful to people in the first place.

As a final note, it is crucial to recognize that the analytical categories employed in this article are by no means intended to be exhaustive. Even within these categories there is obviously considerable variation in perspective, both regarding the concept of the nation and on questions of theology. Moreover, we must not lose sight of the fact that there are Christians, secularists, Tengrists, and other kinds of Muslims in Kyrgyzstan, all of whom have their own perspectives on how their beliefs mesh with their national identities as Kyrgyz. In every instance, the relationship between theology and the national imaginary is multifaceted, resistant to easy categorization, and possessed of its own set of dynamics. Further research is needed to explore the different configurations

85 Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam,* 166.

86 James Bell, "The World's Muslims: Unity and Diversity," Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life—2012, 33.

of theology, political ideology, and daily practice that inform the ways in which these people, too, work to shape social life and the discourses that surround national identity and the nation-state.

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