Book Discussion

David Radford, *Religious Identity and Social Change: Explaining Christian Conversion in a Muslim World* (New York: Routledge, 2015)

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Religious Conversion and the Inadequacyof Rational Choice Theory

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I enjoyed reading David Radford's *Religious Identity and Social Change*. The book contains numerous fascinating stories of Kyrgyz Christians and a wealth of quantitative data from a questionnaire distributed to over 400 respondents. In presenting his findings, Radford brings to light intriguing features of religious conversion in Kyrgyzstan. The Kyrgyz case is inherently interesting, not least because looking across Muslim regions around the globe there are only a "few examples of this scale of conversion to Christianity" (p. 174; also p. 2). Radford appropriately cites Robert Hefner's study of conversion in Muslim Java as another rare example, but oddly he neglects to mention studies that have analyzed conversion to Orthodox Christianity in Muslim Ajara (in the Republic of Georgia), which is a pity because this other post-Soviet space would have provided an interesting comparative perspective. Still, even without sustained comparisons, the book succeeds in identifying and illuminating important dimensions of religious conversion.

Among the fascinating topics is that of how ideas of selfhood and belonging are challenged and reconfigured in the process of conversion. Because religion and culture cannot be straightforwardly separated, converts who reject their previous Muslim religious identity are also seen as rejecting their Kyrgyz cultural identity. Spurred on by this challenge, Kyrgyz converts have displayed tremendous creative agency in fostering new Kyrgyz Christian images of self- hood and belonging. For example, they have embraced "traditional" notions of respect and hospitality, while rejecting prevalent social ills such as alcoholism and nepotism, to carve out a moral Kyrgyz Christian position. Moreover, by

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dwelling on the similarities between cultural artefacts described in the Bible and those found among the Kyrgyz, they aim to prove the compatibility of Kyrgyz and Christian identities (p. 151).

Kyrgyz Christians not only emphasize the fit between Kyrgyzness and Christianity, they have also tried to de-link the relationship between Kyrgyzness and Islam. In conversations, they stressed that their ancestors were "Kyrgyz but not Muslim" (p. 147), and that Islam was not only of foreign *origin* but had *remained* foreign because of its use of Arabic in scripture and prayer (p. 149). The issue of language is particularly potent and often deployed when inviting other Kyrgyz to attend church services. As one convert admonished her friend: "Don't memorize and don't pray to God in Arabic. I will take you to the place where people pray to God in Kyrgyz" (p. 126). Another Kyrgyz Christian reported that he was invited to pray in front of a group of Muslim co-villagers precisely because his prayers were in Kyrgyz. Through these and other telling examples, Radford is able to show how Kyrgyz Christians reconcile conflicting markers of identity and how they create a Christianity that is meaningful and feels right to them.

The creative labor that goes into the formation of a Kyrgyz Christian identity finds fertile ground inside the Christian community, but it has a more complicated relationship with society at large. Radford emphasizes that Kyrgyz Chris- tians do not just push back against being labelled deviant by non-Christian Kyrgyz, but aim "to challenge and transform the boundaries of the social group" (p. 141). In doing so he suggests, rightly, that religious conversion entails not just an individual's religious quest but is part of complex social processes. The act of conversion triggers a range of responses from family members, neighbors, and others, all of which feed into a socio-religious landscape whose contours and texture are constantly changing. Radford offers us glimpses of this complexity: being Christian was relatively unproblematic in the anonymity of Bishkek, but in villages converts experienced more overt opposition (p. 137); family members tended to become more accepting with the passing of time, whereas mullahs persisted in their negative stance (pp. 83–85). Intriguingly, while "many Kyrgyz Christians find that relationships with family members are positively renegotiated with the passage of time" (p. 139), society at large reveals "varying, but increasing, levels of opposition and animosity towards Kyrgyz Christians" (p. 168). Given these opposing trends and the tremendous variation across con- texts, it is no surprise that Radford writes on the last page that it remains to be seen whether or not Kyrgyz Christianity will remain a "small isolated 'sub- cultural' event" or will "achieve mainstream acceptance" (p. 174). This inconclusive ending was a bit unsatisfying. While the future cannot be known, the

author could have provided a more overarching argument about the dynamics of conversion in Kyrgyzstan, or used the Kyrgyz case to challenge and enrich existing theories of conversion. It is on these two points—related to methodology and to theoretical engagement—that I wish to push the author.

