

From the Post-Soviet Godless Legacy to Radical Islam: Russian Converts

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Abstract

The paper analyzes the subject of Russian converts to Islam who appeared after the demise of the Soviet Union and at the beginning of the Islamic revival. A number of Russian converts into Islam increases every year in contemporary Russia and many of them prefer radical Islam. This research shows that weak proselytizing strategy of traditional religions, the overreliance of the Orthodox Church on the existing political regime, the unfolding of crisis of self-identity within the Russian population, grievances about sociopolitical gridlock, demographic changes, and the aggressive usage of modern communication technologies by radical sects give a fertile ground for an upsurge of conversions.

Key Words: Russian converts, terrorism, religion, Russia, the Orthodox Church, conversion

Introduction

Religious conversion is a multi-dimensional historical phenomenon that has existed as long as societies have. The complexity of this term refers to three basic practices: a shift within the same religious tradition, a turn from atheism to a religious life, and an adoption of another religious tradition. With a variety of forms and meanings, the concept of conversion is always connected to a particular cultural environment and certain power links between individuals and the national groups involved. As an overview, conversion includes such important but simple elements as language, social structure, family traditions, and personal beliefs. All of these elements add to the overall complexity of this term.

The problem of conversion has attracted scholars' imagination for decades. Many theoretical approaches construct models of religious conversion in terms of psychological factors and socio-cultural determinants (James 1902; Kilbourne and Richardson 1988; Kox et al. 1991; Lofland and Stark 1965; Rambo 1993; Snow and Machalek 1983). To emphasize the definitive role of stress and psychological crisis on conversion, Heirich (1977) and Bromley and Shupe (1979) provide very persuasive data and prove their conclusions by using control groups in their experiments. These psychological factors and socio-cultural determinants are crucial and may cause different impacts on the individual, who becomes the center of every conversion theory.

The role of an individual is observed in two major ways. Some scholars argue that individuals are free to choose which religious tradition they want to be a part of (Lofland and Stark 1965; Straus 1979), whereas other researchers believe that religious organizations have essential control over individuals and can have an impact on their spiritual preferences (Gartrell and Shannon 1985). Empirical research has been carried out with some geographical and statistical limitations. Many scholars focused on the population within only one state (predominantly the US) and based on the data, collected within the Christian population. The statistical limitations include gender or age biases (Greeley and Hout 1988; James 1902; Starbuck, 1897). In part, researchers do not specify gender differences in terms of the experience

of religious conversion. Worth noting is that Rambo (1993, 174) underlines the importance of the gender factor in an analysis of religious conversion, but the researcher does not elaborate on it. In the 1970s, under the influence of the overall decline of popularity for traditional religions, scholars developed sociological approaches to religious conversion and began to underline the influence of individual attributes such as national or cultural identity, the level of socialization, and others (Greil 1977; Travisano 1970). They disregarded the role of religious organizations as an essential factor for religious conversion. Later, Rambo (1993; 59), working on a holistic theoretical approach to this issue, tried to present conversion as a process of the complex interplay of the role of a religious infrastructure and personal attributes. Given the rise of intermarriage after the end of WWII, researchers began to connect religious conversion to this social tendency (Mueller and Lane 1972; Nelsen 1990; Sherkat 2004).

The problem with radical converts in the Western cultural space did not receive adequate coverage in contemporary studies, specifically in terms of security concerns. Sinclair (2005) and Jensen (2008) scrutinize the wide range of socio-cultural issues which converts encounter in Danish society. Another scholar van Nieuwkerk (2006) considers conversion to Islam through the focus of gender. Analyzing the meaning behind conversion, Wohlrab-Sahr (2005) observes European converts as important mediators between the Western and Muslim cultures. Pargeter's book scrutinizes radical converts within Europe in order to clarify the reasons for radicalization and conversion (Pargeter 2008). The author stresses that the idea of "Westernization" of Islam and the role of converts as mediators are illusory, because some converts look for purer forms of religion in the Islamic world and deny European society (Pargeter 2008, xi). To sum up, in the era of global jihad and the rise of ISIS, the problem of converts demands holistic comprehensive research with particular focus on their terrorist activities or the possibility of joining radical organizations.

