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Muslim–Christian Conversion in Modern Russia and the Idea of Russia as a Eurasian Islamo-Christian Space

A Preliminary Hermeneutic Account

Dominic Rubin
Higher School of Economics, Moscow, Russia
dom_rubin@yahoo.co.uk

Abstract

This article examines conversion between Islam and Russian Orthodoxy in contemporary Russia. The author tests the idea that Russia historically constituted an Islamo-Christian Eurasian space, and that this reality has now been revived in the hermeneutic self-perception of government rhetoric as well as in the self-understanding of converts from both religious communities. He concludes that this "hermeneutic space" is real (though not exclusive), and is expressed both in the syncretistic practice of individuals and within communities. However, instead of seeing the Eurasian space as essentialist, the author gives "Eurasianism" a philosophical reconstruction, viewing it as an inter-subjective mental hermeneutic that nonetheless has reality and causality in shaping individual and collective religious identity in Russia today.

Keywords

Russia – Islamo-Christian space – religious conversion – Russian Orthodoxy – Islam – Tatar – hermeneutic

1 Introduction: Aims and Methodology

This article is exploratory in nature. It aims to delimit a field of investigation, and so is merely suggestive. The questions it poses are: What drives contemporary Russians to choose Islam as a religious option? To a lesser extent, I also ask

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the question: What drives "ethnic Muslims" in Russia to choose Christianity? Further: Does the Russian context influence conversion choice in ways that differ from other contexts, such as the UK, the US, or other areas where Islam has had a long historical presence such as Spain and the Balkans? Given the intensely atheistic Soviet period and the radical erosion of religious identities, what role does so-called "Muslim ethnicity" or "Orthodox ethnicity" play in defining faith choices?

Philosophers of science, following Max Weber's distinction, sometimes contrast "explanation "with "understanding" in social science.[1] The former is causal-statistical, the latter hermeneutic. In this article, I will focus on "understanding", i.e. meaning-construction by individuals, and will largely bypass the question of what meta-patterns and statistical trends in conversion are currently observable in Russia.

As in the rest of the world, many testimonies of Muslim converts are available in such formats as YouTube or apologetic literature. The quantity of such testimonies might go some way towards providing a statistical explanatory account—although this would still not solve the problem of meaning, as they would need to be analysed hermeneutically. There are also a handful of articles on conversions to Islam in Russia (including Artemov 2003; Sergeev 2003; Ignatiev 2008; Prijmak 2011; Anonymous n.d.). Russian-language reports are still mostly anecdotal, and not entirely free from polemical bias (Artemov's article, for example, is written from an Orthodox perspective for a church publication) and so they do not provide a firm enough basis for making broad generalisations about conversion to Islam or Orthodoxy in Russia. Here, therefore, I prefer to draw only on accounts given by people that I have interviewed and interacted with myself (with four exceptions). In what follows, then, I shall briefly summarise the accounts of 11 converts (seven "non-Muslim" to Muslim, four Muslim to Christian). These accounts are mainly drawn from material gathered in my earlier work *Russia's Muslim Heartlands* (Rubin 2018a), where the focus was not on conversion, but for which I interviewed 16 such converts. For reasons of space, I have had to limit myself to a small number and have chosen the most representative accounts. Here, I shall test these accounts against the background of the questions set out above.

The present subjects belong to a fairly limited and well-defined group of the Russian population: they are highly informed and educated intellectuals who have thought deeply about their religious choice; they are also linked to official (sometimes government-sponsored) religious institutions involved in Muslim or Orthodox education and "ideology-creation", as writers, journalists

1 See the discussion in Godfrey-Smith 2003, 7, 9.

or researchers. In that sense, they are both producers and consumers of current ideas concerning the meaning of the destiny of modern-day Russia. The present article can thus be seen as providing more detail on two of the four categories used by Izabela Kończak (2016), who posits the following four types of Russian converts to Islam: "(1) people who married a Muslim, (2) those attracted by the mysticism of religion (looking for God), (3) people who consciously accept Islam as a religion with a tangible historical, ethnographic and cultural heritage, and finally (4) those who are attracted by radical Islamic movements" (abstracted from Kończak2016, p.89). The possible overlap would concern categories 2 and 3.

As an initial heuristic categorisation, Kończak's categories are useful. However, as will be seen, one result of the present work is to indicate that these categories can be more fluid than Kończak implies—especially if one factors in the development of the convert over time (an insight that can only be gleaned through eliciting detailed life histories and also keeping in touch with the individual over an extended period). That is, someone may choose Islam out of an attraction to radicalism but mature into something else. Or, a person may consider Islam because their spouse is a Muslim but then develop into a sincere and searching believer. (Sergeev [2003] gives examples of two Russian women who married Tajiks but then were drawn sincerely to the religion by reading the Qur'an.) And so on. The current work also adds details that can help explain why this is so.

Before looking at these individuals, the next section will sketch a brief "hermeneutic" history of Islam and Christianity in Russia. By "hermeneutic history", I mean a general account of the history of these two religions in the Russian space in a way that is often referenced in intellectual, political and popular discourse, and which, whether accurate or not (from a scholarly perspective) in its all details, forms a background to the self-perception of many Orthodox Christians and Muslims in Russia today. As will become clear as the investigation here proceeds, my assumption is that religious identity is a process of inter-subjective meaning construction. That is, the conceptualisation of Islam and Orthodoxy, and Muslims and Orthodox, in a given context is a result of intellectuals, or simply reflective actors, producing accounts of the past and then fitting themselves into this account. This does not imply that the past is fictitious or subjective, but rather that its continued reality depends on its articulation and interpretation by groups of self-aware individuals. The meaning of these terms is thus not *a priori* biologically or geo-politically and objective (though this is sometimes asserted by the constructors of the narrative themselves); nor is it a mere subjective fantasy. Rather, it is an inter-subjective (mutually constructed) human, *mental* reality. In this sense, we come

close to seeing constructions of Orthodoxy and Muslimness as Wittgensteinian games, practices or "forms of life" (in the sense of Wittgenstein [1953]), as well as taking into account the insight of Giddens (1979, 69) that "the structural properties of social systems are both the medium and outcome of the reproduction of the practices which constitute those systems", and Peter Winch (1958, 15) that "our idea of what belongs to the realm of reality is given for us in the concepts we use…". Another slightly different philosophical analysis that would be congruent with this approach is that of John Searle (1995), which develops the idea of the construction of social reality, and emphasises the importance of mental constructs in creating social institutions and entities.