Radford explicitly discusses his methodology. Chapter 2 and the appendices reproduce the survey questionnaire and provide valuable information about the sample of 427 respondents. They also give details about the 49 interviewees and the procedures that were followed in the interviews. However, this methodological discussion is kept separate from the presented data and their analysis, with the result that questions remain about the validity of the findings. Partly this is because the analysis of quantitative data did not control for location (settlement type, region), for denomination (Presbyterian, Baptist, Charismatic, Pentecostal, etc.), or for the time that had passed since conversion, variables that greatly influence conversion trajectories and experiences, as I have discussed in my own work. Nor is there much reflection on the discrepancies between reported and actual behavior, or reflection on the co-constructed nature of interview data. The point that I am trying to make is that a more critical and reflexive use of research data would have enriched the analysis of the dynamics of conversion. How do forms of opposition against conversion vary among rural and urban contexts and how does that impact conversion trajectories? Do theological and organizational differences between denominations make for different conversion experiences? When Kyrgyz Christians share stories, are they simply reporting their past experiences, or is story-telling an inherent part of the production of a Kyrgyz Christian position?

The second set of questions concerns theoretical engagement. Radford cites an impressive number of theorists and theories, but he engages most elaborately with rational choice theory. He suggests that an "economic approach to understanding religion" can be helpfully applied to explain how and on what basis "thousands of Muslim Kyrgyz have chosen to become Christian Kyrgyz" (p. xxii). In its hard-core version, this approach "considers converting choices to be the result of the individual who rationally weighs up the costs and benefits of conversion within a religious market milieu" (p. 45). Radford acknowledges that this approach has limitations and approvingly cites Finke and Stark's revisionary "subjective rationality" approach, which sees human reasoning as "somewhat unsystematic" and agrees that maximization can be "half-hearted" (p. 48). However, Radford then retreats back to the hard-core approach, saying that that "although it has limitations, it does provide a framework for under- standing *how* people make religious and converting choices" (p. 49). Given this wavering, some clarification of the author's ultimate stance on rational choice

theory would be welcome. Moreover, what actually is it that a rational choice theory tells us about conversion to Christianity that we did not already know? My skepticism about the value of rational choice theory for this particular study of conversion is inspired by two observations. First, Radford seems to drop rational choice theory toward the end of the book. While elaborately discussed in the first chapters, it was absent in the last two chapters and the Epilogue. To me this confirmed that while rational choice theory is (somewhat) sufficient for analyzing the most general and predictable trends, it is inadequate for dealing with the more complex—and far more intriguing—aspects of conversion. Following from this, my second observation is that a rational choice approach seems antithetical to how Kyrgyz Christians experienced their conversion. This tension does not in itself invalidate rational choice theory, but it does create a problem for an author who typifies his approach as "largely phenomenological in that I sought to understand processes and meanings … from the subjects' [Kyrgyz Christians'] point of view" (p. 24). Because when paying close attention to their point of view we learn that they "felt drawn to," "felt the presence of God," and that they experienced "some kind of power" and the "deliverance from evil spirits" (pp. 83–109). That is, the most intense moments of their conversion were decisively not a "reflective process," a deliberate "choice," or a weighing of costs and benefits, but rather a deeply emotive and visceral experience, something that they were drawn to or that overcame them. There will obviously always be tension between members' views and the theorist's explanatory framework. And surely, the weighing of costs and benefits do play a role in conversion trajectories. Nevertheless, rational choice theory is inadequate precisely because it is unable to engage with the emotive, visceral, aesthetic, and moral dimensions of religious experience. Without such engagement it is impossible to understand the complexity of religious conversion that the examples documented in this book have demonstrated so vividly and beautifully.

