Atheism 2.0: Searching for Spaces for Atheismin Contemporary Kyrgyzstan

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Abstract

Recent studies have convincingly demonstrated that Soviet state atheism continues to influence how religion is understood and practiced in present-day Central Asia. In Kyrgyzstan, however, a new generation of atheists is emerging whose ideas about atheism—and about religion—are informed more by globally circulating neo-atheist ideas and images. This paper explores their efforts to live atheist lives and be true to their atheist convictions, and the images of religion that play into the process. Focusing on the role of social media in particular, I will argue that while many, at least initially, embrace these platforms as ways to encounter like-minded individuals and experience moral community, what they encounter there are often images of atheism and its religious "others" with which they cannot identify and which often seem irrelevant to the challenges of everyday life, in which coexistence with (and caring for) religious others are central concerns for many.

Keywords

Kyrgyzstan – atheism – social media – community – religion

An Atheist in Bishkek

One evening, Amir[1] boarded a crowded *marshrutka* in central Bishkek on his way home from work. From the car's loudspeakers emanated a sermon

1 All names in this paper are pseudonyms.

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praising the institution of polygamy. Around him, people listened attentively and nodded, apparently in agreement with the words spoken. Amir was at war with himself: the words that sounded from the loudspeakers and seemed to resonate with his fellow passengers went profoundly against his own convictions, but he was afraid of the consequences of raising his voice against them. Or perhaps, as he reasoned when he told me about the incident in retrospect, he was just too tired to engage in confrontation: you have to choose your battles wisely.

This paper is about young people who, like Amir, see themselves as atheists yet find themselves in a city in which a growing community of practicing Muslims claims its space[2] and in which they increasingly encounter religious microcosms: religious soundscapes[3] like the one Amir experienced in the *marshrutka*; friends and neighbors addressing them with religious greetings; roads being blocked by people attending Friday prayers; stalls at the bazaar offering religious literature, cassettes, and DVDs; shops selling Islamic-style dress; newly constructed mosques; halal cafes; and so on. For some, they are oases of religious virtue, while for others they are eerie signs of Islamization.

This paper explores these young people's understandings of atheism and their efforts to live atheist lives and be true to their atheist convictions. It focuses on how they seek to craft atheist selves and communities of atheists, and the images of religion (notably Islam)—experienced as well as media-borne— that play into the process. Focusing on the role of social media in particular, I will argue that while many, at least initially, embrace these platforms as ways to encounter like-minded individuals and experience moral community, what they encounter there are often images of atheism and its religious "others" with which they cannot identify and which often seem irrelevant to the challenges of everyday life, in which coexistence with (and caring for) religious others are central concerns for many.[4]

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2 E. Nasritdinov and N. Esenamanova, "The War of Billboards: Hijab, Secularism, and Public Space in Bishkek," *Central Asian Affairs,* 4, no. 2 (2017): 217–242.

3 cf. C. Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape. Casette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

4 The paper is based on ongoing fieldwork among atheists in Bishkek funded by the Danish Institute in Damascus and the Danish Research Council for the Humanities, as well as around nine months of fieldwork on everyday religion and secularism conducted in Kyrgyzstan in the period from 2006 to 2012.

Post-Soviet Atheism(s)

Although there has been growing interest in atheism and non-religion in anthropology of late,5 anthropologists have generally been more concerned with what people "believe" than with what they reject. This is also true when it comes to studies in Central Asia: while much of what was written about religious life in Central Asia during Soviet times focused on the influence (or non-influence) of state atheist policies and propaganda, the question of what happened to atheism and what it means to be atheist in post-Soviet society has received relatively scant attention. Scholars have been much more concerned with exploring the reappearance of religion in public space as well as in people's personal lives; discussions about what it means to be, say, Kyrgyz and Muslim; the different ways in which people have explored their Muslim identity; and what it means to belong to a religious minority in post-Soviet society.6 Many studies *do* include discussions of changing conceptions of atheism and atheists or explore the influence of Soviet state atheism on how religion is understood and practiced, looking at how Soviet state atheism still influences the vocabulary through which people's worldview is communicated and the

5 See, for example, R.L. Blanes and G. Oustinova-Stjepanovic (eds.), *Being Godless: Ethnographies of Atheism and Non-Religion* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2017); M. Engelke, "The Coffin Question: Death and Materiality in Humanist Funerals," *Material Religion*, 1, no. 1 (2015): 26–49; M. Engelke, "On Atheism and Non-Religion: An Afterword," in R.L. Blanes and G. Oustinova-Stjepanovic (eds.), *Being Godless: Ethnographies of Atheism and Non-Religion* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2017).