In the following section, I shall give an account of the origin and meaning of terms such as "Eurasianism" and the idea of a historically Islamo-Christian space in current Russian discourse.

2 Meanings

In the nineteenth century, Russia began to conceive of itself in modern terms. Famously, intellectuals divided into Slavophiles, who saw Russia and its destiny as "Eastern", and Westernisers, who saw them as "Western". In the twentieth century, the Eastern-oriented Slavophile option generated a movement called "Eurasianism", which explained Russian uniqueness in terms of its history and culture being a blend of Europe and Asia, or West and East. Its Eastern heritage was said to include Islam, Judaism and Buddhism. In a sense, this was an attempt to describe the reality of imperial Russia at the start of twentieth century: it was a place where Asia and Europe really did mix, and where the Asian part of the empire was demanding more rights and integration into what had initially been solely a Christian, European project. Eurasianism flourished in the 1920s among Russian anti-communist émigrés, but was also continued in the work of the Soviet historian Lev Gumilev,[2] whose work is influential in Russia today. Recently, Vladimir Putin's government and intellectuals close to it have revived a political, cultural and even religious form of Eurasianism, which might be called neo-Eurasianism,[3] and sometimes Islam and Christianity are seen as belonging to this joint Islamo-Christian Eurasian space. Indeed, the 1997 law on religion defined the country's four "traditional religions" as Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Judaism. The Interreligious

2 For an overview of these trends in Russian thought, see Poole and Hamburg(2010). For more on Eurasianism, see Laruelle (2008) and Shlapentokh (2007).

3 For the political aspects of this, see Umland (2012).

Council brings together the leaders of these four religions but, given the vast numerical superiority of Orthodox and Muslims in Russia, this traditionalist Eurasianist classification of religious identity in Russia very much looks like making Russia an Islamo-Christian, or Islamo-Orthodox, space.

This reading of history has to compete with a more Slavophile and Orthodox, and often nationalist, reading of Russia as the Third Rome. But it is certainly a fairly dominant way of reading history in Russia today, and in many ways it makes sense of the thousand years of Turkic and Slavic interaction in the north Eurasian space, as well as the early establishment of Orthodox and Muslim states there. We shall see that elements of this history can take on significance in the self-understanding of converts—at least those converts who are familiar with this fairly elite intellectual discourse, although it should not be assumed a priori that this cannot be taken up by other reflective actors, which those who are considering conversion usually are.

It is interesting that, although Eurasianism was initially a venture launched by Russian Orthodox intellectuals for possibly imperialist reasons,[4] there were "Eurasianists" among Russian Muslims, too—though they did not go by that name in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Today, this Muslim Eurasianist option has recently been taken up—and explicitly named Eurasianism—by various thinkers at the Spiritual Board of Muslims of the Russian Federation (see Muhetdinov 2015, 2016). Its original proponent was Ismail Gasprinsky (1896a, 1896b), who couched Russian Muslim modernism in terms of a Turkic–Slavic partnership. Damir Muhetdinov (2015), assistant mufti of the Russian Federation, revises Gasprinsky by envisioning parity between the two religions, as against Gasprinsky's acceptance of second fiddle. Other contemporary Muslim leaders, such as Talgat Tajuddin, remain closer to the original model: Tajuddin refers to "Holy Russia" in his speeches and shows clear deference to the Russian Orthodox patriarch, thus making it clear by this and other gestures that he is content for Russian Islam to retain its secondary position.[5]

This, in brief, is one way of imagining the place of Muslims and Orthodox Christians in modern Russia. It is an interpretation and field of meanings being actively promoted by the government-sponsored muftiats, and it also appears in a toned-down format among political pronouncements by Russian Orthodox

4 Marlene Laruelle (2008) is a recent writer who has made this point.

5 In other unpublished presentations, I have referred to this as the distinction between *russkii* and *rossisskii* Islamic Eurasianism: the former term sees Islam as needing to fit into a predominantly ethnic Russian and Orthodox conception of Russia; the latter sees Islam as needing to fit into a broader, more civic and neutral notion of Russianness, expressible in the adjective *rossisskii*, which refers to the Russian state rather than to Russian ethnicity.

hierarchs, when they formulate the position of their church to Russian and Middle Eastern Muslims in meetings with Arab or Iranian dignitaries (one example is the speeches of Metropolitan Hilarion [Alfeyev] of Volokalamsk, the second most senior hierarch after the Patriarch, in Egypt and to Iranian representatives in Moscow; see Alfeyev [2011]). In this article, I shall co-opt the terms "Eurasianism" and "Islamo-Christian" space for my own purposes, injecting new meaning to the terms as I proceed. I use the term "Eurasianism" to refer to an understanding of Russian identity that sees Russia as a pluralistic religious and cultural space that is neither exclusively European-Western nor Asian-Eastern. This is an extremely general conception, of course, and in part that is why it is useful, although different actors nuance it, as we shall see.

But does this self-understanding show up in the stories of converts? In one sense, this might seem like a circular investigation. After all, the converts I am looking at are closely connected to institutions that promote this "harmonious" Eurasian view of Muslim–Orthodox relations in Russian history. It might seem obvious, then, that they would see their own conversions in terms drawn from this discourse. But that is not quite the case. The converts in question underwent their life changes and self-reevaluation before joining these official organisations. The official discourse in some sense, therefore, follows on from and draws on this life experience. As mentioned above, meaning-construction is inter-subjective: it relies on the complex interaction of the mental representations of individual actors. These life stories might then provide evidence that the official "ideology" has real roots in individuals' experiences.

On the other hand, not all the details of these life-stories agree with the more sanitised official version of perfect Muslim–Orthodox harmony in Russian history. Rather, they shed light on the tensions inherent in this narrative. In addition, other convert accounts from outside these circles also cast doubt on the official version. It is by examining these inconsistencies that we can critically examine the idea of Russia as a harmonious Eurasian Islamo-Christian space, or else posit some alternative construct.