Discussing Christianity and Ethnicity in Kyrgyzstan

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David Radford's work offers us the precious fruits of a doctoral dissertation, specifically five years of field work in Kyrgyzstan between 2004 and 2008. Structured by a solid sociological theoretical framework, the book deals with a

little-known topic, Protestantism in Central Asia. The author, who has chosen to focus on the phenomenon of conversion of the Kyrgyz to Protestantism, shows commandingly the complexity of the processes and this decision's often far-reaching impact on the individuals themselves and their relations with the social environment in a post-Soviet state where Muslims make up more than three-quarters of the population.

For proselytizing confessions, conversion is, inter alia, a compensation for the—averred or supposed—decline, whether current or future, of their original community in a region or a state. Moreover, the conversion of several thousand Kyrgyz to Protestantism since the 1990s, a faith hitherto essentially made up of Slavic minorities (Russian, Ukrainian) or those of European origin (German, Polish, etc.), confirms Christianity's universality. Above all, the new converts comprise an elite, a new generation of believers. Conversion is understood as a personalized reinvention of utopia; the reorganization of an individual's personal life, as it were, anticipates the reorganization of the world, of which the convert, by turning to religion, will be a driving element. The volunteer nature of conversion implies an intensive commitment as well as the proximity of divine presence in daily life, or also, as the author explains, in the place of worship.

However, as many sociologists have shown, the act of conversion is part of a context of modernity in which an "authentic religious identity" can only be a chosen religious identity. The new convert cannot be fully impermeable to the society in which he develops, and he maintains a more or less intense attraction toward, in Danièle Hervieu-Leger's sense, a pilgrim and/or metaphorical form of faith, that is to say a religion in movement, a faith that is "cobbled together" or practically rearranged and readapted to fit the needs and hopes of the con- verted. This results in a less definitive and exclusive adhesion and in a more flexible, sometimes temporary, entry into a religious movement. The believer thus does not hesitate to combine a declaration of complying with the movement's orthodoxy with the effort of adaptation required to a local political and social environment.

Radford focuses on this inherent complexity in the approach of the con- verted, a complexity that begins upstream (the believer's ways of entering into relations with a religious movement and the path leading to conversion), and continues downstream (the impact of an ethnically Kyrgyz individual's conversion to a minority religion), in the case perhaps not of "Central Asian Protestantism," as the authors himself claims (p. 174), but instead of Central Asian Protestantisms. We find in Central Asia the great diversity of Protestant- ism that also exists on a global scale: apart from the Baptist Church, about which the author has done considerable work, Kyrgyzstan includes several other Protestant confessions, ranging from the Seventh-Day Adventists to

Presbyterians, and the Jehovah's Witnesses, including Charismatic and Pentecostal Churches, some of whose parishes can form appreciably different and autonomous movements even within the same denomination.

The discipline and daily rules imposed upon believers vary greatly depending upon the community. Such rules are generally strict but some movements (e.g., the Baptist or Adventist Churches) are more flexible than others (the Jehovah's Witnesses, some Charismatic movements or Pentecostal denominations). It would therefore be interesting to contrast the experiences of the converts embracing different confessions. These nuances have a significant impact on the new convert, on his degree of independence, both objective and subjective, permitting him to slip into the "bricolage" or "pilgrim religion," in the framework of his parish and daily life. For, precisely this space of independence leads some among them to maintain some distance from their new community or their new beliefs, a phenomenon observed in Kyrgyzstan as elsewhere, which author explains (p. 35) as new converts suffering a "decrease of euphoria."

The diversity of Protestantism also has considerable consequences prior to conversion. In several excellent chapters, the author brilliantly sets out the process of "Kyrgyzization" of the Protestant Churches, both in form (use of traditional Kyrgyz objects in places of worship) and in content (use of Kyrgyz words to translate different Christian concepts). As several scholars have shown, this ethnicization of the place of worship and of theological terminology is a response to the widespread perception in Central Asia that Christianity—Protestant, Catholic, or Orthodox—is a foreign religion or one stemming from the former Russian colonizer.