6 Restricting myself to the fieldwork-based monographs that have been published on the subject in recent years, see B. Gatling, *Expressions of Sufi Culture in Tajikistan* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2018); I. Hilgers, *Why Do Uzbeks Have to Be Muslims? Exploring Religiosity in the Ferghana Valley* (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2009); K. Kehl-Bodrogi, *"Religion Is Not So Strong Here": Muslim Religious Life in Khorezm after Socialism* (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2008); A. Krämer, *Geistliche Autorität und Islamische Gesellschaft in Wandel. Studien Über Frauenälteste (otin und xalfa) in unabhängigen Usbekistan* (Berlin: Klaus Schwartz Verlag, 2002); M. Louw, *Everyday Islam in Post-Soviet Central Asia* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007); J. McBrien, *From Belonging to Belief: Modern Secularisms and the Construction of Religion in Kyrgyzstan* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017); D. Montgomery, *Practicing Islam: Knowledge, Experience, and Social Navigation in Kyrgyzstan* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2016); M. Pelkmans, *Fragile Conviction: Changing Ideological Landscapes in Urban Kyrgyzstan* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017); S. Peshkova, *Women, Islam and Identity: Public Life in Private Spaces in Uzbekistan* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2014); B. Privratsky, *Muslim Turkestan: Kazak Religion and Collective Memory* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001); J. Rasanayagam, *Islam in Post-Soviet Uzbekistan: The Morality of Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); H. Thibault, *Transforming Tajikistan: State-Building and Islam in Post-Soviet Central Asia* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2018).

institutional framework through which religion is administered, in Central Asia as well as elsewhere in the post-Soviet world.7 Furthermore, anthropological and historical studies have appeared which have complicated simplistic Cold War understandings of the relationship between communism and atheism, demonstrating that communist states did not merely repress religious practice, but also sought to negotiate with, accommodate, co-opt, and control religious institutions8—and that, as Tam T. T. Ngo and Justine B. Quijada have formulated it, "it is precisely *because* atheism was so central to the communist project that atheism's others, superstition and religion, were essential to the communist experience."9

In the context of Kyrgyzstan more specifically, studies have pointed out how Soviet nationality and religion policies created the still prevailing notion that Muslimness is equal, if not subordinate, to Kyrgyzness10 and, more generally, how the Soviet project affected people's understanding of, and disposition toward, what became seen as "religion"11—an understanding characterized by fears of excessive and foreign forms of religiosity.12

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7 See, for example, C. Hann (ed.), *The Postsocialist Religious Question: Faith and Power in Central Asia and East-Central Europe* (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2007); Hilgers, *Why Do Uzbeks Have to Be Muslims?*; M.D. Steinberg and C. Wanner, *Religion, Morality, and Community in Post-Soviet Societies* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008); Thibault, *Transforming Tajikistan*; C. Wanner, *State Secularism and Lived Religion in Soviet Russia and Ukraine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); M. Pelkmans, *Defending the Border—Religion, Identity, and Modernity in the Republic of Georgi*a (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006); M. Pelkmans, "Awkward Secularity between Atheism and New Religiosity in Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan," in T.T.T. Ngo and J.B. Quijada (eds.), *Atheist Secularism and its Discontents: A Comparative Study of Religion and Communism in Eurasia* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 244–255; Rasanayagam, *Islam in Post-Soviet Uzbekistan*; D. Rogers, *The Old Faith and the Russian Land: A Historical Ethnography of Ethics in the Urals* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009).

8 T.T.T. Ngo and J.B. Quijada (eds.), *Atheist Secularism and its Discontents: A Comparative Study of Religion and Communism in Eurasia* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); S. Luehrmann, *Secularism Soviet Style: Teaching Atheism and Religion in a Volga Republic* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2011). See also Tasar in this volume.

9 Ngo and Quijada, *Atheist Secularism and its Discontents,* 2.

10 B. Isci, "'Proper' Muslim against 'Authentic' Kyrgyz: The Formation of Islamic Field and Secular Challenges in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan" (PhD diss., Washington University in St. Louis, 2010); Pelkmans, "Awkward Secularity."

11 Pelkmans, "Awkward Secularity," 249.

12 Ibid., 253; M. Louw, "Being Muslim the Ironic Way: Secularism, Religion and Irony in Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan," in N. Bubandt and M. van Beek (eds.), *Varieties of Secularism in Asia: Anthropological Explorations of Religion, Politics, and the Spiritual* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2011); M. Louw, "Even Honey May Become Bitter When There is Too Much of It:

Studies such as these, which have focused on the afterlives of Soviet atheism, have added important new dimensions to our understanding of the complex landscape of religion and secularism—of belief, disbelief, and doubt—that characterizes post-Soviet space. Less attention has been devoted to the life worlds of declared (neo-)atheists: those for whom atheism is not merely a haunting remnant of Soviet times, but a convincing intellectual, existential, ethical, and political position. Notably, they are largely non-existent, reflecting the fact that atheism has gone from being state-imposed and having a very prominent presence in public space during Soviet times (in art and posters, political speeches, and school curricula) to being virtually invisible, or at least non-marked. Most people who conceive of themselves as atheists do not belong to any formal atheist organizations, and most—for a variety of reasons that will be discussed below—tend to live their atheist identity in a discreet manner.