3 Case-studies of Converts

3.1 *Conversions to Islam from Orthodoxy or "atheism"*

3.1.1 ZM[6]

The story: ZM is a 60-year old convert to Islam, who became Muslim in his mid-forties. In many ways, he is a good demonstration of the hermeneutic

6 I have given this convert (altered) initials to disguise his identity.

history sketched above. ZM was a well-known Orthodox Christian activist before he became Muslim. He taught church history and architecture, and in the late 1970s and 1980swas part of the famous Alexander Men brotherhood. This brotherhood was mostly popular among the Soviet intelligentsia who were searching for meaning in the grey atheist landscape of late Soviet Russia. Its founder, Alexander Men, was a priest of Jewish origin, and the brotherhood gathered hundreds of Soviet intellectuals, many of them also of Jewish origin.[7] There was an emphasis on the spiritual nourishment to be found in classical Russian literature and philosophy, and an ecumenical angle which looked especially to Catholicism as a way of deepening Christian faith. ZM became one of the main "elders" of this movement, and in the mid-1980s he was sentenced to four years in a Siberian penal colony for anti-Soviet activity. Mid-way through his sentence, he was released. By this time, *perestroika* had come into effect and religious policy had become more relaxed. ZM was the first religious journalist to found a religious radio station in post-Soviet Russia, and he continued to bring his "Menian" Christianity to a wide audience of new spiritual seekers. This was at the start of the 1990s. By 2002, ZM had converted to Islam.

The steps on the way were the following. As he tells it, the move towards Islam was initially accidental. The radio programme also reported on other religions, including Islam. When the Muslim reporter left the station, ZM stepped in and, under an Islamic pseudonym, began to report on Islam in Russia and the world. Initially, this was a purely professional step, but ZM then began to sympathise with the people and events he was reporting on. He had a dream that he was in a mosque in Egypt, standing up after praying *namaz*, the Muslim daily prayer. He also began to reevaluate the steps that had led him to Christianity. The turn to the Church and specifically to Alexander Men's brotherhood had occurred because of a quite typical Soviet breakdown of meaning, which was exacerbated by the suicide of a close friend. One night, ZM had a dream, in which he heard a voice saying: "There is light, and you must be light too." He woke up, suddenly optimistic and surprised. Walking down the street, he told himself joyfully: "I am a believer." But a believer in what? For someone of his background, the intellectual church milieu of Men was the natural option. But in the 1990s, ZM reconsidered that initial conversion experience. As travel opportunities opened up and he visited Iran, Egypt and the Gulf, it became clear that the Trinity, icons and church history, which he had been teaching passionately for a decade, were obscuring the more basic impulse given in the dream. With the help of Ali Polosin (see below), ZM found his way to

7 See Kornblatt 2004 for the Alexander Men brotherhood, and the phenomenon of Jewish converts to Russian Orthodoxy.

Islamic self-expression. Among his several activities, he also works as a cultural consultant for the muftiat in Moscow.

Commentary: There are certainly "Russian-specific" elements to ZM's story. He interprets his attraction to Iran in Russian terms: there is a school of thought (associated with the influential name, again, of Lev Gumilev) that links the ancient Iranic and Slavic peoples because of their contact in the Caucasus and Caspian steppe, famously in the case of the Scythians. The Scythian link is famous in "Silver Age" Russian literature as a form of Russian self-identification (see, for example, Alexander Blok's 1918 poem *Scythians*). ZM also mentions his (Armenian) wife's Islamic-sounding surname as possible proof of some Islamic element in their (now shared) family past. ZM was also seeking a broader Russian identity than was given in the traditional Orthodox account of Russianness: in this, he was continuing the ecumenical openness of the Men movement, which included Catholicism, but stopped at Eastern religions. ZM was interested in Buddhism, Sufism and, as noted above, the Iranic East. Islam was thus a further universalisation of "ecumenical Orthodoxy". Next, ZM often references the founding conversion story of Russia: he points out that Prince Vladimir looked at Islam but rejected it on the grounds that "it is merry for Rus to drink", as the phrase from the Primary Chronicle had it. ZM sees the Islamic option as a cure for Russia's alcoholism problem and another plus of the Islamic option. Again, this return to Russia's original conversion story in his own identity-construction emphasises that, for him, Islam is a continuation rather than a break with Russianness.

Nowadays, ZM continues to pursue a Russian-Islamic synthesis, and his experience is used by the muftiat to "nativise" Russian Islam. A striking example is the explanation of the role of the *juma'* mosque in terms of the Russian Orthodox idea of *sobornost*, or "sacred gatheredness of believers" (from Rus. *sobirat*/Arab.*Jama'a* = to gather).[8] Another is the use of *rozhdestvo* (Christmas, Christ's nativity) to translate *mawlid*, the celebration of the Prophet Muhammad's birth.

In short, ZM's own narrative of a harmonious and natural transition from Orthodox to Muslim would seem to fit nicely into a "neo-Eurasianist" account of Russian Islam. But some provisos need to be made. Firstly, ZM's new "pro-Muslim" vision of Russia means that he himself is now critical of core elements of Orthodox theology and history. He is also highly critical of what he sees as the Russian Orthodox Church's history of violence and discrimination towards Russia's Muslim populations. But he acknowledges that, in order to carry on

8 See Schmemann (1977) for details on Khomiakov and Soloviev.

working for the muftiat, he has had to tone down this aspect of his views in published articles, so as to avoid causing a clash between the Patriarchate and the muftiate.

This presents a paradox. More attention has been paid in accounts of Muslim conversion to Russians whose embrace of Islam as a clear rejection of their Russian or Orthodox Christian past. Leading muftiat figures such as Salman Farid and Gusman Isakov have even publicly stated that Russian converts are psychologically troubled, that they cause problems for the Muslim community, and that ethnic Russians should not convert to Islam.[9] I have encountered similar views in official Muslim educational-administrative circles close to ZM. Some analysts with an Orthodox background also bring this charge, highlighting cases of ethnic Russian converts who had "sectarian" tendencies before choosing Islam: that is, they were either "neo-pagan", or had previously joined churches that are not in communion with the Moscow Patriarchate such as the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad.[10] This is meant to imply that, for such people, Islam is another "deviant" choice (and emerges from the general Eastern Orthodox parsing of Islam as a Christian heresy, which goes back to John of Damascus). And, of course, the case of ethnic Russian Muslims who become radicals is used to bolster this narrative. This discourse on both the (generally Tatar) Muslim and Russian Orthodox side does not contradict the Eurasian-traditionalist narrative; rather it is a specific version of it: Russia is harmonious because the traditional ethnicities stick to their "native" religions without proselytising. Only deviants switch their traditional religions.