Some denominations have, however, sought to play up their Western image and potential attraction for the local populations. Here is where the economic dimension of conversion takes on all its importance, which the author presents very well. Large numbers of Kyrgyz (about half of the respondents) had little or no knowledge of Christianity before conversion. (p. 72). Obviously, the attraction of Protestantism does not exclusively feed off a seeker's spiritual or theological quest. For many converts, their interest lies elsewhere. Nearly a third of the author's interviewees indicated that they experienced some form of major crisis before conversion (p. 101), such as family disputes, social problems, and especially unemployment. Conversion is thus grasped as one, if not the only, compensation for this crisis, and for what are considered perverse and wrongfully compensatory elements provided by the society, government and the administration of the country. The majority of sociologists who have studied the motivations of titular populations in Protestant movements have highlighted the importance to converts of specific forms of economic and social assistance (financial support, help with integration, housing, etc.).

This hope is fueled by the image of financial affluence and economic prosperity that the West, and some of its representatives (here the Protestant denominations), conveys. Thanks to the design of their often-imposing places of worship, which may be financed by a congregation abroad, as well as the use and promotion of state-of-the-art technology, Western music, or the provision of foreign language courses (English in particular), several pastors indirectly propagate the Western image of their Church, implicitly contrasting it with the poor and underprivileged social and familial context in which many potential converts are raised. Through their conversion, some Kyrgyz even entertain the hope, which rarely materializes, of emigrating to the West. As the author explains, some converts fully break away from the so-called Kyrgyzness (*Kyrgyzchylyk*) of their social and familial milieus, and it is precisely this set of individuals that some pastors have sought to convert.

The author is nonetheless entirely right to insist on the importance, for a growing number of pastors and Kyrgyz believers, of the "Kyrgyzization" of worship and its practice, which reinforces a community feeling. This "Kyrgyzization" of the Protestant Churches is, moreover, fed by the considerable demographic decrease of the Slavic and European (mostly German and Polish) population. Kyrgyzness and Westernization of the place of worship and religious practice nonetheless are not mutually exclusive. As the author explains, in Kyrgyz Christian conversion there is a clear sense "in which the conversion community is represented both by a localized community (specific local church community) and by the broader or global Christian community, both national and international" (p. 77). Some communities leave the choice up to the new convert, combining both approaches within a single parish. Several Baptist parishes organize services in Kyrgyz and activities that are almost entirely made up of ethnic Kyrgyz, in parallel to services and activities in Russian, a lingua franca that appeal to converts of other nationalities. Both before and after conversion, the author correctly notes the importance of the "subjective rationality" that this gesture implies for every individual, and this "includes the idea that human actors make decisions because it makes sense given the particular context […] but also "the subjective 'feeling,' 'fuzzy' or 'intuitive' process that is included in the words of some of the respondents" (p. 120). Many things have happened in Kyrgyzstan since the author completed his fieldwork. This observation in no way throws into question the pertinence and merit of the work; to the contrary, it allows us to contrast the impact on Christian movements in general, and Protestant ones in particular, of the evolution of Kyrgyzstan's political, economic, and social development. Given the demographic decline of Slavic and German national minorities, and the growing controversies prompted by the conversions to Christianity, all Christian

movements, the Russian Orthodox Church included, have had to develop, and some to revise, a narrative to legitimate their presence, beliefs, and activities in Kyrgyzstan towards the authorities and the local Muslim community, sometimes even by rewriting history.

