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Identities in Crisis:
Complex, Overlapping Religious Constructions in the Post-Soviet Space of the Altai Republic

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Introduction: Come Hither Altai

The Altai Republic is a small autonomous region in the Russian Federation located between Kazakhstan and Mongolia in Southern Siberia. The Altai region is most well known for its rugged mountainous terrain; the Altaian Mountains are considered a mystical and spiritual place by both Russians and Altaians. The Altaians are a group of indigenous Siberian peoples and are a minority in their own autonomous republic making up only a third of the population.\(^1\) Altai actually refers to a conglomerate of ethnic groups that share the mountainous region of the Altai.\(^2\) The majority of Altaians originate from Central Asia where they once belonged to the Dzungarian Federation (1653-1756) until they joined the Russian Empire to escape the pressures of the Chinese Ch’ing (Manchu) Dynasty. Since their union with the Russian Empire, Altaian identity has been in jeopardy. Religion is crucial to Altaian identity and is seen as a means of preserving their identity in troubled times. In May 1904, a nativistic\(^3\) religious revival movement called Burkhanism or Ak Jang was founded in the area which today forms the Altai Republic by a shepherd, Chet Chelpan, and his adopted daughter Chugul. Both reported being visited by Ak Burkhan, the personification of the spirit of the Altai, who informed them of the coming of Oirot Khan, a

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1 The exact percentage is 30.6%, Department of Tourism, Entrepreneurship and Investments of the Altai Republic 2008.
2 The six main ethnic groups that fall under the category Altaian are: Kumandy, Chalkandu, Tubalar, Teleut, Telengits, and Altai Kizhi. Altai Kizhi makes up the majority of Altaians (Halemba in Donahoe 2008; 1000).
3 I am taking this term from Lawrence Krader’s, “A Nativistic Movement in Western Siberia” (Krader 1956; 282).
legendary hero, and the restoration of the Altaians’ old ways of life before their union with the Russian Empire. The movement was highly messianic and retained a stance of resistance toward Russian influences (Ekeev 2006, Filatov 2001, Krader 1956, Sherstova 2006, Tadina 2006, Tiuknteneva 2007, Znamenski 2005). This movement is an example of how religion has been used to mediate the problems that face Altaian identity. This religious movement is what first attracted me to studying the Altai. Although Burkhanism developed over a hundred years ago, religious revivalism is not over in the Altai Republic; today it is alive and well and being utilized in fascinating ways to address the threats facing the Altaian people. The way religion is thought of and practiced in the Altai offers the discipline of Religious Studies a case study for examining how categories of religion problematize the study.

The aim of my paper is to show how concepts of religion are complex, overlapping and intermingling in the Altai Republic in the post-Soviet era and how these concepts problematize mainstream categories and definitions of religion. Altaians believe an institutional religion will unify and strengthen their national identity as they endeavor to preserve their cultural identity and autonomy within the Russian Federation. The desire for national stability has led to aspirations for an authentic Altaian state religion that is easily recognizable to Western mainstream views. Altaian traditional concepts of religion are seen as unsuitable for a state religion because of their heterogeneous, personal and flexible nature. Therefore, religion in the Altai holds a position of both cure and poison for national identity. On the one hand, an institutional religion promises to strengthen national identity by unifying a diverse nation; on the other hand, non-institutionalized religions, such as Shamanism, are seen as dangerous to national identity because they threaten fracturing a unified nation. I argue there is a paradox in the fact

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4 I am using the term intermingling to refer to religious mixing and syncretism and the term overlapping to describe how religions mix together but are still thought of as distinct and separate (unmixed) entities.
that as the Altai seeks an institutional religion to protect their identity from Western influences, the more Western their identity will become.

I intend to demonstrate the complexity of religious identity in the Altai through my recent conversations with Altaians. These complex and changing religious concepts express the experiences of an ethnic minority living under the auspices of a federal state. The history of religious movements in the Altai, its ethnographic context and my own experience lead me to ask: What is the role of religious identity in state politics? What promise does religion have for Altaian nationalism and identity? How is religious identity lived out in everyday experiences? How does religious identity mediate traditional and state identity? I hope to shed light on these questions through the exploration of the notions of religion put forth by my informants and what their statements holds for the future of the Altai and the discipline of Religious Studies. In doing so, I hope to interrogate the notion of religion and show how concepts of religion are multiple, diverse and problematic and how these concepts are utilized to accomplish different desired results.

I came to study the Altai Republic through a unique opportunity I was presented by the Student Project for Amity among Nations (SPAN) program. The SPAN program is a research abroad opportunity that allows students to design their own study in relation to their particular interests. Being interested in Russian colonization in Siberia, I eagerly applied to SPAN and upon being accepting, started drafting various research projects I could undertake while in Russia. I sought to combine my interests and disciplines of study in this project, namely my interest in religion and colonial interactions. I began researching the history and contemporary place of Burkhanism in the Altai as well as histories and ethnographies about the region. I made
contacts with several scholars and planned a trip to the Altai Republic with a Russian graduate student from Lomonosov Moscow State University, Denis Maslov.

I had set myself up for a challenging trip. When I departed for Moscow I had completed only two semesters of Russian language, and I lacked the basic skills and experience of ethnography needed for the field work I was about to undertake. Despite a semester of research, my knowledge of the Altai region and people was still very limited. Only articles published in English were available to me, and the vast majority of published work on the region is in Russian. Nor did I know a word of Altaian. Conscious of these factors my excitement drove me to explore interests that would have require years more of experience and knowledge. The project I undertook was incredibly difficult; however, despite these difficulties, I was able to witness a variety of phenomena that shed light on my inquiries and further explore my areas of interest.