In the Russian Federation, this problem is ignored by politicians, intellectuals and in part, by researchers. Even the Russian Orthodox Church has turned a blind eye on the conversion. According to Diakon G. Maksimov (2014), the conversion of Russians to Islam is a marginal event and therefore, it cannot be considered as an important problem for the Russian Orthodox Church. However, Malashenko (2013), an expert in Islam in Russia of the Carnegie Center (Moscow), emphasizes that the tendency to convert Slavic populations (atheists or Orthodox Christians) to Islam exists and may grow in the foreseeable future in Russia. Particularly, he warns about terrorist organizations that prefer to increase their Slavic membership (Malashenko 2013). Despite the obvious facts, stressing that Russians are attracted by Islam, especially by its radical version, Russian society has carelessly ignored this problem and that, in the future could lead to the destabilization of the state and the inability to build effective counter-terrorist strategy.

Devoted to depicting the problem of the conversion of non-Muslims to Islam in modern Russia, this article is divided into several parts. While the first part considers the history of the Muslim-Christian legacy in the Russian Empire, the second part analyzes a number of Russian converts and their main characteristics such as gender, age, social status, etc. Motivations and methods of conversion are described in the third section of the paper. The fourth part scrutinizes the participation of Russian converts in terrorist organizations and their involvement in terror attacks.

Historical Background

The problem of converts can hardly be called new for the Russian state. Nonetheless, it has had a different rhetoric. During Imperial Russia, the Christian population grew in power and numbers, which allowed the Orthodox rulers to launch religious companies in Muslim regions. Under the auspices of the Orthodox tsars, the state had expanded into Muslim territories starting from the fifteenth century. By 1917, the Muslim group was the largest non-Christian entity in the empire, and that made this religious group a main target for the Orthodox authorities (Crews 2006, 1). In comparison to modern Russia, Muslims groups were isolated from each other due to the level of communication technologies, remote geographical locations, and language diversity. The tsar's government repeatedly undertook attempts to reshape traditional pillars of the Muslim society through educational and administrative reforms. The Muslim population interpreted any modifications as threats of Christianization and thus, detrimental to its local traditions. Provoking violent resistance, these reforms jeopardized the empire's stability and thus, the authorities postponed enforcing them. For centuries in Russia, conversion to any non-traditional religion was prohibited by law and punished severely. In addition, the Sobornoye Ulozheniye of 1649 prescribed even more severe measures for individuals who tried to convert to Russian Orthodox (Ch.22, Art. 24). Nonetheless, the real number of converts in the Russian Empire is impossible to determine due to the absence of such statistics. However, the number of Russian converts to Islam was considerably small and if it did happen, conversion was forceful (Bekkin 2012).

Despite strong Christian traditions within the Russian society, the Orthodox tsars were aware of this problem. Trying to secure their power foundation and minimize the number of Russian converts, they prohibited the building of mosques in places with a high density of Russian population; Tatar converts to Christianity could not reside together with Muslim Tatars. Personal contact of the Orthodox people with "others" was socially unacceptable, whereas trade relations were under government control. Also, the government limited translation of any Islamic literature to the Russian language. Given the low level of literacy in Imperial Russia, even translated and available religious materials could hardly find concerned readers within the Russian population. Therefore, the public access to informational sources that could provoke conversion to Islam, was restricted.

It is also true that many Muslims could not or had a limited ability to speak Russian, and that impeded the wide penetration of Islam into Russian society. Thus in ruling Jews, Catholics and other non-Orthodox subjects, the tsars based their power on a particular group of people and their religious identity, whose alterations could provoke unwelcome instability in the state as well as uncontrollable social processes.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the Manifest of October 17th, 1905, which propagated civil rights and religious freedom, changed the situation a bit. During the period between 1905 and 1917, there were several known cases of conversion to Islam. For instance, according to a local report of a governor to the Ministry of Education, Orthodox peasants proclaimed themselves followers of Islam in Tomsk Gubernia. The leader of the Orthodox Christians in Tobolsk warned the federal authorities about religious propaganda, stressing that Christians converted to Islam (Shakyrov 2007, 100).