This is a small error on the part of the author, who validates the storyline advanced by Vladimir, archbishop of the Orthodox Church in Central Asia, who insists that the Orthodox Church has never undertaken missions to convert the Muslim populations of Central Asia. By arguing for the so-called fraternal and historical cohabitation between Muslims and Orthodox Christians on Central Asian lands, Vladimir has endeavored to erase certain embarrassing episodes of the history of the Orthodox Church in the region. After the Tsarist authorities refused two attempts (in 1828 and 1858) by Siberian bishoprics to open missions in the Kazakh steppes, the first "anti-Muslim" mission (*Kirgizskaya protivomusul'manskaya missiya or Kirgizskaya antimusul'manskaya missiya*) finally got underway in 1881 by the bishopric of Bijsk (Altay). Other missions were to follow at the end of the nineteenth century, starting with the bishoprics of Tobolsk and Omsk and, in 1912, the bishopric of Tashkent. However, the extremely limited impact of these missions (a mere few hundred conversions, followed by several apostasies), long blamed on the Tsarist regime's reluctance to proselytize, today enables Vladimir to attempt to silently pass over this far less glorious episode of Christian and Muslim relations in Central Asia.

However, owing to its refusal to proselytize after the fall of the Soviet regime, in particular among the Kyrgyz, the Russian Orthodox Church has managed to keep very good relations with the Muslim majority and the *ulemas*. Relations between these latter groups and the Protestant movements have proved more complex. Despite a Muslim-Christian cohabitation that remains peaceful overall, a growing number of conflicts have been observed between some Muslims and the proselytizing confessions over the last ten years. These clashes, and the often-negative reactions of some Muslims toward the conversion of individuals of Muslim background, have a considerable impact on the daily activities of Protestant communities and on the Kyrgyz converts. Christian Kyrgyz have had to forge a narrative justifying their conversion to their family and friends. This narrative is built upon the "Kyrgyzization" of the worship service and its daily observance, the point being to present Christianity not as a "Russian or foreign religion but as a fully Kyrgyz form of worship." On this, Radford provides us with one of the most precise studies ever undertaken on these arguments. On the basis of this work, it would be particularly interesting were the author or other scholars to study the continued validity of some of these arguments, or their possible revision, within the evolving religious and political context in Kyrgyzstan (and in Central Asia).

For more than a decade, the religiosity of populations of Muslim tradition in Kyrgyzstan has grown significantly. Several scholars have documented growth in religious knowledge among the Kyrgyz, as well as a stricter observance of the five pillars of Islam. Through this evolution, the category of "'nominal' Muslim faith, with little theological knowledge, in which fall most Kyrgyz Christians" (p. 58), is today diminishing. Consequently, the reserve stocks of potential targets for Christian proselyte movements is reducing: as Stark and Finke have shown, "The more religious capital a person has, the less likely they will convert because of the strength of social, emotional and religious investment in that religion, and the subsequent affective attachment that accrues over time."

This growing religiosity phenomenon is particularly observable among youths. Moreover, many put pressure on their parents and older family members to adopt a stricter approach to practice. This is a striking contrast with the author's statement (p. 59) that "the younger the person, the less likely they were to identify themselves as being religious." Moreover, this stricter belief and practice challenges the narratives of some Protestant denominations, according to which the Kyrgyz converts, thanks to their strict daily religious practices or refusal to drink alcohol, are more "submitted to God" than the Muslims. The reluctance of the Central Asian Muslim populations to obey the laws of Islam, such as the ban on alcohol consumption, is decreasing, particularly among the younger generations.

The necessary revision of the narrative, by both Kyrgyz converts as well as the proselyte groups, could also be rendered increasingly difficult by growing pressure from the Islamic institutions. If, as the author explains (p. 85), mullahs expressed surprisingly little opposition to conversion, increasing controversies provoked by the conversions of Kyrgyz have translated into growing tensions and sometimes violent incidents between Muslims and Protestant proselyte movements, and into increasingly evident pressures placed by Islamic institutions on the authorities to tighten up legislation on religion and proselytism. This staunch rejection of Protestantism might also be fueled in the future by a growing Kyrgyz ethnonationalism and arguments against the so-called foreign Churches that, by "Kyrgyzifying" their worship, "are stealing our culture," as observed by Mathis Pelkmans.