While in the Altai I depended heavily on the help of good friends. Denis Maslov and his research assistant Lena Bikhanskaya helped me gather information, develop my ideas, and perhaps more importantly navigate daily life. Perhaps noticing my vulnerability, an Altaian named Oksana Kydyeva, who spoke perfect English, befriended me. Kydyeva was a student of sociology and folk-culture and took an interest in my project and freely translated the many interviews she arranged. I am especially indebted to her, not to mention Denis and Lena, for the insights I came to have. Without them, this project would not have been possible.

My experience in Russia, especially in the Altai Republic, was overwhelming. I am guessing that being in the Altai was very much like being Alice in Wonderland and I came to call my time in the Altai just that: Adventures in Wonderland. I was inspired to refer to my
experiences as a make-believe place from Anna Tsing’s *In the Realm of the Diamond Queen* in which she uses the title of her book to refer to the conceptual space she shared with Uma Adang, a powerful female shaman in the Meratus Mountains. Wonderland is neither the Altai objectively nor solely my subjective experiences, but rather the intersection of the two. Wonderland consists of both real experiences and my own interpretations of them.

As a note of caution before presenting these experiences, I would like to stress how the sources of this data were attained. My interviews have been translated by Kydyeva or are reflections from an interview that she or Denis Maslov told me about. Some of these translations and reflections were written down as notes and do not always follow word for word dialogue. My notes are not perfect: many of them were taken from remembering translated conversations hours after the interview, or even the next day. I bring attention to how my interpretations of these experiences were drawn to present them more honestly.

Most of my experiences were made possible by Oksana Kydyeva. She connected me to many different social networks in the Altai and scheduled various appointments with religious persons, scholars, and Altaian nationalists. The first interview we had was with a “White Shaman,” a shaman that deals primarily with Upper World spirits and does not make sacrifices or travel to the underworld (Alekseev 1989; Basilov 1989; Vinogradov 2003 and 2006). Our visit with this shaman lasted only a half-hour at most, but during the interview I was able to understand her ideas about religion through Kydyeva’s translation. Just a few days later, Kydyeva took us to see a “Black Shaman”—one who deals with dark spirits, makes sacrifices and travels to the underworld (Alekseev 1989; Basilov 1989; Vinogradov 2003 and 2006). The

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5 See Vinogradov 2002 for more details on the development of Shamanism in Southern Siberia. See also Khomushku 2007 for insights on a Shamanic world view and religious syncretism in Southern Siberia.
next day, acting upon the Black Shaman’s request, we visited a Buddhist lama. The following
day, Kydyeva took Lena and me to meet her friend’s grandmother on her birthday. The day
after, Kydyeva and I had coffee with Svetlana Tiukieneva, a scholar on religion in the Altai and
an Altaian herself. Lastly, due to Tiukieneva’s insistence, Kydyeva took me to her father,
Vladimir Kydyev, a well known Altaian nationalist. I met many other interesting people in the
Altai, but these are the main characters I will use to frame the argument that religions appear
overlapping and complex in the Altai and how these complications allow religion to mediate the
problems of identity that currently challenge the Altai Republic.

Almost every informant I met both challenged and reinforced the mainstream notion of
religion as institutional. I was overwhelmed and confused by how diverse, contradictory and
multiple each of these informants’ ideas of religion were and came to realize it was the very
category of “religion” that allowed these concepts of religion to appear messy. Thus I have
devoted Section One of my paper to illustrating the overlap and complexity in religious
conceptions. In this section I look at religion away from its categorical definitions and utilize
Robert Orsi’s relational model of religion to show how these definitions have allowed religion to
appear messy in the first place. These messy concepts of religion have not occurred in vain; in
Section Two I describe a number of threats to Altaian identity and autonomy coming from the
West that have encouraged these messy concepts of religion to continue. However, even the way
these threats are understood is not free from religious conception; therefore, I describe how these
threats are understood in both political and religious language. In Section Three I detail how
religion is seen as a solution to the threats to Altaian identity and autonomy and how these

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6 The term messy is used by Anna Tsing in *Friction* to refer to the complicated and inconsistent ways universal
concepts play out on the globe (Tsing 2005) and by Robert Orsi to refer to how religious practice on the ground
appear awkward and contradictory in the wake of universal concepts of religion (Orsi 2005).
threats have broken up religious concepts into two camps: institutional religion and non-institutional religion. Institutional religion, namely Buddhism, is seen as a cure to Altaian national identity because of its unifying propensities whereas non-institutional or traditional religion is seen as a poison for it threatens the Altai with greater division. In the Conclusion, I argue there is a paradox in the way Altaians think about religion. As the Altai seeks to become a strong nation that belongs to an institutional “World Religion”\(^7\) capable of protecting the Altaian people from Western influences, the more Western the Altai will become. In demonstrating how concepts of religion have the propensity to change peoples’ identity, I hope to call attention to how the very ways in which religion is categorized, defined and conceived, affects what is dubbed religious in everyday life.

**Section One: Complex, Overlapping Religious Conceptions**

These overlapping and interwoven concepts of religion in the contemporary post-Soviet space of the Altai Republic are important to Religious Studies because they complicate the very notion of religion. In other words, the religious dynamics in the Altai bring into question the very notion of what a religion is. Thus, before I begin to detail how religious conceptions are overlapping, complicated and changing in the Altai Republic, the notion of religion must first be interrogated. As Jonathon Z. Smith in his collection of essays titled *Imagining Religion*, boldly posits, “Religion is solely the creation of the scholar’s study” (Smith 1982: xi). To Smith the category of religion is not a universal category but is historically located in a particular, Western

\(^7\)The term “World Religions” is taken from Masuzawa 2005 and Orsi 2005: I am using this term to refer to a category of religions that is thought of as institutional and global such as Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Judaism. As Masuzawa points out, this category was invented in the European academy and is Eurocentric.
categorical invention. I aim to describe the complexities of religious phenomena in the contemporary Altai taking into account the positioned category of religion.