With the emergence of the Communist Party onto a historical stage, the state changed religious symbols and images of power forever. The atheist platform looked for the extermination of religion from the social life of the Soviet people. In the 1970s, during the

Afghanistan war, many Russian soldiers were captured, some of them trying to save their lives by changing their religion (YouTube 2015). Throughout the period of Imperial Russia and Soviet rule, the image of Islam in the Russian public's perception was not clear and comprehensive due to political circumstances. Before the October revolution of 1917, Islam was widely perceived as something dangerous and illegal; the Communist society threatened Islam and religion in general as an obsolete remnant of the Dark Ages. Since the fall of the USSR and the return of religion to the historical forefront, the Russian mind transformed the absence of knowledge about Islam into something mysterious and interesting.

Who are Converters?

The exact number of converts on local and federal levels is impossible to define due to the fact that state's censuses do not include questions about the ethnic and religious affiliations of respondents. This absence of reliable statistics makes fertile ground for various speculations. According to Artemov's calculations, there were 2-3 thousands converts, but according to Viacheslav-Ali Polosin, an adviser of the Council of Muftis of Russia and a Russian convert, there were around 10 000 converts (Tylskiy 2004; Artemov 2013). Various religious web-sites underline that in Russia, the number of Russian converts is more than 100, 000. Silantiev R., a researcher of Islam, argues the Council of Muftis of Russia overestimates the rate of conversion stating that no more than 6 000 Orthodox Christians traded their religion for Islam in Russia (Sapozhnikova 2011). The representative of the Spiritual Board of Muslims in Dagestan, Magomedrasyl Omarov stresses that this organization notices a growing influx of Russians in local mosques, but there is no statistical data on this event (Magomedov 2013). Therefore, the Russian government has no unified statistical figures on Russian converts to Islam.

Both genders participate in conversion, and in the absence of statistical data, it is difficult to estimate the proportion of female and male converts. However, in comparison to men, female-converts are highly visible due to the striking contrast of Slavic appearance and traditional Muslim clothes (hijab and niqab). In fact, female conversion may provoke stronger public reactions due to the sacral and symbolic role of women as signs of religious and national borders. This visibility provokes speculations about the bigger number of female converts than male within academic circles, religious clerics, and common people (Silantiev 2011). A Russian Muslim, Abdulla-Viktor stresses that in his local religious community, the majority of believers are female whereas men are rare visitors (Last30 2015). Dagestan imams underline the significant influx of Russian women in local mosques that want to change their religion of origin, either under pressure from Muslim husbands and relatives or by their own desire (Magomedov 2015).

In Europe and the US, conversion of Western women to Islam is propagated and welcomed by clerics. As a result, even despite the gloomy image of women in Islam, female converts surpass their male counterparts (Nieuwkerk 2006, 1). The same tendency can be a part of the Russian reality. Alcoholism, the drug usage within the Slavic male part of the population, the devaluation of family values in modern Russian culture, and persistent demographic decline – all these domestic features of Russian society result in a male shortage, pushing women to look for spouses in the Muslim culture. This gap is successfully filled by labor migrants from Central Asian Muslim states: Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, etc.

In Imperial Russia, the majority of converts were people located on a low level of the social hierarchy. Now, the social status of converts ranges from a student to a criminal or a

businessman. The most prominent converts are actively used or participate in promoting Islam by trying to present conversion as a socially common and acceptable action. Transferring their personal experience to the public, these converts give an individual face to Islam. Valeria-Iman Proxorova, a member of the Russian Academy of Sciences, who changed her religion of origin under her husband's influence in the 1980s, translated the Koran into the Russian language and successfully published it with her comments and explanations. Two Orthodox priests, Vyacheslav-Ali Polosin and Vladislav Soxin converted to Islam, underlining that Christianity did not have plausibility and adequacy in their eyes (Soxin 2006; Soldatov 1999).

Motivations

There are an endless variety of reasons and motivations for why an individual looks for another religious experience. To some, the decision to convert to Islam is dictated by pure pragmatic calculations such as marriage or survival. The latter category embraces soldiers and military staff who were captured during violent conflicts. For this category, it is important to add some people, especially prisoners, criminals, and in part, businessmen and dignitaries in the Muslim regions of Russia who take on Islam in order to get benefits. For others, taking on Islam is the product of a personal theological development, as many converts previously tried themselves in other religious traditions. Other people settled on Islam due to a difficult psychological crisis or even emotional breakdowns. Applying the problem of conversion to the Russian Federation it may define a number of reasons for encouraging the conversion of Russians to Islam: the low reputation of the ROC and the absence of spiritual guidance, the demographic decline of Russians and the growth of local Muslim groups, the influx of Muslim labor migrants from Central Asia and the Soviet language heritage, modern communication technologies, and a cultural gridlock within the Russian populace.