Lastly, the growing authoritarianism of Kyrgyzstani political power, the restrictions on religious freedom—mentioned by Radford—the administrative measures, often illegal, to hinder believers in their daily practice could constitute a new challenge to the future development of Protestant movements, in particular in their effort to convert the Kyrgyz populations. In the highly authoritarian states of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, strong religious repression and the postulate, adopted by the authorities, according to which every

Uzbek or Turkmen is of Muslim tradition and thus cannot convert to Christianity, has led to several repressive measures against Protestant churches, and their converts. If the Kyrgyz situation is not—yet—comparable to that of its two neighbors, it will fall to the next generation of scholars to study the consequences of this authoritarianism, should it bear out in years to come, on the evolution of Christian communities.

I would have liked the author to address gender issues more specifically in his study (perhaps this is the topic of a future work?). Such issues are particularly important in the light of the changing context in Kyrgyzstan, in particular of the so-called retraditionalization of society. This retraditionalization, presented as a return to the "Kyrgyz" values that the Soviet regime allegedly disregarded, has led, among other things, to a decline in the education of women, and to confining a growing number of them to their function as stay-at-home mothers. This has pushed many women to seek a social-religious framework able to provide them with a more recognized status, and to escape from male domination. This phenomenon is not new: starting in the 1990s, women saw in their conversion to Christianity a hope of escape from what they perceived as a patriarchy imposed by Islam. This gender issue has also undergone notable evolutions, and its impact on religious practice and belonging is worthy of greater scholarly attention. More recently, we have seen many Central Asian women join Islamist movements in the hope of escaping gender discrimination.

These observations and suggestions by no means take anything away from the merits of Radford's work, but instead aim to show the subject's immense wealth and some of the various future research perspectives that this work invites.

Author's Response: Reimagining ReligiousConversion

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I have appreciated the various critiques by Mathijs Pelkmans and Sebastien Peyrouse of *Religious Identity and Social Change*. They highlight the strengths of the book as well as offering thoughtful critique. I will begin this response by commenting on areas that the reviewers have identified as key strengths of the

work, then respond to their critiques. I will end by indicating areas for future research.

An understanding of the social-political-historic-religious-cultural context in which social phenomena take place, such as religious conversion, is vital for any investigation. This is especially true when it occurs in such comparatively large numbers from Christianity to Islam—and where relatively little academic research has taken place. The book highlights the ways in which the Sovietization and Russification of the former Soviet republics, including the enforced anti-religious program—and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet structure post-1989–91, provided an opportunity for the kind of religious/social changes that are addressed in the book. This context is fundamental to understanding religious conversion because the individual choices that many Kyrgyz have made in embracing Protestant Christianity are deeply embedded in, and have consequences for, that complex "context web."

Pelkmans draws on this point when he comments positively on how the book's exploration of how "ideas of selfhood and belonging are challenged by and reconfigured in the conversion process." Conversion is not just about individuals, but the social networks and cultural frameworks that are intertwined. Issues of the place one has within the community and the innate sense of belonging are deeply affected when one embraces markers of identity that are traditionally not associated with that community, such as Christian faith with Kyrgyz ethnic identity. Pelkmans highlights the role of "creative agency" on the part of Kyrgyz Christians as they look for ways to maintain ethnic continuity and belonging while embracing a major ethnic marker not traditionally associated with the Kyrgyz people. Far from being pawns in the hands of "Christian proselytizers" or at the mercy of the dominant majority, Kyrgyz Christian converts show active agency in reimagining conversion and their place in society. Peyrouse comments on the way the book sets out this process of "Kyrgyziza- tion" in Kyrgyz conversion, "the complexity that begins upstream [the believer entering a religious movement] and continues downstream [the impact of ethnic Kyrgyz embracing a minority religion in a majority Muslim state]." Christian conversion here not only impacts family and culture, but also the political and economic spheres. Kyrgyz Christians draw on national political imaginaries to support their "deviant" religious movement. Drawing parallels with Bishkek's attempts to instrumentalize religion and culture to forge an imagined modern Kyrgyz national identity, Kyrgyz Christians draw on similar "cultural artefacts" (material and ideological discourses) to forge a Kyrgyz ethnic identity that is also Christian. It is not surprising that while this may help Kyrgyz Christians to feel that they belong in the mainstream boundaries of

Kyrgyz ethnic identity and community, this has not necessarily been the case within the broader Kyrgyz community nor with the government, whether this has taken the form of the refusal to bury Kyrgyz Christians in local cemeteries or the tightening of restrictions of religious activity/freedom.

