The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Why Do Ethnic Russians Convert to Islam?

By Paul Goble

June 03, 2009



About this blog

Window on Eurasia covers current events in Russia and the nations of the former Soviet Union, with a focus on issues of ethnicity and religion. The issues covered are often not those written about on the front pages of newspapers. Instead, the articles in the Windows series focus on those issues that either have not been much discussed or provide an approach to stories that have been. Frequent topics include civil rights, radicalism, Russian Islam, the Russian Orthodox Church, and events in the North Caucasus, among others.

Author **Paul Goble** is a longtime specialist on ethnic and religious questions in Eurasia. Most recently, he was director of research and publications at the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy. He has served in various capacities in the U.S. State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency and the International Broadcasting Bureau as well as at the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. He writes frequently on ethnic and religious issues and has edited five volumes on ethnicity and religion in the former Soviet space.

The conversion of historically Orthodox Christian ethnic Russians to Islam is a highly sensitive issue in the Russian Federation, with journalists and commentators frequently offering wildly different numbers and explanations for a trend many find a matter of deep concern.

Now, Andrey Ignatyev, a specialist on the sociology of religion at Russian State Humanitarian University, seeks to answer the question of why ethnic Russians convert to Islam without the exaggerations and apocalyptic language that typically surround discussion of such religious shifts.

In a heavily footnoted article posted on the Portal-Credo.ru site yesterday, Ignatyev argues that most earlier portrayals of this issue have been fruitless because they have offered a single explanation for what is an enormously complicated social phenomenon. In fact, people have extraordinarily varied reasons for converting. For his part, Ignatyev draws out four.

First, the Moscow sociologist begins, the largest number of converts are those who do so because of marriage, a group that includes both those who accept Islam before they marry and those who become Muslims once they enter into a marriage with one of the faithful. "As a rule," these are women, and the groom's parents make conversion a precondition of marriage.

Although such women elicit "particular hatred from Islamophobes, such as the members of the Movement Against Illegal Immigration," Ignatyev points out, most of them know "very little" about their new faith and seldom show up in any mosque after their formal conversation, although a few of them do over time become active Muslims.

Second, he continues, there are Russians who are attracted by the mysticism of Sufism, a pattern found around the world where such "god-seeking" often leads people to "convert" to various forms of Hinduism or Buddhism. But generally, Ignatyev notes, such people "show no interest in communion with ethnic Muslims or strive to be part of a Muslim milieu."

Indeed, there is some question as to just how much these people warrant the moniker of Muslim. He gives as an example a Russian who, having joined a Sufi order, "gave a promise to accept Islam," even though that was "not required," and who said that "in the Moscow section of the order, 'there are Muslims but no Eastern peoples.'"

Third, Ignatyev continues, there are those who "consciously accept Islam as a religion in its concretely historical, ethnographic and cultural manifestation." They are "more serious than the neophytes of the first and second groups," and some of them study languages of Muslim nationalities and even travel abroad for instruction in the religion and its practices.

Most of these people associate themselves with one of the historical divisions of Islam, such as the Hanafi rite of Sunni Islam, the Salafites or the Twelver Shiia, and are devoutly religious, publicly thanking Allah that he has brought them to the true faith. Many of them choose to live according to the *shariat* or *adat*.

Ignatyev's fourth and final classification is "the most surprising group" of all, a group that he calls "white Muslims" on the basis of an analogy with Louis Farrakhan's "Black Muslims" in the United States. "Representatives of this group," he continues, "combine Islam either with Russian nationalism, neo-paganism and racism or with left-radical doctrines."

Many of the relatively small number of people in this group were part of NORM, the National Organization of Russian Muslims, which viewed Islam as "a path to the rebirth of the Russian nation" or as "a means to the world-wide liberation of the oppressed" but which had little interest in historically Muslim groups.

In fact, such "White Muslims" have often been openly hostile to Muslims from other countries, Ignatyev notes, with some of them taking the side of ethnic Russians over Muslim immigrants in the case of conflicts such as the one that broke out two years ago in the Karelian city of Kondopoga, despite sharp criticism of their position by traditional Muslim leaders.

Ignatyev does not offer any numbers for these groups &mdash they probably amount in total to fewer than 50,000 &mdash but he does sharply criticize those, such as writer Elena Chudinova and Orthodox activist Roman Silantyev, who have written alarmist tracts about "Russian Muslims" and the threat they supposedly represent to Russia's future.

According to Ignatyev, there is no reason for that: "If there are Orthodox Arabs or Japanese, then why cannot Russian Muslims exist as well?" More than that, he notes, this trend is likely to grow in a world of "global transformations in which what was impossible in the past" is now "an everyday phenomenon."

"The processes taking place in the contemporary world that are connected with the rapid development of many countries in Asia and the increase of migration flows are leading to a notable heightening of the eastern factor in the life of Russia," Ignatyev concludes, something one need not fear if one understands its nature.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2009/06/03/why-do-ethnic-russians-convert-to-islam-a35003