To do this I follow Robert Orsi’s theoretical framework in his book *Between Heaven and Earth*. His approach suggests looking at religion as a series of relationships between heaven and earth or the spiritual and the everyday (Orsi 2002, 2-4). This approach allows religion to be looked at for what it *does*—not necessarily what it *means* or *explains*. This approach also takes the researcher’s position into account: “Once religion is understood not as a web of meaning but of relationships between heaven and earth, then scholars of religion take their place as participants in these networks too” (Orsi 2002, 5). I was able to make sense of why these religious concepts appeared overlapping and interwoven in my interviews once I turned away from examining how religion created meaning to how religion created relations between the spiritual and mundane. In using this relational approach I hope to shed light on how the concept of religion itself has allowed these concepts to appear messy in the first place.

Despite the fact that categories of religion such as “Buddhism” and “Shamanism” are overlapping and intermingling in the Altai, I want to stress that these categories have helped construct the “real” and were utilized by each of my informants and friends. Historically locating the “universal” category of religion does not make it false but sheds light on how the categories themselves create and make problematic our understandings of religion. Halemba echoes the point that religious categories are seen as distinct even though they overlap: “there is a recognition of the fundamental differences between Buddhism and Shamanism” (Halemba

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8For more on how universals both enable and impede see Anna Tsing’s metaphor in her book *Friction* in which she reflects on how roads both allow us easy passage to places but limit where we go. She elegantly states: “Roads create pathways that make motion easier and more efficient, but in doing so they limit where we go. The ease of travel they facilitate is also a structure of confinement” (Tsing 2005; 6).
2003, 171). By using a relational method I aim to show that these religious conceptions appear confusing and messy because their main priority is not to remain in the confines of the definition allotted them, but to mediate human problems through forging relationships between the spiritual and material. In short, these religions are constantly overlapping, penetrating and incorporating each other because their conceptions and categories are constantly being reinterpreted, re-utilized and recycled to address the problems of Altaian identity. In this section I will show how the categories of “religion” like “Buddhism” and “Shamanism” overlap and complicate each other precisely because of their categorical definitions. My conversations with various people concerned with religion and Altaian identity demonstrate how these overlapping and complicated notions of religion appear on the ground.

Kydyeva arranged for Denis, Lena and me an interview with a Black Shaman who lived on the outskirts of Gorno-Altaisk, the capital city of the Altai Republic. Kydyeva warned me that Black Shamans are dangerous and asked if I had been baptized because this would protect me from some of his powers. Kydyeva’s concern shows the permeability of these religious categories—a Christian baptism has the power to protect against shamanic sorcery. Immediately I noticed the permeability of these religious categories when I entering the Black Shaman’s small log cabin (see Image One)—the entire one-bedroom house was covered in Buddhist regalia, and there was a picture of the Dalai Lama in the center of a shrine. As we walked in, the shaman sat behind a Mongolian table on a little stool with his hands together at his navel like a Buddhist yogi. He had his eyes closed and was mumbling to the tunes of New Age sounding chants, and

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9 This difference is generally that Buddhism is recognized as more genuinely religious than Shamanism which was often called a “world view” or “tradition” by many of my informants and is referred to as such in some of the sources (Khomushku 2007; Tadina 2006).

was fully clothed in an Altaian costume. After we presented him customary gifts of milk, tea, candies and pastries he turned the music up even louder and started ringing a Buddhist bell.

Like the appearance of his home, the instruments he used were a mix of both shamanic and Buddhist instruments. He had a heather bough, a couple of sheep scapula, and a whip—traditional shamanic instruments, but he also had a Buddhist bell and hat for performing rituals. Most importantly, his drum—the most classical shamanic instrument—was a little Buddhist chime. The shaman was most assuredly a shaman and reaffirmed his identity as one when I asked him if he would also call himself a Buddhist: “Yeah . . . ,” he said unconvinced, “I guess you could say that but I’m a shaman. I drink vodka. I’m a shaman.” Although he was most certainly a shaman, this did not stop him from taking on certain aspects of Buddhism. The objects and decorations in his home demonstrated how overlapped and complicated the categories of Shamanism and Buddhism are in the Altai.

Although he was aware of the categories he was mixing, he offered an alternative to these understandings in his speech. One of the first things the shaman stated in the interview was Shamanism is not a religion; it is a tradition. When we asked him why he appeared so Buddhist he replied, “Shamanism and Buddhism are the same thing.” Throughout the interview he stressed that Shamanism and Buddhism were not two different things rather, they overlap completely. In stating this, he complicated the standard conceptions of these categories. When he talked about how he became a shaman, he referred to himself with a Buddhist term—he stated, “This is how I became a guru.” In addition, when I prodded Kydyeva to ask about Ak Jang, he laughed: “Ak Jang is bullshit!” he chuckled, “it’s milky faith, white faith; they use milk. It’s Buddhism; there’s no sorcery, it’s just milk for the spirits.” Again he confused the distinction between these (supposed) religions. Ak Jang, like Shamanism, is the same thing as
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Buddhism. He even stated, “Tibetans and Altaians are the same in regards to faith, they just have different cloth; it’s the same spirituality.” The Black Shaman complicated the categories of these religions by referring to them as the same thing.