9 Anatoly Artemov (2003) mentions this but these pronouncements have been made by other Muslim clerics too.

10 This view is common among hostile Orthodox analysts of ethnic Russian converts to Islam, but Artemov (2003) is a good example. His article usefully clears up some of the exaggerations surrounding "mass conversions" to Islam that are touted by Muslim convert organisations; however, I would hazard that he is far from objective in characterising the motivations and views of ethnic Russian converts to Islam. Such converts have engaged in anti-Orthodox polemics and pointed to the superiority of Islam over Orthodoxy, but this is to be expected of neophytes, and represents the views of mature or ethnic Muslims, with the difference that the latter have learned to be diplomatic about presenting them in public. It is also true, as Artemov implies, that new Muslims are also in part characterised by anti-Semitic views, all of which leads Artemov to call them "Wahhabite" and deviant in orientation. However, it should be remembered that mainstream Russian Orthodox views on Islam are highly conservative and that much religious discourse in Russia is couched in pre-modern polemical terminology. Nor is anti-Semitism exactly lacking in Orthodox literature. Thus it could be argued that the "obscurantist" aspects of "new Muslim" rhetoric are no better and no worse than those of their theologically offended Orthodox opponents. For a more detailed analysis of the views of several influential Orthodox figures towards Islam, see Rubin (2018b).

In this context, ZM's narrative is also traditionalist-Eurasian and "universalist-ecumenical" in the sense embraced by Alexander Men. However, his version presents Islam as the natural choice for all "Eurasian" ethnicities, and not just "native" Muslims. To coin a term, we might say that ZM embraces an "Islamist Eurasianism", while (parts of) the muftiat (at least publicly) embrace an "ecumenical-natural Eurasianism". The former sees the Eurasian space as ripe for Islamisation; the latter prefers to preserve the "natural" religious-ethnic status quo.

Nonetheless, ZM (and other members of the muftiat) has to conceal this aspect of his Eurasianism. Perhaps it would be less pejorative to say that he has mastered both dialects of this Eurasian discourse, and learned to combine his own version with the muftiat's more publicly conciliatory ecumenical-natural Eurasianism. It is interesting to note, too, that in conversations with other former Alexander Men-related Orthodox Christians, I observed that ZM is viewed with distaste: there are rumours that he informed on people to reduce his Siberian prison term, and insinuations that his conversion to Islam was somehow motivated by gain. Such accusations crop up often in the literature, and show that, even among liberal Orthodox Christians, the conversion of one of their number to Islam is seen negatively, and that, while Russia may be an Islamo-Christian space in a sense we are trying to define here, it is also heir to many of the Islamophobic tropes of wider European (post-)Christian civilisation.

3.1.2 Vyacheslav Ali Polosin

The story: Polosin is probably Russia's most famous Muslim convert. Here, though, I shall outline his story more briefly than ZM's, as they overlap. Polosin was an Orthodox priest in the 1980s and early 1990s. Like ZM, he was on the "liberal" wing of the church during Soviet times, and like ZM, he became disillusioned by the way the vibrant underground "resistance" church of the Soviet period turned rapidly into a government-sponsored establishment bastion, at least as he saw it. This, coupled with his philosophical studies in Weber's concept of "rational religion", led him to consider the Islamic option, but only after he had examined Judaism (like ZM, he had Jewish roots). He convinced himself intellectually of the correctness of Islam by the early 1990s, but in public it was only in the late 1990s that he declared his conversion and openly became a disciple of the famous Dagestani Sufi sheikh, Said Affandi of Chirkesk.

Commentary: Polosin in conversation with me disavows the Eurasianist slant of the government and parts of the muftiat, and affirms his self-identity as a Western person, whose first love is German philosophy and culture. However,

the combination of a "Westernizing" and Islamic self-identity might itself be a feature of the Russian context. The first Westernizing philosopher, Petr Chaadaev (1794–1856) in fact saw Western Christianity (primarily Catholicism) and Islam as sharing qualities that contrasted with Eastern Orthodoxy: Islam and Muhammad were dynamic and rational, just like Catholicism.[11] And it was the Enlightenment politics of Catherine II (r. 1762–1796) that first brought Islam into the Russian religious-political fold. Polosin's own interest in Islam started when he served as a priest in Uzbekistan and as a religious affairs consultant in the Duma, when he frequently defended the rights of Muslims to build mosques and practise their religion in Muslim-majority areas of the Caucasus. This was all part of his struggle against the growing intertwining of Orthodoxy with government structures during the 1990s. Thus, while he may disavow explicit Eurasian ideology, his "liberal rational" worldview in the Russian context meant extending recognition to the Eastern, Muslim heritage of the Russian and Soviet "worlds".

Polosin's worldview could thus be classified as a form of "Islamist-universalising Eurasianism", which is "Westernizing" in the Russian context. Indeed, the idea that conversion to Islam can be a progressive-liberal Westernising-Eurasian choice is initially confirmed by the story of another convert reported in the literature, Shamil-Vladimir Matveev. Matveev was a member of Demsoyuz, a human rights organisation highly critical of the Russian government, and active in protests against the Chechen wars in the 1990s. It is perhaps worth quoting the words of an (anonymous) 2004 article (Anonymous n.d.),that discusses Matveev's case:

> [Matveev's] reincarnation was preceded by 12 years of stormy youth in the human rights movement. In general, *the choice of the Islamic path among those on the ultraliberal political wing is characteristic of many Russian Muslims*, so that the biography of Vladimir-Shamil is typical in this sense. (My italics)

Matveev's own words are revealing, too:

> It was a revelation to me that [Islam] was not an authoritarian religion as people usually think … Islam is even more liberal than Christianity. For example, imams are not appointed from above and can be removed at any time. In Islam there is a clear-cut code of laws, and for a human rights defender like me that was extremely important.

11 For Russian philosophers on Islam, see, for example, Zhuravsky (2010) and Rubin (2016).

Hence, the liberal-identifying Matveev, like ZM, frames his choice of Islam in terms of continuity with his Russian liberal past.

But there is an even more interesting coda to Matveev's story that may cast still more light on ZM and Polosin. To quote him directly again:

> [Even more than the equality of Islam], what convinced me was the Chechens' jihad. I don't agree anymore with those who say that jihad is only peaceful piety. There is also spiritual meaning to the idea of a jihad with weapons in one's hands. It consists in showing one's opponent one's spiritual strength on the battlefield and so forcing him to think about Islam.