While describing the strengths of the book, Pelkmans and Peyrouse also note a number of areas that might be addressed.

Pelkmans raises both methodological and theoretical questions in relation to the research and the possible limitations this may have on the book's findings and conclusions. He feels that the methodology used was not connected as closely as it could have been to the presented data and analysis, and, as a result, a number of key variables were not cross-analyzed sufficiently, reflecting in an under-reporting of the phenomenon of Kyrgyz conversion.

It is possible that more analysis could have been done with the quantitative data. The areas that Pelkmans note as lacking (controlling for location, Protestant denomination, and time passed since conversion) would have provided a more nuanced understanding of Kyrgyz conversion. Analysis of the data in the book focused on age, gender, and education. However, attention was given to issues in relation to the time passed since conversion such as: religious practice, experiences of encountering "evil spirits," understanding of Christianity, and opposition to conversion. Another omission in the book was a closer inspection of the role that place played out in these issues, especially between rural and urban settings. Peyrouse concurs with Pelkmans on the point that further discussion should have been made on the difference between those Kyrgyz who joined particular denominations. Peyrouse correctly observes that there is great diversity within Protestantism, and that one should really speak of "Protestantisms" as a way of recognizing this; just as we perhaps should speak of "Islamisms" in terms of the diversity within Islam.

I noted that questions remain as to the validity of taking conversion narratives as factual or what really happened. Memories of the past are notoriously fragile; likewise, the role that biographical reconstruction, the influence of denominational doctrine, the co-construction of narratives, or indeed the role that "talking about conversion has in faith communities." My response to Pelkmans is that while these are worthwhile and legitimate research foci, the research at hand deliberately focused on the phenomenon of identity reconstruction through conversion from the perspective of those who are undergoing conversion. Some decisions needed to be made in terms of the time and attention allocated to particular aspects of the conversion phenomenon. This highlights a limitation of the research, not an essential missing element, and suggests the need for further research.

Pelkmans also raises theoretical questions concerning the author's emphasis on rational choice theory and its application to Kyrgyz conversion, and religious conversion more generally. He communicates a negative view of rational choice theory as an analytical tool in religious conversion. First, as Pelkmans rightly points out, it is "a framework (emphasis mine) for understanding *how* people make religious and converting choices". Yet different theoretical or analytical frameworks provide alternative methods to look at the same phenomena. Each has its own strengths and weaknesses, including rational choice theory. My analysis of the approach concluded by suggesting that there was a middle path in the debate for and against rational choice theory. That is, that there is a legitimate sense in which individuals consider whether a course of action, for example converting to another religious denomination, is worth taking or not, whether it is beneficial for them (emotionally, economically, socially, spiritually), what are the risks and what it will cost, and whether the expected positive outcomes are worth any potential negative outcomes. Chapter Seven investigates "Life situations, solutions, [and] explanations" and discusses some of these examples, such as the economic cost, which Peyrousenotes in his review.

I acknowledge that this process is complex, personal, and subjective, and greatly influenced by the social and cultural milieu in which a person has been raised. I concur with others that there is a way between the extreme points of view, a middle ground as it were. This includes the role of "preferences" and experiences in the decision-making process, as well as the fact that a good deal of decision-making is far from conscious, overt, or cognitive. Here I agree with Pelkmans that a purely cognitive, non-subjective rational choice perspective ultimately falls short in effectively understanding phenomena such as religious conversion.