Although the Shaman referred to these many traditions as the same, he reaffirmed their differences. He contrasts Shamanism to Ak Jang stating, “Shamans use vodka, Ak Jang uses milk.” Likewise, Buddhism differs from Shamanism because Buddhists are learned people. “[Buddhism] has a head, a leader like Orthodoxy.” Then he said Burkhanism (Ak Jang) and Buddhism are the same because they both had leaders. Further affirmation of religious complication continued as he talked of a great apocalyptic war of religions in which only three religions would survive: Christianity, Buddhism and (strangely enough) Shamanism. From this war would arise one god with a head and two arms, and each of the religions would be one of these. In this statement he is separating Buddhism and Shamanism as separate distinct religions, utilizing the categories he had sought to complicate before. In the shaman’s mind Buddhism can be the same as Shamanism, Burkhanism and even Tibetan spirituality and different at the same time because he is at once using these categories of religion and re-defining them.

At the end of our interview, he learned that I had just celebrated my birthday. The shaman took a special interest in my birth date, looking up in a kind of zodiac for the date, he read the prediction and on concluding advised I should have a Buddhist sutra, the Sundui Sutra, read to me by a Buddhist lama. The overlap of these religious categories is epitomized by this gesture: the advice given by a shaman is to see a lama. Kydyeva must have taken the advice of the Shaman seriously for the next day she took Lena and me to visit a lama and have the requested sutra read. When it was our turn to enter the temple (see Image Two), Kydyeva explained to him why we had come. He then called the shaman on his cell phone; presumably to
ask him what the prophecy had requested. This simple phone call revealed how these religious traditions are interwoven in Altaian everyday life; in the Altai, religious specialists across religions keep each other in their cell phone contact list! We bought the same gifts to the lama we had brought to the Black Shaman: milk, tea, sweet pastries, and candies. Likewise, just as the shaman had done, he poured the milk, opened the sweets for the spirits, and lit incense—the same motions the shaman had done the day before. Furthermore, there was a sign on the outside of the temple that read Ak Burkhan, the spirit master of the Altai (see Image Three). What was the name of the Master Spirit of the Altai doing on a Buddhist temple?

The lama’s concept of religion was not only shown in actions, like the shaman, the lama further complicated the category of religion in his speech. He stated, “Buddhism is not a religion; religion is master and slave, everyone is equal in Buddhism.” The lama’s conception of religion is one that has hierarchy. Buddhism is not a religion because it does not have hierarchy, rather, he stated Buddhism is a “line of wisdom, can be Christian or Buddhist. It just teaches you how to be a good man.” Here the lama is breaking down religious boundaries; Buddhism really could belong to a number of different religions because it is simply a means of becoming a “good man.” Furthermore, he showed how similar and overlapping these religious traditions are. He stated, “[There are] elements of Buddhism in Shamanism” and “Burkhanism is a simple form of Buddhism.” He also stated, “Buddhism enhanced Altai rituals, gave them philosophical meanings, didn’t change them.” Here he is demonstrating how interwoven these traditions are; however, the lama did differentiate between these religious traditions. He stated, “Buddhism has standards and books; shamans don’t have books.” He continued, “shamans have their own world; he becomes a spirit when he dies” and “[if] the shaman accepts Buddha, he might become a man

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in his next life.” The lama talked of these religious traditions as separate yet the same, thus complicating the notion of religion.

Likewise, Vladimir Kydyev, an Altaian nationalist described Buddhism in a similar complicated way, as a religious institution overlapping with various elements of Altaian traditions. In an interview Kydyeva translated how he put it: “If we look back we also use to talk about Buddhism, but now it’s more complicated. It’s not simply Buddhism. Perhaps it’s something like Shintoism and Buddhism.” He uses Japan as an example to illustrate how complicated and intermingled Buddhism is with Altaian traditions. Buddhism is a world religion to Kydyev, and he utilizes its definition as one, but it is also something else—something that overlaps with Altaian traditions and beliefs. Although these categories are utilized they do not constrain how these religions relate to each other or dictate how they make relations between the spiritual and the everyday, or in Orsi’s words, “between heaven and earth.”

Similar overlapping and complicating notions of religion were presented when Kydyeva took Lena and me to visit a White Shaman. Lena asked whether Shamanism was a religion or not and the White Shaman replied, “No, it is not a religion—it has no books. It’s the basis of all religions and in all religion. It’s a genetic gift and can’t be trained.” Here, the White Shaman overlaps the notions of religion and tradition, describing Shamanism as something of a basic component of religion but not a religion itself. Furthermore, she posits her idea that religion is something that can be taught and trained and has books. Shamanism to her cannot be a religion because it cannot be taught or trained—it has no books—it is only inherited. I asked her and

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13 This notion is a little too simplistic because some shamans are trained. The Black Shaman’s specialty was training people to become shamans. He also referred to Shamanism as something genetic but stated he could recognize people that would make a good shaman. My thought on how this works is that he recognizes the genetic
Kydyeva translated: “Why did you become a [White Shaman] and not a [Black] shaman?” And her reply complicated these categories even further, “No one defines who I am!” Her statement was telling because it denied the categories we had come to know her by. These social categories do not determine who or what she was; only she determines that. Again these categories are utilized, for the community knew her as a White Shaman, but these categories did not constrain her.