The main reason why more and more Russians chose Islam over Christianity is the weakness of the ROC. During the Soviet period, the Russian culture was used as a universal base for the establishment of the Communist secular culture. This had a detrimental effect on the Russian nation, which lost connections with its historical roots and cultural legacy. Given the fact that Orthodox Christianity was a main underpinning for the Russian culture, statehood and national identity, it was thought that after the fall of the USSR the Church should play a leading role in consolidating the nation and its return to pre-Soviet traditions. Nonetheless, the Moscow Patriarchate had different views on the church's functions in the new society.

After 70 years of Soviet oppression, the Church was not the same social institution as it was before the October Revolution of 1917. It was distrusted, scattered and disordered which made it lose its control and connections within society and with authorities. The ROC had to rebuild its administrative structure, religious personnel and its moral supremacy over the atheistic population. With the absence of the Communist ideology, the latter could be considered an easy task. However, as the decline of the public Christian enthusiasm at the beginning of the 2000s showed, the Church was not able to gain momentum and reestablish robust relationships with its people. The reputation of the Orthodox Church has tarnished every year, pushing people to look for alternative spiritual support.

In the 1990s, the ROC faced a difficult choice that it had to adhere to, prioritize and follow: the Russians or the government. In terms of historical perspective, the decision was predetermined by the fact that traditionally the Orthodox Christian Church was engraved in the state mechanism as it is a complementary part for population ruling. Nonetheless, the religious

leadership was entitled to disregard this well-trodden way and begin a reformation of the Church. There were some other factors that played a decisive role. At that time, the wide public demand for Orthodox values did not couple with the people's ability to provide material and financial support for the Church as an institution. Initially, Russians sponsored construction and renovation of churches, monasteries, cathedrals and other religious facilities. Bernbaum underlines that "... in the early 1990s, Russians flocked to churches and the interest in religion was extraordinary. Religion, the "forbidden fruit", was now an object of great interest to many Russians... Churches were filled to capacity with hundreds of people outside trying to push their way in. Many had never been inside a church before and now they were anxious to find what religion was all about" (Marshall et al. 2013, 68).

Although, with the economic decline in the 1990s, people could not be very consistent in their financial sponsoring to the ROC. The government had failed to prevent the fast impoverishing of the population and an upsurge of unemployment. Despite the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia had the biggest atheist society with anti-religious traditions. This led to serious hindrances for the Church's institutionalization and social entrenchment. Heeding these circumstances, the religious authority was forced to establish a beneficial alliance with the government. Consequently, the ROC began to lean more and more on state subsidies. Both local and federal dignitaries have willingly reacted to any clerical request, providing material and financial resources. State support was not isolated and offhand, rather it was planned and sustained, which guaranteed the survival of and a dominating position for the ROC. The latter was an extremely essential issue because after the fall of the Communist regime, Russia became an open market for foreign religious missionaries and sects. The Moscow Patriarchate perceived them as a threat to its historical status quo, stressing that these missionaries launched "... a crusade against the Church, even as it began recovering from a prolonged disease..." (Daniel 2006, 30). In the situation of intensive religious competition, state financial support was indispensable for the reinforcement of Orthodox Christianity. However, the clerics did not realize that wealthy religious institutions do not necessarily mean wide popularity and the immediate return of all Russians to Orthodox Christianity. Pursuing financial stability, the Church became an ideological complementary pillar for the oligarch regime. Its primary goal was to establish benign relationships with the government rather than provide moral encouragement to the lost and frustrated Russian people. Once these priorities of the Church became obvious, even true believers became disillusioned, eroding the moral authority of the ROC. In particular, young generations were discouraged, perceiving the Church as a government puppet.