The "revisionist" approach of Stark and Finke, acknowledged by Pelkmans, emphasizes this very point. They speak of a "subjective rationality" in decision-making that is a good deal more realistic or "lived" in the way humans go about things. These processes are a good deal more "unsystematic," and, I would add, far more "affective" in nature than a mere calculation of pro and cons. The suggestion of this process as "subjective rationality" draws together both clearly and unclearly defined factors. The concept of "subjective rationality" allows for, as Peyrouse affirms, the "fuzziness," the intuitiveness of the various factors intersecting in conversion. Ultimately, "rationality" is *what makes sense* to the person concerned. This also draws on Bourdieu's notions of *habitus*, as we are affected, often in unconscious ways, by the multitude of experiences that we have been socialized in and that permeate the cultural context in which those

experiences take place. This is part of the very process taking place in religious conversion, particularly the kind of conversion described in the book that involves transformations of both religious and ethnic identities in Kyrgyzstan.

This is best exemplified by one Kyrgyz female respondent's moment of epiphany that "convinced" her to overcome obstacles involving the "othering" of the Christian message, through identification (and equation) that Christianity was a Russian, not Kyrgyz religion. She made a point of describing the difference between Russian and Kyrgyz Christian meetings, "When the *komuz* [traditional Kyrgyz musical instrument used in the Kyrgyz service] played, it was close to your heart. You felt like, 'It was mine,' confirming for her that the Christian faith comes from the 'soul of the Kyrgyz'."

A nuanced application of rational choice theory helps us to understand some of the complex processes associated with conversion to Christianity, but certainly not all processes. Nevertheless, I accept the criticism from Pelkmans that this view is not as carefully articulated as it might have been, particularly in the introductory section of the book. The book's conclusion raises several issues in the Kyrgyz case that adds to existing theories of conversion, especially in cases where religion and ethnicity are intertwined. First, the role of complex contexts that allow for or limit change, including ethnic boundary flexibility; second, the role of "subjective rationalities" in influencing the conversion process and re-imagination of identities; third, the role and importance of negotiations around social, cultural and religious capital that either hinders orfacilitates conversion.

Peyrouse points out that perhaps I have validated the reconstruction of the historical story of the role the Russian Orthodox Church in relation to the Muslim peoples of Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia. That story, as described in the book, is one where the Orthodox Church has always distanced itself from evangelizing Central Asian Muslim communities. This has been a useful message in the present religious-political environment where the Russian Ortho- dox Church seeks to position itself as a partner with the Kyrgyz government and the Muslim religious establishment, as upholders of traditional religion vis-à-vis "proselyte confessions" in both Christianity and Islam. Peyrouse appropriately provides examples, where, in fact, proselytization by the Orthodox Church, did take place in Central Asia among the titular populations.

Where next in terms of research? Peyrouse notes that the current religious-political-demographic climate in Kyrgyzstan has evolved since the initial years of relative political and religious freedom that facilitated the phenomenon of Kyrgyz conversion to Christianity. Recent developments include the growing strength of Muslim institutional authority, rising levels of Islamic religious observance, especially among youth, and increasing government limits on

religious freedoms. Additional research would be beneficial into the consequences of these changes and whether successful Kyrgyz Christian integration is taking place in the broader community. Likewise, further exploration of gender issues could be pursued, as well as gender's impact on the Kyrgyz Christian movement and society. Has the hope of a better life for women really brought change, or, as Pelkmans challenges in his critique, is there a discrepancy between what people say and what is their lived experience? Pelkmans also noted the lack of a comparison with another example of Muslim conversion to Christianity, specifically in post-Soviet Ajaria, Georgia. I had not been aware of this example and, indeed, while there are differences between the Ajaria and Kyrgyz cases, the similarities are striking. A comparative post-Soviet study of Muslim-Christian religious conversion could therefore be beneficial to identify differences and commonalities in Muslim-Christian conversion and between other forms of conversion, and how this adds to our knowledge of religious conversion more broadly.