Similarly, when Denis took me with him on an interview with an Orthodox priest in the neighboring town of Maima, he told me how the priest described the pilgrims who come to the Altai from all over Siberia and Europe each year as tourists, New Agers and Shamanistic. Instead of going to the chapels these pilgrims make their way to places such as Lake Teletskaya and Mount Beluka and merely stop by these chapels on their way there. Here Orthodoxy overlaps with elements of New Age and Shamanism. One would think this might be a point of contention for the church but Denis stated how the priest commented on how the church cannot be worried about every pagan thing a Christian does. The priest used the example, “We all like our bliny (Russian pancakes) even though it has a pagan root. Even though it has pagan significance it doesn’t mean we as Orthodox people have to abandon using it.” Denis said he used this same analogy to address how some Orthodox Altaians still practice what could be seen as pagan rituals. Here again we have overlapping conceptions of religion even with a religion as institutional as Russian Orthodoxy, in fact the institution has grown tolerant of it. Not even Orthodoxy is free from the complex of religious concepts intermingling in the Altai.

gift in people and then elaborates on it in his training which still adheres to the emic or intrapersonal quality of Shamanism.

14 Orthodox priest, Maima, July 14, 2010.
I describe these religious conceptions and practices as overlapping because to the practitioners the intersections of these religions do not appear contradictory. To say these intersections contradict each other would be to suggest they mutually exclude each other; however, this is not the case among these informants. Adhering to some Buddhist beliefs and practices does not make the Black Shaman any less of a shaman nor do visiting shamanic places make Orthodox pilgrims any less Orthodox. I use the term “overlap” to show how these categories can be distinct yet intermingle at the same time. What overlaps in these religions are their very categories. Shamanism can overlap with Buddhism, and Orthodoxy can overlap with Shamanism—maintaining their distinct categorical boundaries without contradiction.

These categories can overlap without being contradictory—Buddhism and Shamanism can be the same yet different at the same time—because these categories do not limit how religions interact in everyday life. Here we turn to Robert Orsi’s relational argument. He states:

There are aspects of people’s lives and experiences within religious worlds that must be included in our vision and attended to beyond what is officially sanctioned. This is a call, then, for attention to religious messiness, to multiplicities, to seeing religious spaces as always, inevitably and profoundly intersected by things brought into them from outside, things that bear their own histories, complexities, meanings different from those offered within the religious space. (Orsi 2005, 169)

The relationships these religions form between the spirits or a divinity and the everyday is done regardless of their categorical limitations. Thus, it does not matter to the Orthodox priests if pilgrims are acting like New Age believers and visiting shamanic sites; a relationship between God and the worshippers is forged on the pilgrimage regardless. What is important about paying attention to this overlap, as Orsi would see it, is its ability to show religion is infused in the complicated social fabric of the everyday. New Age and shamanic sites exist as a point of interest in the lives of Orthodox pilgrims—Orthodoxy does not exist in a vacuum but in a
complicated world in which shamanic sites can be places of Christian religious pilgrimage. Similarly, the Black Shaman’s use of a Buddhist bell demonstrates he lives in a world with “profound intersection” with things that have their own histories and complexities such as Buddhism that have meanings other than those prescribed by Shamanism. As Orsi states, “religions arise from and refer back to discrete social and cultural worlds and they are inevitably shaped by the structures and limits of these worlds as they engage them” (Orsi 2005, 171). Therefore, religions are messy because they are created in a social cultural landscape; they cannot help but be complex and overlapping because “social and cultural worlds” are complex and overlap with a myriad of other aspects of life.

However, it is important to these characters to belong to a religious category, despite the fact that religions practiced on the ground do not match up with the boundaries of their categories and often cross them. Although many of these categories of religion are capable of forging the same relationships between the spiritual and mundane life, the way in which each of these categories forge relationships is important because they can offer power and greater autonomy in the Russian Federation. In the next section I will discuss what threatens Altaian identity and autonomy and how important identifying with one category is verses identifying with another. To these informants, the fate of the Altai Republic rests on the choice of belonging to one category as opposed to another.

Section Two: The Vulnerability of National Identity

It will become apparent why religion must occupy such an ambivalent position in the Altai Republic when taking account of the ways in which people view their own national identity.
as vulnerable. Kydyeva and the people I met shared many of the same concerns about the autonomy of their republic and the national identity of their people. In this section I will discuss the threats to the Altai’s national identity and how they were expressed by the people I met. These threats are understood and discussed in both political and religious terminology. By showing how these threats are perceived both politically and religiously I hope to build an understanding of why religion is seen as an answer to these threats and why it occupies such a complex and overlapping position in society.

Perhaps the person most articulate about these political threats was Vladimir Kydyev.\textsuperscript{15} He was very conscious of the dangers that threatened the stability of Altaian national identity and the majority of the interview was about these potential threats to the Altai. Kydyev and his wife Svetlana were very influential people in Gorno-Altaisk and the Republic in general. I was lucky to get an interview with him not because he happened to be Kydyeva’s father but because Svetlana Tiukieneva urged Kydyeva to take me to him. Kydyev calls himself a nationalist and requested his name not be used in my paper for his own protection.\textsuperscript{16} He has his own publishing house and works for the local newspaper where he advocates for Altaian autonomy. Kydyeva told me he was the person who stopped a team of archaeologists from digging up more bodies where the Altai Princess\textsuperscript{17} was found and was active in getting the mummy returned to the Altai—the conflict over who owns the rights to these mummies is troublesome to Altaian nationalists. At one time he worked for a federal senator, Ralif Safin, who represented the Altai