For Matveev, defense of the rights of Muslim Chechens led him to Islam, rather like Polosin and his mosque-building in the Caucasus. For Matveev, though, the fight for liberal rights leads naturally to the armed struggle against the Russian state's violation of Chechen rights. This might lead us to cast doubt on the distinctiveness of Kończak's four categories: God-seekers, "historical and cultural" converts, and "radicals". An interest in the non-authoritarian religious culture of Islam by a liberally-inclined seeker may lead to approval of options that, in the Russian context, are considered radical. In other words, it might be too hasty to dismiss those who end up in the ranks of the radicals as somehow deviant from the beginning. After all, in North American mosques in the 1970s, it was perfectly acceptable to hear *khutba*s (sermons) supporting the Afghan *mujahidin* in their struggle against the evil Soviet empire. Such support was considered in line with mainstream American policy. That is, radicalism is highly political in its definition, and social scientists should be wary of using the categorisation uncritically.

Using our new terminology, we would also categorise Matveev, as a "Westernising Islamist-universalising Eurasianist". We have seen how this type of Eurasianism causes discomfort among the official Muslim hierarchy. At this point, we should also point to another critique of it, this time from the Orthodox side, in the person of Fares Nofal (2012). Nofal is a mirror image of Polosin, ZM and Popov: he is an Arab Muslim who emigrated to the Soviet Union and then became Orthodox. He has cast doubt on the genuineness of Polosin's Islam, ironically dubbing it "Chrislam", or "Russian liberalism of the seventh century". The critique is accurate in its awareness of what we have called the "Westernising" and "Islamist-universalist" elements in the Islam of Polosin, ZM and Matveev. But, of course, such accusations are polemical and one-sided. They ignore the fact that Islam is highly polyvalent, and tend to see any form of Islam that departs from orthodox, or indeed Salafi Sunnism as

un-Islamic. There is a long tradition of this in European scholarship: one might cite Asin Palacios's work on Ibn 'Arabi, *Islam cristianizado*, or Louis Massignon's focus on the "Catholic" elements in al-Hallaj. The former, especially, tends to see any "spiritual" elements in Islam as somehow coming from Christianity and departing from the essential legalistic core of Islam (see Addas 1993).

The Nofal–Polosin polemic demonstrates once again that the idea of Russia as an Islamo-Christian Eurasian space is itself a hermeneutic battlefield: the muftiat ascribes an "ecumenical-naturalist Eurasian" meaning to the concept. Converts ascribe to it an "Islamist-universalist Eurasian" meaning. And official Orthodox organs, we might say, ascribe to it an "Orthodox-universalist Eurasian" meaning. That is, they point to Russian historical Islamic–Christian coexistence in the "Eurasian civilisational space" as a positive factor, but—as in George Florovsky's original version of Eurasianism—see Orthodoxy as the dominant and desirable religion. (Again, it should be born in mind that I am myself redefining the ambivalent and underdetermined term "Eurasianism" here, in an attempt to give it greater precision and turn it from an ideological term into a tool of analysis).

3.1.3 Vladimir Popov. Valery Sabir. Ahmet Makarov

In this section, I group together three "converts" to Islam who actually raise challenging questions about the fundamental categories used so far. Here, I refer not to the notion of Russianness, but to the basic terms of this debate: "conversion" and "Muslim". In fact, here the notion of Russianness is on more secure ground.

3.1.3.1 *Vladimir Popov*

The story: Vladimir Popov is a nationally famous artist whose career stretches from the 1950s to the present.[12] His early works were socialist realist, and his works in the 1990s displayed the influence of Nicholas Roerich, the esoteric mystical artist and thinker of the early Soviet 1920s and 1930s. Thus in Popov's artistic work one can see a socialist-pantheist depiction of nature that has sometimes been called "Russian Cosmism".[13] It is a religious sensibility that paradoxically can be found among both Orthodox and atheist thinkers on either side of the Soviet historical divide. But the reason why Popov is being discussed here is his most recent ten-year artistic phase. He has completely abandoned representational art and now does exclusively Islamic calligraphic work. This work, though, is infused with a Cosmist sensibility similar to that

12 For a retrospective on his art and a descriptive essay, see Popov (2015).

13 For the phenomenon of Russian Cosmism, see Young (2012).

seen in his socialist and post-socialist works: the sun and spinning earth are rendered in Qur'anic calligraphy, and titled: "Love and gratitude to brother Sun for his actions that help humanity" and "Love and gratitude to Mother Earth for her care for humanity". Popov also now paints *tugra*s (personal calligraphic autographs) for Russian and Middle Eastern leaders, in which he includes short phrases that summarise their spiritual or political qualities.[14]

Popov in conversation with me said that he has "chosen the Islamic platform to work from as it most clearly preaches the oneness of humanity and global peace". His cluttered flat in downtown Kazan, the capital of the Muslim-majority republic of Tatarstan, is hung with endorsements from Arab, Iranian and Pakistani religious and political figures, which support his art, and declare him a Muslim. However, the eccentric (and charming) Popov does not pray *namaz* (*salat*), and in fact, due to a contusion suffered while fighting on the front in World War II, cannot remember the Arabic alphabet but uses assistants to select the letters, which he then develops creatively. His closest assistant, however, whom he has named his successor, is a devout young Muslim Tatar woman, who has an *ijaza* from a calligraphic master in Istanbul.

Commentary: Popov's story raises fascinating questions, which I shall not attempt to answer fully here. Firstly, is Popov a "Muslim"? And if so, in what sense, and by what definition? He considers himself engaged in an Islamic exercise, even Islamic preaching. His work is used by the official muftiat at events and ceremonies. His sensibility shares a great deal with that of Polosin and ZM, who are far easier to classify as converts. And yet when I ask him whether he prays, he touchingly raises his head to the ceiling and remarks: "I pray without the need for all the prophets. Just straight to God." For Popov, Islam is not understood in a strict "orthodox Sunni" sense. But then Islam has historically been highly polyvalent.[15] And Popov certainly sees "his Islam" as a tool for the renewal of post-Soviet Russia, on which he comments: "Lenin was great. But he would have been even greater with God."

There is also a clear element of Eurasianism in his worldview: in the square below his flat, in fact, there is a bust of Lev Gumilev, with an extract from one of his quotations: "I, a Russian person have spent my whole life defending the Tatars from slander." The quote continues: "They are in our blood, our history,

14 See Rubin (2018a, 119-124) for more detail on Popov.

15 In future work, it would be necessary to come up with methodological guidelines to answer the questions (along with Shahab Ahmed [2015]) of "what is Islam?" and "what is a Muslim?" in the conditions of eroded practice and identity that pertained in the post-Soviet space. This article can be seen as a prologue to such work.

our language, our worldview … the Tatars are not a people who are outside of us, but within us." The statue, built by the Kazan municipal authorities, demonstrates the extent to which Eurasianism is a public ideology in Russia generally, and Tatarstan in particular. Popov exemplifies this: he is a Russian living amid Tatars and using "their" religion to promote a vision of Russian, Eurasian and more widely, global unity. While Popov did not quote Gumilev in our conversation, he and the milieu that he is part of (which includes ZM) are influenced by this Gumilevian-Eurasianist outlook.