While atheists tend to play down their convictions in the company of family, neighbors, and peers, many, in particular in the younger generation, are active on social media. New media such as websites, blogs, and online fora have played a significant role worldwide in what may be termed the neo-atheist resurgence,13 creating new forms of interaction and communication between atheists, sometimes across national boundaries. This has been particularly important in places where atheism is seen as controversial and where atheists may feel isolated in their communities.14 Kyrgyzstan is no exception to this trend: just as "traditional" ideas about Islam have increasingly been challenged

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Islam as Threat And Source of Well-Being in Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan," *Central Asian Survey*, 32, no. 4 (2013): 514–26.

13 Of late, there seems to be growing interest in atheism and being atheist in many parts of the world: since the start of the new millennium, there has been an explosion in polemical literature arguing for or against atheism. For example, in the wake of biologist Richard Dawkins' book *The God Delusion* (2006), a fierce debate developed between what are now commonly called new atheists and anti-atheists. The debates touch upon fundamental questions such as whether or not a life may be meaningful without a religious or spiritual dimension; to what extent morality is linked with religion; whether science and religion are compatible; and to what extent and on what basis we may claim to know anything about the existence or non-existence of deities and the transcendent. This new atheist resurgence is also apparent in the rise of atheist/"humanist" movements and organizations in different parts of the world, which seek to promote atheism, secure the right to live an atheist life, and, in some cases, establish atheist rituals and ceremonies as alternatives to the predominant religious ones (cf. Engelke, "On Atheism and Non-Religion"; A. W. Geertz and G. I. Markússen, "Religion Is Natural, Atheism Is Not: On Why Everybody Is Both Rightand Wrong," *Religion,* 40, no. 3 (2010): 152–65.

14 R. Cimino and C. Smith, *Atheist Awakening: Secular Activism and Community in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 54.

by (mostly) younger Muslims who advocate a more universalist concept of religion, new generations of atheists are emerging in Kyrgyzstan whose ideas about atheism are informed not so much by Soviet state atheism, or atheism as practiced by Soviet generations, as by ideas circulating globally within international communities of atheists, notably on social media.

This younger generation of atheists is very diverse. Some are devoted to a "scientific" worldview, which they consider incompatible with a religious outlook; others are feminists or queer activists and have been led to atheism primarily because of the gender inequality and/or homophobia that they see as intrinsic to religion in general and Islam in particular. Some link their atheism with a Marxist or socialist ideology. Others are mainly inspired by neo-atheist literature, such as the works of Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens. Still others are primarily led to atheism through personal experiences of ethical transgressions related to religion or representatives of religions. Some identify themselves as "atheists," whereas others prefer the term "agnostic" (but may nonetheless at times refer to themselves as "atheists").

Similar to the ways in which the younger, more scripturally oriented generation of Muslims often distinguish themselves from the older generation, seeing the latter's understanding of Islam as resting on "tradition" rather than a knowledge of Islam proper, these new generations of (neo-) atheists often explicitly distinguish themselves from the older generation's perceptions and practices of atheism, which they consider to be default positions adopted in order to adapt to the political reality of the Soviet era rather than being based on personal conviction and knowledge. When younger atheists talk about how they came to atheism or realized they were atheists, the active pursuit of knowledge about religion—and subsequent disillusionment with religious ideas—is often central. Aibek, a young man in his late twenties, for example, recounted how he had been "very religious" during his early teens and until he was around 15 years old: he fasted during Ramadan, prayed five times a day, and went to the mosque regularly. Growing up in Toktogul, he recounted, he was very much influenced by a local imam, who was later arrested for promoting religious extremism. The imam told him about the Taliban, about how they had conquered Afghanistan and would soon conquer Bishkek and Tashkent. He also warned Aibek that he had better start studying Islam in order to be pre- pared. Aibek was frightened and made great efforts to become a better Muslim in the eyes of the imam: "I was ready to go to Afghanistan!" he pointed out, seemingly horrified by his former self. He did not go, but he did decide that he wanted to study at a madrasa. His father, who was less impressed by what the imam had said, was opposed to this (in telling the story, Aibek mimicked howhis father had threatened to beat him up), with the result that Aibek instead

went to study international relations at the Slavic University in Bishkek. There, he befriended a group of people from very diverse social, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. Inspired by them and out of curiosity, he began to read more about various religions and scrutinize their holy scriptures. The more he read, the more appalled he was: he found the stories in the Qur'an and the Bible ridiculous and irrelevant to modern life. Thus, it became clear to him that he was an atheist. To Aibek, then, the "religious" identity he had left behind had, first and foremost, connotations of living an isolated life in a village—of being young, ignorant, and naïve and easy prey for an imam who manipulated young people with threats, promises, and morally reprehensible versions of Islam. Like several of my atheist interlocutors, he spoke about the irony in the fact that he, as an apostate, actually knew more about religion than his religious friends and relatives, some of whom had never read a single page of the Qur'an. Tatiana, similarly, began to consciously become an atheist when she was 16. Meeting a young man who was preparing to become a priest in the Russian Orthodox Church made her curious about religion:

> I came back home and read the Bible. And on page eight I stopped. Because it was so cruel! It was like killings and killings and killings (…) At the age of 22, I read the Quran from start to end. And it was revealing, interesting, but I found nothing religious there. Rules: yes. Societal organization: yes. Law: yes […] I think my position is that the presence of God, if he existed, would make me angry. Like everything I see and saw would make me question him. If he is almighty, he wishes to do it. If he does not, he is not almighty…and how cruel he is to certain populations and takes sides and…so many questions that his mere presence and being would destroy me […] If you read the books, and you are a woman—how come you still believe? Sometimes it is like, the book goes so harsh on women. Everything bad happens because of you! If you are menstruating, you are a bad creature and you are filthy or something.

In spite of the fact that many of them had strong opinions about religion—the ways it is presented in the holy scriptures and/or understood and lived among religious practitioners—these young atheists were rarely open about their (lack of) belief. Whereas it may be relatively uncontroversial for those who grew up in the Soviet Union to declare themselves to be atheists, since this was seen as less of a choice than a political necessity, it is rather more suspicious to be young and atheist. Aibek, for example, would rarely declare himself as such, as he was afraid it would make people see him as a "devil," as he put it.

Given that religious life among Muslims in Kyrgyzstan is bound up with family and community events marking important moments in life (circumcision, marriage, and death, for example), declaring oneself to be an atheist is seen not merely as a rejection of religion, but as a rejection of the community and the values and practices that are considered to underpin it. Let us return to Amir for an illustration of this phenomenon.

Amir's Trajectory

Amir, who was an academic in his early 30s, came to Bishkek in 2012. He was born in a religiously very conservative part of the Ferghana Valley in Uzbekistan into a family of Tatars who were Muslim, but for whom religion "did not matter much," as he put it: they took part in the religious rituals that were central to life in the mahalla, but never went to the mosque. At 16, he left his home- town and went to the US, first as a high school exchange student and later for college. This experience had a lasting impact on him: he went to a Christian college and worked as a janitor in a church, exposing him to Christianity. This experience, he believes in retrospect, made him question Islam as well as religion more broadly, and in particular the moral drives in religion:

> I had a passion for development work … but I could not understand why people engage in it, really, genuinely? Everybody is buying a ticket to heaven by doing good, and you see that in the Christian college, too: you are not really doing it for somebody else; you are doing it mostly for yourself. Either because you are terrified of the deity, you are scared of the almighty God, or you want to kind of bribe this higher spirit or whatever, show that you are good…so for me it was kind of unethical, and I firmly believed that we can [work for the] greater good without religion.

Returning to the Ferghana Valley in 2011, Amir began to see life there and the values people held in a different light, questioning what he had previously taken more or less for granted. In particular, he resented the way women were treated, the way families were constructed, and the way children were raised. But if he stayed there, there was no way, he thought, that he could avoid "following tradition" and participating in the events that underpinned family and community life: "Just how can you not do this? It would be really strange if you did not do this…You would offend people, endangering your life and so on. The machine is so much bigger than you."

Although he was critical of the gender and family structures they underpinned, taking part in communal religious rituals did not really bother him that much:

> I am going through these motions because they are part of our culture. It is almost like standing up and making your bed, like going to somebody's funeral or somebody's festive event and saying a prayer, or following somebody saying a prayer and going through the motions. It is just going through the motions. I did not have anything eating me inside or a feeling that I needed to rebel against it.

To this day, living in Bishkek, Amir feels that he does not have the right to stand up against life as it is lived and understood in the mahalla, as this would most likely create problems for his family. With their Tatar background, they were initially seen by many as "Russians" and had to make a special effort to be accepted as part of the community. Now they are well-integrated into the mahalla, and Amir does not want to put their hard-won position there at risk.

In 2012, Amir came to Bishkek in order to do an MA. Here, he found himself in a very different environment: "I think Bishkek itself is very unique. There is this free spirit […] It is such a city of contrasts. From the wildest party to the most conservative taxi drivers: you can have it all within twenty minutes!" His education and subsequent career allowed him to live his life largely in the company of like-minded people, but he also experienced how the city was gradually changing, becoming more conservative and religious, creating an environment where it was increasingly difficult to be atheist, at least in public:

> What do I observe in *chaykhanas*, for example? People drink [vodka], people *love* to drink. But people drink out of teapots; they pour it into cups and drink it. Who are they lying to? They are only lying to society because there is this *panopticon*;15 there is this invisible eye. We are all observed by everyone, and then people talk, and you are one of them, and so you behave in this way also.