\textsuperscript{15} Vladimir Kydyev, Gorno-Altaisk, July 28, 2010.
\textsuperscript{16} I was given permission to use his real name in this paper so long as it is not published.
\textsuperscript{17} The Altai Princess or Ice Maiden was a famous archaeological find of a remarkably well-preserved mummy of a Scythian woman found in the Altai. She was discovered by a Russian archaeologist, Natalia Polosmak, in 1993 and was taken to Novosibirsk for further study. Altaians were upset the mummy was taken from her homeland and demanded she be returned. Although genetically the mummy is more related to the Selkups of the northern Tomsk region, Altaians claim she is Altaian because she was found in the Altai. Currently the mummy will be returned to the Altai where she will be exhibited at Gorno-Altaisk Regional Museum, Gorno-Altaisk. (Halemba 2006; 18-19).
Republic, but resigned because working for this senator conflicted with his own beliefs about how the Altai should be governed.\textsuperscript{18}

Kydyev’s lecture started almost immediately with a discussion about Orthodoxy: “In the Altai the Orthodox Church is resurrecting again and we’re afraid they might abuse us again.” He said with some disgust, “Fifteen years ago the Church started putting up crosses all around the republic. You can see it as you come to the Altai.” The cross seemed to him to mark the republic as an Orthodox and Russian republic. “There’s a cross on Ukok, on the Mongolian border and on Mount Beluka, and we don’t like it” he said again with disgust; “There’s even a small church on Lake Teleskaya.” “It’s like a bear marking his territory,” he commented swinging his arms as if he was a bear scratching a tree, “and we don’t like it.” “Furthermore,” he vented, “why is there a cross on Mount Beluka, that’s not fair, it’s our national symbol and not theirs.” Mount Beluka is the highest peak in the Altai and a sacred mountain in Altaian tradition.\textsuperscript{19}

He showed how the Church is conscious of its encroachment as he talked of a sign put up by Christians that read, “Watch out the Christians are coming” or “Let the Christians pass” (Kydyeva translated it both ways). He stated that Christians want to pass a law to make it a criminal offense to slander Christianity. Kydyev continued, “Ten to fifteen years ago they put a memorial to mark where a bunch of people died from ‘political inadequacy.’” Kydyev complained: “this wasn’t fair for there were more people than just Christians killed there; there were [non-Christian] Russians, Altaians and more.” In Kydyev’s view the church is conscious of its colonial presence and intends to further religiously colonizing the Altai through crosses and

\textsuperscript{18} A few days before I left the Altai there had been a conflict between the Kazakhs and Altaians in the southern region of Kosh Agach; that very night, Kydyev and El Bashchi, the cultural figurehead of the Altai, met to discuss what needed to be done.\textsuperscript{19} For more geographical information look online at the Altaian Official Portal: eng.altai-republic.ru/index.php. The portal contains useful general information about the Altai Republic and is in both Russian and English.
government support. This point is echoed by Halemba, “Orthodox Christianity is seen mainly as a religion of the Russians and because of that it is firmly rejected by the “Altaian Intellectuals” as a step towards unification of the Altaian nation (Halemba 2003, 168). Filatov also makes this point stating Orthodoxy is a “religion of Russification” and would result in “the suicide of the people” if it became a state religion (Filatov 2001, 84). Kydyev is thus among the Altaian Intellectuals that see Orthodoxy as a threat to the national unity of the Altai.

Orthodoxy is not the only threat; Kydyev also sees the federal and republic governments as a threat to Altaian identity and autonomy. Kydyev thinks the Altai government wants to make the republic weaker so it will assimilate with Altai Krai, the neighboring region from which it was originally separated in 1991. He described how the government is restricting access to Altaian cultural knowledge: “Everything goes against Altaians learning their own language; it’s not compulsory, it’s an elective. Our own government is against us for its [all about] Russian policy and it has a Russian Head of the Government,” he stated. “Learning Altaian was compulsory before but now this year, on the first of September 2010, it will no longer be compulsory anymore. [The Republic] accepted an amendment from the Federal Government this year and now they don’t have to require Altaisk as a compulsory language. All ethnic minorities are against this amendment because it concerns all twenty-one republics.”

Kydyev articulated his fear of cultural assimilation: “We Altaians look at the world through how things will affect the Altaian nation. We are against industrialization—it’s bringing in more workers here that aren’t Altaian. In the 1940s and 50s there came many people to build a hydropower dam on the Katun River and people to use the Taiga forest—our northern regions.

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20 A group of self-identified Altaian nationalists active in advocating for the issues that face Altaian identity and autonomy, see Halemba 2003; 167 and Section Three of this paper.
21 For more details on the founding of the Altai Republic from Altai Krai see Kos’min 2007; 43 and Donahoe 2008; 1000. This issue is also discussed in Halemba 2003 and 2006.
And there came many Russians and the three northern minorities started losing their language and mixing with Russians. There’s no Tubalaran (a northern minority) who knows his native language now. Industrialization brought marginality to the Altaian North.”

He continued: “Our main problem today is that we share a border with China. Only fifty-five kilometers but they want to make a gas pipe and a railway and highway through the Altai to China. These are discussed lately and we have this district—Kosh Agach—a district that belongs to the Altai and they want to make a casino there for the Chinese most likely. They want to make the Altai a Las Vegas!” he said with great disgust. He stated with a sense of urgency, “We don’t have much time; our nation is about to disappear.” He fears the influences industrialization can bring could lead to the annihilation of Altaian culture.

Kydyev went into detail about how his peoples’ population had dwindled during their time under Russian influence: “In 1887, there were sixty-seven percent Altaians in the Republic and twenty-six percent Russians that lived in the north. There were lots of Altaians in the north. [Now] there’s more than fifty percent of Russians in the north where there use to be Altaians [like Asians] with slanty eyes,” he explained. “In the early 1900s, tons of immigrants came in and by the Revolution fifty percent of the population of the Altai was made up of Russians. During the Civil War in Gorno-Altaisk it became a national war. Both Whites and Reds killed Altaians—60,000 were killed. Only thirty percent were left and many more died from starvation and from Reds’ and Whites’ killings. Since then (the Civil War) we can’t rise up. We dream about it, being fifty percent then one hundred percent then being our own masters here.”