From 2006-2010, the chain of sex and corruption scandals with direct or indirect participation of Orthodox priests just exacerbated the situation, tarnishing the Church's reputation and pushing Russians to look for an alternative. Being extremely protective of the Church's reputation, the Patriarchs Alexey and Kirill have ignored warning signals from local media about behavioral problems within the Orthodox clerics in Russian regions. The scandal over sexual abuse of students in the Kazan Theological Seminary became the climax of the many difficult situations in the ROC, revealing a crisis of the Church as an institution and a spiritual role model for Christians. In 2013-2014, Diakon and theology Professor Andrey Kyraev had published students' complaints where they described homosexual harassment by Professors (Arutunyan 2014). Despite convincing evidence and numerous victims' testimonies, the Church tried to present this abuse case as an isolated incident. Some priests were fired; some moved to other positions without informing the authorities and the concerned public. The reputational cost

was real because details about this controversial scandal took front pages of the main news agencies on the internet and TV. However, the Church disregarded this lesson, choosing to avoid apologizing, reforming, or fighting. Moreover, the religious leaders invented and propagated a myth about an anti-Christian conspiracy. The view of Diakon Maksimov on scandals over the ROC exposes the general line of the Moscow Patriarchate. So, believing in abnormal media attention about the Church's downsides, Diakon Maksimov argues scandals could not undermine the Church's reputation and have a negative impact on believers, stimulating Russians to take on Islam (Maksimov 2014).

In general, the Church does not pay enough attention to the wide range of youth problems, minimizing its missionary work with new generations of Russians. In part due to a rejection of globalization, democratic values and moderate online engagement, the clerics have lost contact with youths. This unintentionally widens the knowledge gap about the Christian platform in young people. Interestingly, the Russians perceive their shallow knowledge about the Christian tradition as personal dissatisfaction with the ROC, and in terms of intensive religious propaganda, it makes them an easy target not only for traditional Islam but for radical sects. Worth noting is the fact that widely propagated tolerance and obedience and in particular the state's will, is rejected within the young generations, who associate tolerance and obedience with weakness.

To conclude, the weakness of the ROC, its declining reputation, and its inability to reconnect Russians to their cultural traditions have provoked the outflows of Russians from Christianity and facilitated their conversion to Islam.

Methods of Conversion

In light of contemporary global interconnectedness, the methods of conversion have become more versatile and effective. They now embrace the following practices: internet communication, literature, video lectures, the infiltration of the educational system, et al. In the 1990s, with the absence of the internet, the main methods of conversion were literature and personal contacts. Many local muftis and Muslim youths after receiving religious education abroad, returned to the Russian Federation and translated various pieces of Arab literature into the Russian language. Generous foreign financial assistance (predominantly, from the Middle East) helped to publish these religious materials, making the Islamic heritage available for everyone. Further, books written by Russian converts emerged on the Russian book market. They became a powerful proselytizing tool. A significant number of testimonies reveals that many Russian converts began their religious evolution with extensive reading. For example, Nasima-Anastasia Ejova said that in the 1990s, books helped her to discover many Arabic religious thinkers and learn about Islam (Ejova 2015). Another Russian convert, Victor-Abdulla, stresses that the book of Ali Polosin (the former Orthodox priest and Russian convert) played a decisive role in his conversion to Islam (Victor-Abdulla 2015).

Converts' narratives are very persuasive and influential for non-Muslim audience (YouTube 2011a). According to Hanna Cherenkova, her daughter, Inna Cherenkova, who was detained by the Russian secret service for an attempt to commit a suicidal attack in Moscow, stresses that Inna spent plenty of time listening lectures of Said Byriatsky (a Russian convert, Alexander Tixomirov) about radical Islam (YouTube 2011b). Nowadays, there are many personal stories of former Christians in which they share personal religious experiences. Often, these narratives try to justify abandoning the religion of origin and present conversion as a

common process, which would hardly provoke negative reactions from family members, friends, employers, etc. Also, describing their personal metamorphoses, the majority of author-converts underline various aspects of the superiority of Islam over the Orthodox tradition. Authors observe Islam as the future religion for Russians, depicting it as natural and clear rather than exotic and defiant (Ejova 2015; Viktor-Abdulla 2015; Doroshenko 2011; Polosin 2011).