15 Amir refers here to Jeremy Bentham's idea of the *panopticon*, a prison design that allows a single watchman to observe all the inmates, while the inmates are not able to tell whether they are being observed or not. The concept was famously used by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Penguin, 1991 [1975]) as a metaphor for modern disciplinary forms of power.

Bishkek through the Eyes of Atheists

When talking about the difficulties one encounters when being an atheist and trying to lead an atheist life, many of my interlocutors referred to how public space in Bishkek has slowly but steadily been undergoing a profound change. Built by the Russians in the nineteenth century, Bishkek has long had a reputation for being a profoundly secular space. Since Kyrgyzstan's independence, however, the city has experienced a growing influx of Muslim NGOs, funding from foreign Muslim countries, Kyrgyz and foreign Islamic actors, and religious publications, as well as the increased visibility of Islamic symbols among the residents of the city.16 As Emil Nasritdinov and Nargul Esenamanova have argued,17 the growing community of practicing Muslims in Bishkek "assert the right to be in the city, live according to its religious ideals, and create Islamic urban spaces."18 This increased visibility of Islam in public spaces, they argue, is the subject of strong public debate.19 It is not only declared atheists who have strong reactions to it; people who perceive themselves as practicing Muslims may also express fears that some people are becoming excessively religious and that "foreign" (and "extremist") forms of Islam are invading the country.20 Like Amir, most of my interlocutors—especially those with a Kyrgyz ethnic background—had more or less come to terms with the fact that it was im- possible to completely avoid participating in the ritual life of their families and communities. They would be pragmatic and "go through the motions," as Amir expressed it, while remaining emotionally detached.21 The feeling that public space in Bishkek—a city which they had previously seen as a secular and liberal haven—was becoming "Islamized," however, was much more disturbing. Some commented on the more visible signs: the growing number of mosques or the way various versions of the hijab and other kinds of religious clothing had become a common sight across the city.22 Others focused on less conspicuous changes: Dastan, a young man in his twenties, recalled how walking around his neighborhood during the month of Ramadan he would be met

16 ISCI, "'Proper' Muslim against 'Authentic' Kyrgyz," 65.
17 Nasritdinov and Esenamanova, "The War of Billboards."
18 Ibid., 217.
19 Ibid.
20 Louw, "Being Muslim the Ironic Way"; Louw, "Even Honey May Become Bitter."
21 See also M. Louw, "It Is Just Doing the Motion: Atheist Time Work in Contemporary Kyrgyzstan," in M. Flaherty, L. Dalsgård, and L. Meinert (eds.), *Time Work* (forthcoming).
22 cf. Nasritdinov and Esenamanova, "The War of Billboards."

by neighbors who called out, "*Orozonguzdar qabïl bolsun!"* (May your fast be accepted!) He did not fast and had never done so, and the fact that people just assumed that he did—and that people identified each other as religious by default—was to him a sign that the city had changed profoundly over the past ten years or so. Still others were struck by increasing conservatism and intolerance, noting that a group of young Muslim men had gathered in front of the Philharmonia in an attempt to stop an event that included traditional Kyrgyz dance, which they argued was un-Islamic.

Tatiana, who was originally from Turkmenistan and came to Bishkek in 2003, had also experienced the city to be (subtly) changing. She highlighted how it had increasingly become unsafe for LGBTQ people:

> When I first came, it was very different from Turkmenistan. People would freely hold hands, kiss on the streets—you never see that in Turkmenistan. I saw many transgender and gay people. I went to a gay club for the whole of my freshman year. Because it was kind of safe. No one would talk to you—because it is a gay club, no one is interested—and you bunch of girls could just dance, and so it was a nice place for us to go […] It was open, everybody knew that it happened. I have many gay friends now. It is closed. We have a gay club, but even I don't know where it is because it is only those in the community who know. They don't tell other people, because they are really afraid. And because this organization, *kyrk-choro*[23] ... they are just crazy guys. I would not like to meet them.