Kydyev demonstrated how his people would have had a large population had they not lived under the auspices of the Russians:

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22 For more details on the ethnic groups of the Altai see Donahoe 2008 and Blum and Filippova 2003.
In 1916, there were 60,000 Altaians, 60,000 Tuvans, and 60,000 Khakassians. Today there are 400,000 Tuvans—they have good ministers in Tuva—65,000 Khakassians, and 60,000 Altaians left. After [the] Revolution in the early 1920s, 1917-1922, Khakassia and Altaians had to go through the Civil War, collectivization and repression, and World War Two. . . . Tuva joined after the War in 1942 and so they didn’t have to go through all the collectivization or repression—they missed the worst, Tuva didn’t hit the World War Two drafts either.

He then informed me triumphantly, “If we Altaians joined then too, we would be 500,000 today!” In these statements Kydyev stated how the years under Russian influence have decreased Altaians’ population and culture and how they would have been better off, like Tuva, had they not come under these influences.

In addition to cultural assimilation, Kydyev is also concerned about the threats to Altaian autonomy: “Today northern tribes want to separate from Altai, and they hurt the Altai. They want to speak their own language. Ethnic minorities in Russia go on a pension earlier and get more money and their children can go to the universities. The Kosh Agach and Ust Kan regions want to be Telengits not Altaians so they can have these perks. But united we stand and divided we fall. There are 142 little nations in Altai, because everyone would call their own clan their native nationality. There are nine million Tatars and only sixty-seven kinds of ethnic minorities there. We have a 142 from only 60,000 people. Someone is trying to split us up!”

The fears Kydyev articulates are analyzed in the article “Size and Place in the Construction of Indigeneity in the Russian Federation,” by a number of scholars on indigenous small-numbered peoples of the Russian Federation, abbreviated in Russian KMN. The article states how peoples that qualify for KMN status receive benefits from the Federal government such as exemption from land tax if engaging in traditional economies, priority rights to natural

23 Information on clan identity and state relations can be found in Donahoe 2008 and Blum and Filippova 2003. For more information on Altaian clan structure see Vinogradov 2003.
resources, optional civil service in place of military service and early retirement benefits for men and women (Halemba in Donahoe 2008, 999). However, KMN populations are contingent on being below 50,000 and do not qualify for self-governance. This sets up a dichotomy between small-numbered people and larger indigenous peoples living in self-governing regions. As indigenous minorities living in autonomous regions and republics such as the Telengits of southern Altai that qualify for KMN status seek federal benefits they threaten lowering the number of non-small-numbered indigenous peoples below the 50,000 threshold which would forfeit their right to an autonomous republic (Blum and Filippova 2003, Broz 2009, 56, Halemba 2006, 21).

Such a dynamic is taking place among the Telengits, whose population was estimated to be between 8,000 or 9,000 (Halemba in Donahoe 2008, 1002) to as high as 17,000 (Blum and Filippova 2003), a number that would qualify them for KMN status. However, the population of the indigenous Altaians is estimated to be around 67,000. There is a fear that the Altai could lose their status as an autonomous republic if the Telengit minority chooses to identify as Telengit instead of Altaian in future censuses.24 This scare occurred during the 2002 census as Halemba posits: “In the local people who were considering declaring themselves Telengits were labeled as traitors to the united Altaian nation. Republican political activists fear that the administrative status of their national republic would be put in jeopardy” (Halemba in Donahoe 2008, 1002).

Kydyev articulates a number of fears such as Orthodoxy’s encroachment on Altaian sacred grounds and losing the native Altaian languages and cultures, as in the Altaian north. Furthermore, he fears the government is becoming too saturated with Russian voices and is deliberately weakening the Altaians’ cultural identity and autonomy. Likewise, industrialization

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24 See Donahoe 2008 for more details.
and the development on the border of China will quicken Altaian dilution into Russian culture as it already has in the north. Lastly, he fears the Altai will lose its status as autonomous if the Telengits do not identify as Altaian which could drop the Altaian population below qualifying for their autonomous status. All of these factors threaten the social stability and national identity of the Altai.

Another informant, Svetlana Tiukteneva, a scholar on religion and an Altaian herself, also shared many of the same fears Kydyev had. She informed me of a recent scare the Altai had about losing their autonomy, “In 2007, 5000 people walked out on the main square and called out to conserve the status of the Republic, for it was suppose to be joined with Altai Krai. What the Altai Republic has is water, tourism and a border with China.” She continued, “[It was to be joined with Altai Krai] because of political and economic factors. Only the Altai Republic said we really need our republic. There was a movement to write smaller regions into larger ones but Altai managed to secure their status.”