Recently, the popularity and accessibility of the Internet made this terrain very useful in order to advertise and disseminate the ideas of Islam within the Slavic population. The Russian Internet space is filled by various religious sites such as islam.ru, islam-today.ru, islamnews.ru, Kavkaz-center, whyislam.ru, and others. There are many religious groups, forums, and communities in the famous Russian network Vkontakte, which attracts like-minded individuals or people who look for specific information. Given the popularity of this network within young people, it facilitates the conversion practice by two pivotal and pervasive methods, the goal of which is to provoke interest in the Muslim culture and religion. The first method is the positive visualization of Islam. The Russian segment of the Internet is full of multiple pictures with beautiful and happy Muslims; female models are depicted in traditional Muslim outfits and males wear mostly European clothes. The second method is the dissemination of wise and inspirational quotes, written by Arabic intellectuals. These careful methods help to introduce a new vision of Islam and destroy its aggressive and violent image, created by radicals.

In addition, given the unstable nature of potential converts and a sensitivity to Christian criticism the majority of sites present religious information in a very peaceful and kind manner. Adopting this careful approach, Internet sites avoid or minimize the publishing of complicated theological discussions and long political disputes. They mainly provide basic knowledge about Islam: the dress code, meal preferences, religious holidays, the role of male and female, family customs, some postulates from the Koran, etc. Nonetheless, the effectiveness of the Internet-mediated conversion is not very high without personal interaction and the visiting of mosques. Representatives of traditional Islam and its radical version use the same set of proselytizing methods. However, conducting a religious campaign, “traditionalists” are not very aggressive, versatile and diverse in their hunt for souls in comparison to radicals. To reach young generations, the latter use a wide net of recruiters in such places as universities, prisons and the army. Recruiters utilize an individual approach to every potential convert/ member, minimizing the chance for failure. For individuals, who suffered from a psychological crisis, they present the radical group as a “family” or community, where every member is looked upon as equal, important and valuable. For lonely young woman, radical-recruiters become a potential spouse. Having much inside knowledge of the wide range of Russian society, these groups launch effective traps for vulnerable individuals in accordance with specificity of circumstances.

In particular, the situation goes from bad to worse in prisons. Despite the multiple alarming signals about the circulation of radical ideas among prisoners and the long history of terrorism in the state, the authorities have ignored the spreading of the Wahhabi ideology in prisons. Just a few Russian scholars try to bring this problem to the attention of the public. However, their efforts do not receive adequate responses neither from officials nor from society (Syleimanov 2013; Silantiev 2015). Radical organizations specifically have targeted prisons in order to increase their membership; weak control system in prisons, the high people density, the corruption of correction officers and the huge shortage of qualified clerics make radical recruitment very effective and easy. In addition, the absence of separate correction facilities for radicals and an inability of the correction system to sort out Islamists from moderate traditional ones, drastically facilitates goals of Islamists. Wahhabi literature and audio tapes with Islamist

lectures have been widely accessible for Russian prisoners, regardless of their religious affiliation. Some members of Hizb ut Tahrir intentionally committed petty offence crimes in order to be jailed and continue proselytization among inmates. There are a number of radicals, who were imprisoned for serious crimes and began actively creating radical communities in prison. In 2006, a Russian convert, a former businessman and a member of a radical group, Ilmendeev Valery received a long sentence for a murder. In Novoulyanovsk prison, he established a small but strong branch of “Imarat Kavkaz”, which has remained active, even after his relocation to another prison in Murmansk (Melnikov 2013). Among a variety of reasons for radicalization and conversion, Russian prisoners mainly are motivated by a certain level of protection, which they can receive joining radical groups because Russian correction facilities are famous for their barbaric inner customs, unbearable living condition, and sexual violence.

Radical Converts

Even in the Russian Federation, the principle of freedom of religion gives every person the right to change their religion of origin. However, some Russian converts go so far as to reject traditional Islam, preferring its radical interpretation. This provokes negative reactions within Muslims, who are ready to accept newcomers but do not accept conversion apart from the peaceful religious tradition. Even though the number of Russian converts to radical Islam is very small, they become a real threat not only to national security, but to the entire Muslim community in Russia. Analyzing terrorist activities in Russia, Renat Pateev (2013), an Islamic scholar, emphasizes that Russian converts were involved in more bloody and vicious attacks than ethnic Muslims. The imam Xaidar Xafizov (2013) argues that the conversion of Russians to Islam is a very dangerous event due to the fact that they prefer to join to radical groups. Another imam of Tatarstan, Gysman Isxakov (2013), stresses that Russian converts are more aggressive which is provoked by a different mentality. Some experts blame the Church for the inability to guide and support Russians in this difficult time (Ickanderzoda 2012).