Thus Popov is another example of what I classified earlier as "Islamist-universalist Eurasianism". Popov shows that such Eurasianism is semantically rich and polyvalent enough to combine different meanings from the Russian and Central Asian space. Popov is an artist who does not attract polemical ire from more orthodox Muslim and Russian Orthodox believers. However, in principle his worldview, like that of Polosin, ZM and Matveev, could be potentially challenging and offensive to adherents of an "Orthodox-universalist Eurasianism". For, while it feeds into the self-image of Russia, and especially Tatarstan, as a harmoniously Islamo-Christian space, it also divides that space in ways contested by other Eurasian hermeneutic systems.

In looking at our next two "converts", we will see a different form of definition-bending.

3.1.3.2 *Valery Sabir*[16] *and Ahmat Makarov*

The story: Sabir, who lives in a medium-sized city in Tatarstan, is in his late 30s. He converted to Islam in the 1990s, and there would seem to be no doubt about his Muslim identity. Like many new Muslims in those days, he was nourished on a diet of conservative Saudi pamphlets translated into Russian. Then he went to study in Mecca on a Saudi government scholarship. There, by his own account, he became an extreme fundamentalist, and it was merely an accident, he says, that he did not run off and join the Chechen separatists or engage in some other form of violent jihad. Since then, however, he has calmed down and his views have moved into line with the "traditional Tatar" Islam preached by Valiulla Yakupov, a respected activist in Kazan muftiat structures, who was assassinated in 2012 by Caucasus Emirate jihadis. Yakupov was a strong influence on Sabir in his later developments.

Sabir's ethnic background raises interesting questions. During our meeting, Sabir told me that his father was a military officer of Russian background, while his mother was a Tatar. The mutual acquaintance who had introduced us and known Sabir for years was surprised: he had had no idea that Sabir's

16 Sabir is a pseudonym.

mother was Tatar. Sabir explained that, as was common in the Soviet period, ethnic minorities in government bodies often had to downplay or even hide their non-Russian identities. Thus, Sabir grew up almost entirely shielded from his Tatar heritage. The question then arises: was Sabir an "ethnic Muslim" returning to his ancestral religion? One might be tempted to answer negatively, given that almost nothing of his Tatar roots was transmitted to him.

However, these two factors—Sabir's present-day "moderate Islam" and his concealed Tatar roots—raise an interesting question. For Sabir, again, seems to straddle Kończak's categories: he is now a half-Tatar believer in a nearly exclusively Tatar-ethnic milieu who connects to Islam "as a religion with a tangible historical … and cultural heritage" (category 3), as seen in his integration into a local Tatarstan Sufi brotherhood; but he started off very close to being an ethnic Russian who was "attracted by radical Islamic movements" (category 4).

This might lead us to suggest that, initially, Sabir was neither an ethnic Tatar "returning to Islam", nor an ethnic Russian "discovering Islam"—but rather a "blank slate". However, the Eurasian idea that Russia is a Slavic-Turkic and/or Islamo-Christian space (variously interpreted) could be helpful here: such concepts are too general at the individual level, but at the collective level the historical experience of two communities, Slavic-Orthodox and Tatar-Muslim provides spaces where individuals can achieve a collective identity, and strengthen a potentially weak Orthodox-Russian or Tatar-Islamic identity. Deracinated "Soviet people" thus find themselves in a hermeneutic-historical force-field where the primary choice is between Orthodoxy and Islam. However, as we have seen, and in contrast to Gumilev's theory, we should add that this "space" or "force field" is not biological or natural, i.e. given in advance. Rather, it is an inter-subjective hermeneutic space that is constructed through evolving interpretation, belief and practice.

A similar, but not identical, case to Sabir's is that of Vitaly Ahmed Makarov. Makarov grew up with a fully Russian first and last name in the Soviet period. His father was a Russian Cossack, a group that preserves Russian folk and Orthodox customs very strongly. His mother was a Tatar, and she actually transmitted the language to him. He was thus strongly presented with the two "Eurasian religious options". Makarov now works actively for the Spiritual Board of Muslims of Russia, and has made a film called "Muslims that Russia can be proud of", celebrating tsarist- and Soviet-era generals, inventors and writers of Muslim origin. One might say that Makarov has successfully fused his patriotic-Cossack and Tatar heritages into a Muslim-Tatar Russian blend. Again, he is not entering a fully pre-formed Eurasian space, but rather is a link in the web that he is himself helping to shape.

3.2 *Conversions to Orthodoxy from a Tatar Islamic Background*

In this section, I would like to examine the mirror image of the converts described above, thus providing more food for thought over the question of how Muslimness and Orthodox identity operate in Russia today and to what extent they are evidence of an Islamo-Christian and/or Eurasian space.

I shall start with a Muscovite Tatar called Askhat, who is now Orthodox but maintains an open and tolerant attitude to Islam. Then I shall look at the case of Dinara Bukharova, whose attitude to Islam is closer to the theological position of conservative elements in the Russian Orthodox church today (like the above-cited Nofal).

3.2.1 Askhat Vafin

His story: Vafin was born into the family of a Soviet Tatar engineer in Moscow. His parents emigrated to Moscow from the Nizhny Novgorod region. Ethnically, Vafin is thus a *meshar* Tatar. Vafin's grandfather was a mullah who was arrested in the 1930s. His father was a Tatar cultural activist who was questioned by the KGB in the mid-1980s for forbidden nationalist activity. Growing up, Vafin recalls that he had an inferiority complex about being a Tatar. He tried to hide it in his elite school but his history teacher still once humiliated him in front of the class by making him read a page on the Tatar-Mongol yoke in Russian history. (Incidentally, this would call into question the idea that the Soviet system was ecumenically Eurasianist, as some Gumilev enthusiasts nostalgically like to think.)His language skills were poor and so he never picked up Tatar, the native language of both his father and his mother. His Tatar identity was thus deep but highly painful and ambiguous. He was also raised without any knowledge of Islam, as a result of the absence of his grandparents and the nationalist rather than religious orientation of his parents.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, American missionaries began to establish Protestant churches in Russia, Ukraine and other former Soviet countries. Through a Soviet-Korean Christian acquaintance, Vafin became involved in one such church. The turn to religion was a natural step among questing intellectuals at the end of the Soviet period. Many people turned to the Russian Orthodox Church but Vafin felt that, as a Tatar, this was not an option: for him Russian Orthodoxy was strongly associated with the historical oppression of the Tatar people. The Protestant churches were free of this stain, and in addition, were attractive because of the new and forbidden association with American and Western culture, and the air of "freedom" that went with it. Vafin claims that during his time in the Pentecostal church, he observed dozens of Tatars like himself.