Added to the feeling that public space was increasingly Islamized was the sense that many people would go about their lives unthinkingly, hypocritically behaving as if they were happy about the developments because they were concerned about their public appearance—as Amir's remarks about the *belyi chai* ("white tea"), vodka drunk from a teapot, suggest. Ainura, a woman in her twenties, recounted how one of her friends would boast that five days a week he was religious, but during the weekend he would indulge in drinking and visiting prostitutes, describing his behavior as depressingly typical: the city had become a gigantic religious theatre play in which many people only engaged because they were afraid of the consequences of not doing so. She felt an urgent pull to demask the hypocrisy, but also felt that she was up against a machine that was larger than she could contend with. She therefore hoped to

23 *Kyrk-choro* ("Forty knights") is an ultra-nationalist group or movement that has become infamous in recent years for attacks on, and intimidation of, foreigners, LGBTQ activists, and Kyrgyz women who engage in (romantic or sexual) relations with foreigners.

be able to migrate—to Canada or Scandinavia—before the country "turned into a caliphate."

In short, what many of my interlocutors expressed were feelings of becoming strangers in their own world, of disorientation,24 of not being able to find a place to dwell—to feel at home—in spaces they knew, lived in, and embodied. This gradual moral breakdown was experienced as a general sense of alienation25 that called for a response—and atheists responded in various ways. Among these responses was to seek out alternative spaces online.

Alternative Social Spaces: Social Media Communities

In Bishkek, new media have become more and more embedded in people's daily lives, particularly those of the younger generation.26 There is a big discussion about what kinds of communities and subjectivities social media communities allow for or encourage; whether social media communities enable or destroy community; what computer-mediated communication does to our commitment to, and empathy toward, other people; and what kind of responsibility and accountability we assume for our virtual actions.27 Rather than entering into this discussion as such, I will explore how my interlocutors experience social media as a way of being and acting in the world; what kinds of selves and communities they afford; and how they relate to these selves and communities in face-to-face interactions with others. For the younger generations of atheists, Facebook, in particular, is used as a medium for networking, discussion, and the sharing of information and experiences, as it is seen as

24 S. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

25 The concept of "moral breakdown," as Jarrett Zigon has emphasized in his later work, should not be read as necessarily indicating a rupturing or transcendental experience. Sometimes, it may rather be seen as "nonconscious, mooded, affective processes of working through an ethical dilemma in the midst of everyday life, oftentimes without any awareness whatsoever other than 'being in a mood'" (J. Zigon, *A War on People: Drug User Politics and a New Ethics of Community* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018), 112–113).

26 E. Nasritdinov and P. Schröder, "Re/Claiming Bishkek: Contestations and Activisms in the City of Two Revolutions: An Introduction," *Central Asian Affairs,* 4, no. 2 (2017): 97–128; H. Ibold, "Disjuncture 2.0: Youth, Internet Use and Cultural Identity in Bishkek," *Central Asian Survey*, 29, no. 4 (2010): 521–535.

27 B. Hofmeyr, "Is Facebook Effacing the Face? Reassessing Levinas's Ethics in the Age of Social Connectivity," *Filozofia*, 69, no. 2 (2014): 121.

more "serious" than other social media. Many are connected with Facebook groups for atheists and agnostics in Kyrgyzstan, and others with more internationally oriented groups such as "Atheist Nation," as well as with groups for atheists in other countries, notably Russia.

Dastan—who was very much inspired by Richard Dawkins and his science-oriented atheism and dreamed of translating *The God Delusion* into Kyrgyz—started up a Facebook group for atheists and agnostics in Kyrgyzstan back in 2014 after a heated discussion on his own Facebook page following a post he wrote during Ramadan, which made the argument that Ramadan was problematic in the hot Central Asian summer.

Dastan had grown up in a family that was "moderately" religious, as he termed it. His mother would occasionally fast, he said, but she and the other members of the family had largely accepted that he was an atheist. Asked about when he had become an atheist, he told me that every child is an atheist at the moment of its birth and only later becomes religious if it succumbs to the pressure of a religious society. He had never succumbed to any such pressure, in spite of the many attempts that had been made to make him do so. His family had sent him to a Turkish boarding school related to the Gülen movement. Formally, the schools are secular institutions, but most of the students there, Dastan pointed out, tended to become religious during their school years, mainly because of the way they would be taught about Islam by older students who resided at the dormitory with them.28 Many of his friends therefore became religious. Now, he rarely bothered to talk with his religious friends. He felt somewhat obliged to do so, as he hoped to spread the word of atheism, but he rarely felt he had the energy to engage in conflict.

He would, however, often enter into discussions on Facebook. The group he created had steadily grown—by September 2018, it had 2,685 members. Like most other Facebook groups, there are those who follow it more passively and those who spend a lot of time engaging in discussions and the sharing of information and experiences, posting everything from media articles and religious satire to more personal experiences and questions regarding how to live as an atheist in Kyrgyzstan. Most posts focus on Islam, reflecting Islam's role as the dominant religion in the country and for most of the group members. Some restrict themselves to participating in or passively following the online discussions, but a core group of members, including Dastan, uses the group as a platform for organizing meetups: face-to-face discussions, talks, and social gatherings. When I met up with them in the summer of 2017, they were

28 cf. B. Balci, "Fethullah Gülen's Missionary Schools in Central Asia and Their Role in the Spreading of Turkism and Islam," *Religion, State & Society*, 31, no. 2 (2003): 151–177.

discussing how to become a "real" movement or organization—that is, an entity that would be visible outside the framework of social media and would make a real difference in Kyrgyz society. This, they reasoned, would probably involve changing the name of the group, as the term "atheism" might scare off some of those who would otherwise be interested and might put members at risk if they showed off t-shirts or car stickers from the organization in public.