Broadly speaking, it is plausible to categorize converts to radical Islam into two main groups. The first group embraces criminals and Russians with criminal intentions, who consider membership in Islamist groups and organizations as an opportunity to fulfill their wildest dreams; their choice is purely pragmatic and deliberate and has nothing to do with religion. The second group includes the most vulnerable parts of the Russian population such as orphans, and other individuals, who experience a stressful situation (a loss of a beloved family member, divorce, etc.). This group also includes students, who move to other cities to continue education and reside far from their parents. While the first category is predominantly male, the second category contains a large number of females. Along with the different gender content in these categories, there is another important distinction which is connected to an awareness of choice. While Russians from the first category voluntarily join Islamic militant groups, the second category of converts refers to people, who become a victim of radical recruiters due to their psychological problems, a family crisis, long unemployment, etc. Given the fact that social cohesion within the modern Russian society is below any acceptable standards, many people suffer from multiple problems without any help and support from relatives, neighbors, and especially, the Church. This leads to disappointment in the existing order and cultural landscaping, pushing people to accept help from a rogue individual or individuals. Whereas representatives of traditional Islam keep welcome newcomers with open- door-mosques, radicals hunt for potential converts taking advantage of difficult personal circumstances. Alexander

Tikhomirov (Said Buryatsky), Anna-Amnat Saprikina, Dmitry Sokolov (Adu-Jabar), and Vitaly Razbydko - these Russian converts are the most famous terrorists in Russia. However, there is a long list of Russian converts who participated in bloody attacks against innocent people. Some of them have moved to the Middle East trying to join ISIS.

The fate of female converts engaged in militant Islamic groups is not very attractive or unique. It is rather gloomy and predictable. These women face two options: to be a collective “wife” (a sexual slave for a group of militants) or/and to be an active participant in terror plots. It is important to note that women may freely move within these two options: a collective “wife” can serve as a terrorist or a female – terrorist can be a collective “wife”. Some converts do not change their status of “collective wife”. Once being converted to Islam, they get married, sometimes in a very untraditional way: by a phone or skype without visiting a local mosque. Then after relocation to the remote areas of Dagestan or other Muslim regions, these collective “wives” carry multiple but common functions: cleaning, washing, cooking, and other duties of a regular wife. With the death of a husband, a leader of a radical sect gives her a new “spouse”. Given the high level of death among militants, collective wives can have several husbands. Worth noting is that the disappearance of a husband is not always dictated by his actual death. According to victims, some of them found their so-called killed husbands happily alive, strolling the streets of Russian cities. Several Russian girls after escaping from such sexual slavery, concluded that this behavioral code is not acceptable in real Islam while keeping their passion to their new religion. Pursuing cultural assimilation and religious integration, women do not get involved in any violent activities and end up pregnant and abandoned by their false spouses. Their conversion and membership in radical groups are not motivated by ideological adherence to the Islamist tradition or even a revolt against Western supremacy. Instead it is due to a moral dissatisfaction with the Orthodox culture, family customs and the religion of origin.

Conclusion

To conclude, conversion is a complex gradual process which demands a particular maturity of thought. This process unfolds under the pressure of psychological and social factors. Exact statistics on the number of converts to Islam in Russia does not exist because conversions are not recorded. However, the tendency to convert has significantly increased in the 2000s due to demographics, migrant influx, the rejection of Christian values by Russian young generations, and active religious propaganda. On the one hand, the weakness of the ROC, its declining reputation, and its inability to reconnect Russians to their cultural traditions have provoked the outflows of Russians from Christianity and facilitated their conversion to Islam. On the other hand, Russian web sites maintained by Muslim intellectuals, groups, and organizations play a great role in encouraging non-Muslim populations to take on Islam. As a result, with the absence of adequate attention from the government and the Church, conversion to traditional Islam and its radical tradition will increase every year.

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