However, Vafin's story does not stop there. In the late 1990s he was baptized as Russian Orthodox and began to attend a church that was close to the movement that ZM (above) belonged to. Indeed, his thinking and that of ZM are very similar: at this stage in his religious development, Vafin's religious interests were universal and ecumenical. However, he made a conscious step to become Orthodox for semi-pragmatic reasons: as someone concerned for his country, he believes that religion can help heal post-Soviet Russia, just like ZM. He now turned to the previously feared Orthodoxy out of a sense that this is the historic, traditional religion of Russia and therefore can provide a place for him to work towards reform within the native structures of his country towards reform. In essence he remains a universalist, however, and has even partially returned to his "native" Islam. From time to time, he attends *jum'a* prayer at various Moscow mosques, and takes part in Chechen-Ingush *zikr* gatherings at the Historic Mosque in Moscow. For him, all religious experiences are paths to the divine.

Interestingly, Vafin has developed a rather self-made theology through which to express his quest. He retains a sense of his own Tatar identity, and has borrowed from the Slavophile concept that sees Russians as a people who bridge East and West and have a Messianic world-role, and applies all these attributes to the Tatars. He also sees Orthodoxy as a religion that is closer to Islam than Western Christian confessions, because it adheres to the primacy of God the Father, rather than seeing God the Spirit as proceeding from both the Father and the Son.[17] In his reading, Eastern Orthodoxy is more monotheistic and so is closer to Islam. Vafin is thus Russian Orthodox, but also, in his own self-definition, an Islamo-Christian monotheist.

Interpretation: Vafin's story hardly needs commentary, as it so obviously plays with Eurasian notions. For him, Eurasia is an Islamo-Christian space in a clearly interpenetrating rather than mutually exclusive way: that is, an individual such as himself can switch between the religions, and construct a syncretistic theology from the two faiths. His position seems to belong to "ecumenical-natural Eurasianism", that is, the belief that ethnicities can best find themselves in their natural, historical religions. It is true that he himself has changed his religion, but this is not an option he is recommending for others, so he is not an Islamist- or Orthodox-universalist Eurasian.

17 This concerns the notorious Filioque disagreement that is one of the issues that divide Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism. See Schmemann (1963).

3.2.2 Dinara Bukharova

Dinara Bukharova is a *meshar* Tatar like Askhat. However, she grew up in Nizhny Novgorod and speaks Tatar, a key marker of Tatar identity. I did not personally interview Bukharova but listened to her interview with Fr Georgy Maximov on the conservative Orthodox channel Spas TV.[18] The interview actually caused a ruckus in the Tatar Muslim community because of a certain historical claim she made, and Damir Khairetdinov (2016), himself a Moscow *meshar* Tatar, and rector of the Moscow Islamic Institute, as well as being a scholar of Tatar history, went public to reject certain of Bukharova's claims.

Before getting to this dispute, however, we shall outline her story as far as possible.

The story: Bukharova comes from a Muslim Tatar family in Nizhny Novgorod, whose ancestors came from the nearby village of Safajani. In her interview, she states that she searched in several different religions before finding satisfaction in the Orthodox Church. She mentions, too, that her parents are public figures in the community, and one can speculate that, like most Soviet Nizhny Tatars, her milieu was very secular but nonetheless conscious of historical Islamic ties. Most rank-and-file *meshar* Tatars take it as a package that if you speak Tatar you are culturally Muslim, regardless of any level of observance. Most such Tatars also consider that the Tatar language and Muslim religion are necessary parts of being Tatar: if you lose one or both of these, your Tatar identity is severely challenged.

From Bukharova's interview, it seems that she started visiting Orthodox churches and was impressed by their atmosphere and also by an encounter with the "Lord God". She uses this phrase repeatedly rather than, say, "the Lord Jesus". The interviewer, Fr Georgy Maximov, is a conservative Orthodox figure whose theologies of Judaism and Islam closely follow classical medieval formulations, whereby these religions as well as other denominations of Christianity, are "heresies", and dangerous diversions for the soul. To his asking whether "Allah was not enough" (the implication being that Allah and the Christian God are different), Bukharova answered positively in the interview. As we shall see, her own form of Russian Orthodoxy ended up being close to Maximov's and far from Vafin's "ecumenical" variety.

The next stage of her life story concerns her attempt to reconcile her Tatar heritage with her new Orthodox faith. Evidently, having grown up in a

18 See "Moj put' k Bogu. Beseda s Dinararoy Bukharovoy"(My journey to God: Conversation with Dinarara Bukharova). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KDIWFQRxTCs&list=PLGOANAFtFcTD_68vjBVy8pe4JqHl8HLt7&index=12. Accessed 8 October 2018.

Tatar-language environment, her Tatar identity was deeply embedded in her but it was now not easy for her to express this identity. First, her relatives reacted negatively to her conversion. Second, there was the broader reaction of Tatar society, which considers converts to be not only apostates from Islam but also lost to Tatar culture. She thus began researching the history of Tatar Christians and satisfied herself that of Tatarness need not automatically be equated with Muslimness. Unfortunately, one of the examples of Tatar Christianity that she chose proved to be historically inaccurate. This was her ancestral village of Safajani. In the interview with Fr Maximov, she claimed that the village was in fact a Krashen village and used to have a church, but that the villagers later "fell away into Islam".

In so doing, Bukharova touched on an enormously sensitive theme in Russian Muslim–Orthodox relations, that of the Krashens,[19] the Tatar-speaking Christian minority that arose from forced (and voluntary) conversions on the Volga after Ivan IV (d. 1584). Khairetdinov was able to show that the village of Safajani had never had a church and that its Krashen population had been historically Muslim, and had not "fallen into" Islam, which suggests some sort of accidental apostasy.