Some of my interlocutors expressed feeling relief upon discovering the group and learning that there were like-minded people around. Emilbek, a man in his early 30s who had spent many hours in his youth diving into the scriptures of a variety of religions (which filled the shelves of his father's library) and had thought a lot about religion and what he came to see as its function—as a technology for ruling the masses—explained:

> For a long time I thought I was the only one, and I couldn't find anyone who had similar thoughts. But lately [discovering the Facebook group], I saw that we have such people who were thinking like me, and they started to understand these things. Some of them did so earlier than I [laughs] …It helps, really.

Aibek—whose wife (who was religious) teasingly pointed out in my conversation with them how he particularly enjoyed some of the more crude and cynical posts in the group—likewise indicated that following the group pro- vided him with a place to breathe, as he usually felt very alone with his atheistconvictions.

Others, however, were more ambiguous when reflecting on what kinds of atheist communities were created in online spaces. Let us return again to Amir:

> I was surprised to find this group when I moved to Kyrgyzstan. There is even a social network for atheists and agnostics in Kyrgyzstan, and it cuts across different ages and ethnicities. But what is interesting about this group is that some of their words and behaviors are similar to what people resent in religions. So they also become kind of divisional, like "us versus them"; "we have the truth"; "we know how things are", and so on…. So you have this group which on the one hand is marginal, but on the other hand is also very selective, exclusive, and aggressive at times, and even evangelical in their treatment of atheism.

Amir was added to the Facebook group by some of his colleagues who thought he would like to be included, but he soon quit, finding most of the posts in the group too aggressive, to the point that they became similar to the religions

they were bashing and a means for harassing religious believers rather than a starting-point for positive discussions on atheism:

> When it comes to hate speech online…you can make a person commit suicide in the worst-case scenario. It is tragic. So for me this is a very dangerous weapon because even when we are responding to…let's say, you know, just an example that comes to mind: two girls eating sunflower seeds in Bishkek. They were throwing the shells on the ground and somebody filmed them and showed them on social networks. Okay, what they were doing was wrong, but the response was so disproportional. These poor girls were destroyed, essentially. So to me it is like we are doing the same through the atheism network, where we get together not only to share ideas, but also to weaponize somebody's visibility, bash them, moralize them…why should we moralize them? Why should I harass them if this is not what my belief is about? So for me it was a trigger for leaving the group.

Amir was not alone in his disillusion with online atheist communities. For several of my interlocutors, the initial relief at finding a community of like-minded individuals on the internet soon gave way to more ambiguous feelings when they discovered that they were not necessarily that like-minded—that what they rejected when declaring themselves atheist was not necessarily what other atheists rejected. Damira, for example, found her atheism intimately bound up with feminism, emphasizing how obvious it was that the Qur'an was written from a male point of view, but after joining the group as well as other social media groups for atheists, she realized that being atheist was not necessarily the same as being feminist or being tolerant of others' views. She pointed out that many men in the group would, for example, post pictures of women in burqas and make fun of the way they ate their food, etc., not realizing how sexist they were. Firuza, similarly, left the group after increasingly finding that atheism was something entirely different for those who discussed it there than it was for her. Whereas for her atheism was connected with being feminist and leftist, the group, she thought, was dominated by people who ex- pressed Islamophobia, homophobia, and a rather rigid "scientific" worldview. She felt she did not have the energy to engage in the group's discussions, but also that she could not participate without doing anything, and thus she quit and found other, international online communities that better matched her own views. Tatiana followed "Atheist Republic" (an internationally-oriented Facebook group), but not without reservation:

> Sometimes they go really harsh, and I don't like their jokes, but most of the time they are kind of bearable and sometimes they do post articles,

> interesting articles […]But sometimes they go ugly on religious people. They make fun of them and…to me, fanaticism is bad, and it does not matter which side you are on…Well, I understand that sometimes atheists get aggressive, because they have to protect themselves. And then I see that religion is on the rise […] But for me coexistence is important. Like how you can live together—how you can be nice to each other. Thisis it.