However, even without Safajani, Bukharova has been able to find Tatar figures in the past who chose Orthodoxy freely. In the time before the complete conquest of the Volgaby Muscovy, there were Tatar rulers, such as the Kasimov khan, who allied themselves with Muscovy and professed Orthodoxy, and at least one of them, as Fr Maximov pointed out, was canonised as a saint. For Bukharova, this Tatar-Christian history was an important element in her new self-understanding as a Tatar Christian who wishes to maintain her linguistic and cultural, but not Islamic, identity. The discovery of this Tatar-Christian past has made her transition to Orthodoxy "smoother", as she says. This echoes the experience of Soviet Jewish intellectuals who converted to Russian Orthodoxy between the 1960s and 1990s: like them, Bukharova claims that her new Christian identity eventually led her to investigate her original heritage more deeply and to take pride in it in a different way. Soviet Jewish Christians often see themselves as "doubly chosen", as Judith Kornblatt (2004) has observed, and Bukharova now sees her Tatar identity as an advantage—something that broadens the universal potential of Orthodox Christianity, which is so often seen as being tied narrowly to ethnic Russianness.

Bukharova has now joined up with other Tatar Christians to form a parish where *molebens* and *panikhidas* are served in Tatar, and Tatar saints are celebrated. The community unites ethnic Krashens, i.e. descendants of those old

19 For historical background on Krashens, see Kefeli(2014).

Volga Tatar Orthodox villages, as well as newly baptised Tatars like herself. At the same time, Bukharova continues to take part in the meetings of the official Moscow Tatar community[20] and has even managed to establish a good relationship with them, although evidently the more Islamically identified members of the community, such as Khairetdinov, are more ambiguous about the phenomenon of strongly self-identifying Tatar Christians.

Interpretation: How might one classify Bukharova in light of the above? Is she an Orthodox-universalist Eurasianist, or simply an Orthodox universalist? Evidently, she believes that Orthodoxy is theologically true, while Islam is a deviation from this truth. This would then be standard conservative Orthodox theology. However, it is interesting that she cares so deeply about her Tatar past, and also that she has sought to take part in the Moscow Tatar community, where Muslim and secular Tatars also participate. Evidently, her goal is not to evangelise these non-Orthodox Tatars but rather implies a respect for the right of Muslim Tatars to preserve their identity, and a belief that this is part of the tapestry of Russian identity. In that sense, I do not think it is redundant or simply a case of "shoe-horning", to characterise Bukharova as an Orthodox-universalist Eurasianist. That is, she is someone who values the uniqueness of the Russian past, and sees it as a space that is a blend of Russian and non-Russian, Orthodox and non-Orthodox elements. In that sense, for her it is something greater than just a purely Russian or indeed purely Orthodox space; it is a Eurasian space. In the final analysis, she gives metaphysical priority to one of the Eurasian space's traditional religions, believing that it should be embraced by other Eurasian ethnicities. However, she engages in a certain ecumenical Eurasian tolerance as regards the time-frame for such dissemination of Orthodoxy. In sum, she is an Orthodox-universalist Eurasianist.

It is thus interesting to note that the Eurasian philosophy and the closely related notion of what I am calling an Islamo-Christian space can combine an "ecumenical" behaviour and philosophy with exclusivist theology. Indeed, this has recently also been highlighted by Frederick Matern (2014), who shows that Eurasianism has from its inception always been fundamentally ecumenical as regards inter-religious questions: its Orthodox adherents have shown more tolerance towards Islam, Buddhism and Judaism than contemporary Western Christians in the 1930s, even though Eurasianists were less tolerant towards

20 The interviewer introduces her as a "member of the presidium of the regional Tatar national-cultural independent organization of Moscow" [*chlen Presidiuma regional'noi tatarskoi natsional'no-kul'turnoi avtnomii Moskvy*].

their fellow Western Christian denominations when it came to *intra-Christian* issues.

4 Conclusion

To conclude: We have outlined three variations of the indeterminate concept of Eurasianism: Islamist-universal; ecumenical-natural; and Orthodox-universal. We have contended that the "Islamist" and "Orthodox" types of the Eurasian hermeneutic differ from Islamic and Orthodox hermeneutics in non-Russian contexts explicitly as a result of the Eurasian factor, which highlights (often selectively, sometimes tendentiously) and positively evaluates the historical experience of co-existence between Muslims and Orthodox in the north Eurasian region.

On the basis of our eleven case studies, we have concluded that this mental construct plays a real role in shaping religious identity in Russia today—at least for our initially small subset of subjects—and that this context will probably therefore differ from non-Russian contexts. This expressed itself in the fact that the converts we examined—both Muslim to Orthodox and *vice versa*—are choosing what is (eventually) conceived of as a historically rooted, "native" religion, and are conscious of continuities between their before and after conversion identities. The Russian context makes it possible, it seems, to construct an Islamo-Christian space, whether in the person of a single individual (Vafin), or in community organisations where Muslim and Christian Tatars share Tatarness as a uniting factor (Bukharova). Again, we have avoided the essentialist idea associated with previous versions of Eurasianism that see something innate, externally predetermined or unique about Eurasian culture, ethnicities or individuals (such as a proclivity for holism, tolerance, tradition, etc.), and which suffer from exclusivism with regard to the West, Jews and so on.[21] We have also pointed to the obvious fact that ethnic and religious belonging was eroded or reshaped by the Soviet system, so that it is often technically incorrect to speak *tout court* of an Orthodox to Muslim conversion. However, elements from a more homogenous historical Muslim or Orthodox past, which are disorganized and disunited on the individual level, can be drawn together into a stronger personal identity in a collective context through the Eurasian hermeneutic we have been discussing.

One lacuna in this analysis was the widespread phenomenon of ethnic Russian conversions to Salafism, Kończak's fourth category. Such a choice

21 See Rossman (2007) for Eurasian anti-Semitism.

would seem to fall outside of the Eurasian hermeneutic altogether. For the most part, the Russian state has criminalised Salafism (the 1997 law in Dagestan, for example), so excluding it from any evolving inter-subjective hermeneutic. Nonetheless, the choice of ethnic Russians to join Salafi movements might sometimes be a form of resistance to the Russian state and may spring from peculiarly Russian motivations with deep historical precedents. Even those who choose violent resistance by joining Chechen fighters might differ from Western Muslim converts who go to Syria, for in some sense the Chechen conflict is internal to the Russian-Eurasian space, and so views on Chechnya are also views about the possible shape of Russia. The case of Matveev, a liberal human rights campaigner, was very suggestive in this regard.

In short, there is much work to be done in Russia, including drawing comparisons with Muslim–Christian conversion in other parts of the world.

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