Schizmogenesis and the Longing for Moral Community

My atheist interlocutors, who often felt themselves to be at the margins of the community, were striving to find themselves a place to dwell. Dwelling—seen as a balance between a sense of agency and autonomy, on the one hand, and belonging to a larger community, on the other, or, as Jarrett Zigon has put it, "to be in a world in such a way that one's being is never pre-limited within a pre-assumed totality, but rather possibilities for becoming otherwise remain open"29—may be seen as a fundamental existential imperative for human existence. For my atheist interlocutors, it was a pressing concern: whenever they stepped into the world of others, they tended to encounter behaviors, attitudes, and ideas they could not live with. In the face-to-face communities they and/or their families lived in, and increasingly in public spaces, they found it hard to be atheists, at times experiencing social life there as a machine that simply required people to fit in. Social media seemed to offer other hopes and possibilities for experiencing community. For some, they indeed offered a safe haven where they could meet and engage in discussions with like-minded individuals, a safety valve where they could share experiences and express views that would be seen as controversial in the face-to-face communities where they lived, or just an assurance that they were not alone with their thoughts. Others—particularly those whose atheism mainly rested on ethical grounds and was related to the experience of ethical transgression in religion (whether in the holy scriptures, in hypocrisy among believers, or in how religious believers acted out of fear of God rather than care for others)—increasingly became disillusioned with what they saw as rather similar ethical transgressions in on- line atheist communities: the tone was perceived to be way too harsh; due to their intolerance toward other worldviews, they occasionally came close to the religious worlds to which they defined themselves as being in opposition; andthey became tools for dividing people and igniting hate.

29 J. Zigon, "An Ethics of Dwelling and a Politics of World-Building: A Critical Response to Ordinary Ethics," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute,* 20 (2014): 746–764.

In many ways, the friction experienced by atheists in their encounters with other atheists mirrors religious developments in Central Asia in the aftermath of the break-up of the ussr: the initial excitement at being allowed to explore Islam and express Muslim religious sentiments has increasingly been replaced by a sense of friction between different ways of understanding Islam and being Muslim. This is a kind of schizmogenesis, the perpetual creation of divisions, paradoxically driven by an existential drive to find a place of belonging and a moral community of like-minded individuals. This becomes even more clear in the case of social media, which may reinforce a trend toward networked individualism or "me-centered" social formations as a dominant form of sociality in the present age30—a form of sociality where individuals may join, leave, and create what are often interest- and value-based social groups at a very fast pace and without major consequences.

What the case also shows, however, is that people rarely live their whole lives in such me-centered enclaves. They are thrown into communities that they do not choose themselves and which, although they may at times appear to be "machines" (as Amir put it) that do not allow for any form of departure from dominant norms, at other times appear to be composed of intimate others they care about, for whose well-being they are responsible, and with whom they need to coexist. Like Amir, many of my interlocutors had family members—wives, husbands, children, parents, or other relatives—or close friends who were religious, and it was important for them to ensure that these intimate others did not get into trouble or suffer due to their atheist convictions. For Aibek, as already mentioned, the Facebook group constituted an important breathing space, and he also appreciated some of the harsher postings there. In his offline interactions with others, however, he was much more accommodating: due to his great interest in Islam in his early teens he was—ironically— very good at reading the Qur'an and was often asked to do so during special events in his family. He did not mind doing so, he said, seeing it as a "tradition" he wished to respect. What he found more disturbing was the fact that his wife had expressed that she might one day wish to start living more piously and pray. This profoundly challenged his worldview, as his wife was a professional herself, with a promising career within international organizations. She was bright and independent, which he had always admired about her. And the two of them tended to agree on the kinds of moral values they would like to build their lives on and pass on to their daughters—although tending to find the source of these values in different knowledge traditions. The theme was so

30 C.F. S. Pink et al. (eds.), *Digital Ethnography: Principles and Practice* (Thousand Oaks, CA:sage, 2016).

unpleasant for them that they usually avoided discussing it, while knowing all the while that they would someday have to confront it and find a way to live with their differences.

Conclusion

Many experiences may lead a person to embrace atheism, and what people reject when declaring themselves to be atheists are not necessarily the same things. The Bishkek atheists whose efforts to live atheist lives and be true to their atheist convictions I have explored in this paper had different reasons for being atheists and different ideas about what it was they rejected in detaching themselves from religion: for some, it was primarily ignorance, irrationality, and narrowmindedness; for others, it was primarily misogyny and homophobia; for still others, it was primarily unethical behavior in the name of religion or caused by religion, or what they saw as the unethical character of religious scriptures. I have argued that, in a context where declared atheists often feel marginalized—even in social spaces that were previously experienced as relatively secular and liberal—social media offer a much-appreciated way to communicate and share experiences with like-minded individuals. However, though they initially embrace these media, many become disillusioned with them over time as what they encounter there are often images of atheism and its religious "others" with which they cannot identify, which may sometimes seem disturbingly similar to what made them turn their backs on religion, and which often seem irrelevant to the challenges of everyday life, in which coexistence with (and caring for) religious others are central concerns for many.

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