She also discussed other fears that Kydyev had not mentioned, particularly foreign Buddhism in contrast to Altaian Buddhism. When I asked her about the vandalism to the Buddhist Stupa27 in the Usk-Kan region (western Altai) in autumn of 2002 (Halemba 2006, 33)28 I read about in Halemba’s book, The Telengits of Southern Siberia, she replied: “The people in Karakog Valley only wanted to fight Indian lamas. The Altaian Buddhists came in and stopped

25 Svetlana Tiukteneva, Gorno-Altaisk, July 28, 2010
26 See Donahoe 2008; 1002 for details on how the Altai Republic could be reincorporated into Altai Krai.
27 A Buddhist stupa is a place of worship for Buddhists. It usually takes the form of a mound of earth with Buddhist relics inside.
28 Other conflicts related to Buddhism increasing presents in the Altai are discussed in chapters three and five.
[the potential violence].” Foreign Buddhist proselytism, in contrast to Altaian Buddhism, is perceived as a threat to the social stability of the Altai.\(^{29}\)

She also expressed fears about the Russian federal government’s effect on Altaian culture and identity: “The idea of a republic has strength and this is good. Having a republic will help us work things out—especially the privatization of land and private property which is a reform that comes from the Federation. No one knows if we’re going to capitalism or not; not Medvedev nor Putin.” She continued, “[However, private land is] based on European ways and indigenous people are absolutely not taken into account. There is a problem [with private land] but no one knows how to solve it [and no one is] aware of the danger of ‘sedentary-ization.’ Nationalism discourse is going to get bigger because of the land privatization issue.” Tiukieneva finds promise in the Republics autonomy but worries over how it may become restricted by Federal reforms such as land privatization and other Western concepts such as free-market capitalism.

Kydyev and Tiukieneva discussed the threats to the Altai in political terms; however, many other informants had a rich religious understanding of these threats to social stability and Altaian identity. The Black and White Shamans and Maria Opongosheva, a knowledgeable grandmother of Kydyeva’s friend Yulia Opongosheva (we called her Babushka), all rationalized the threats to Altaian identity and autonomy in religious terms. This paradigm understands the problems of national instability as a digression from a previous culturally pure state that was caused by the rise of dark spiritual energy.

\(^{29}\) See section three for more details about Buddhism in the Altai.
The Black Shaman described how weak Shamanism had become today. He told us he used to fight robbers and killers with his shamanic powers but today he does not have the energy to fight because the Black Spirits are so prevalent. On the contrary, shamans in the past were powerful, as he illustrated “Putin tells us what to do and we do it; in the past shamans were like Putin.” It used to be, he mentioned, that all problems were solved by shamans—problems with the country, with property, et cetera—it was all in the shaman’s hands. He agonized over his lack of shamanic ability; lamenting he stated, “I can only solve people’s [personal] problems.” He expressed the degradation of Shamanism. He bragged that his grandmother had also been a shaman and a very powerful one. He informed us, “I can give people life for only three years, three months and three days but my grandmother could give people life for an extra thirty years.” He talked about how there were shamanic “levels” and a shaman’s “level” is defined by his/her strength and what he/she is able to do. He informed us that there are thirteen to seventeen steps and he is on the seventh step. He suggested his grandmother functioned on a much higher level.

He had an explanation for the degradation of Shamanism: “[The sects] who come to the land (the Altai) are sent by black spirits. The world of Shamanism is gone but there are still shamans. Those that come from the sects have come to destroy the last of the shamans.” It is not clear whether he was referring to Christian sects or the sects of Burkhanism that sprung up after Perestroika. He continued: “If they don’t succeed elsewhere they come here and destroy us. All these churches in America and Okinawa[^30] are all trying to destroy us. Different religions try to come in and destroy the Altai. Shamanism was destroyed when paganism was destroyed and all the pagans converted to Orthodoxy, Muslim faith and the rest. Now everyone is out to get shamans.” Unlike Kydyev and Tiukieneva, he explains that events that have deprived

[^30]: I am unsure why he mentioned Okinawa here.
Identities in Crisis  
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Altaians from their culture are due to spiritual forces—foreign religions sent by black spirits have come to destroy the Altai.

Not only is Shamanism being degraded but also the Altaian culture: “Shamans are getting weaker because the (Altaian) people are getting weaker. In the olden days, people would just have meat and milk and be fine, but today people are mixing their meats with sweet things and are making all these funny recipes and using all these additives. It used to be the more clothes one had the better off they were and now people nearly run around naked in skimpy clothes.” After each example he stated, “You see, we’re getting weaker,” as if each example was self-evident for the Altai’s degrading state.

This cultural degradation in his belief is also caused by religious sects that persecuted Shamanism. He stated:

Black spirits have come into the Altai in the form of all sorts of sects. Lots of evangelists are coming in and telling us were not eating right and these people are bringing all this new stuff and the soil is getting offended by this. All the problems will come from this. If [some factory or industrial plant] comes in everything will be bad. It has already brought the cold and it will bring floods, hunger and more too. We shamans can feel it and see it.

Here the same fears of industrialization and cultural assimilation Kydyev and Tiukieneva talked about are described as mystical forces that can cause floods, hunger and cold. These enchanted forces can be felt and even seen by shamans.

In addition, whereas Kydyev and Tiukieneva attributed these catastrophes and threats to Altaian identity stemming from the federal government, the republic government and the Orthodox Church, the Black Shaman attributed these forces to dark energy and spirits radiating from distinct centers. He stated: “There was an area where Charles Gorkin and other
Karakorum Committee members\textsuperscript{31} were executed and that place has a lot of negative energy, in fact all earthquakes stem from that spot. Cities are centers of negative energy and the bigger the city the more problems it has—Moscow is among the worst. All problems stem from cities.”

Here federal government influences are described as dark energy flowing from city centers like Moscow that infiltrate and corrupt remote places like the Altai. Whereas Kydyev described the Church encroaching on the Altai with crosses and government policies, the Black Shaman described this influence in spiritual terms—cupolas, the domed-shaped roofs on Orthodox cathedrals, the shaman also claimed were centers of dark energy. He described spaces that are potent to Altaian identity such as the mountains as holy places that radiates positive energy. He described the mountains as a place to escape the negative energy and rejuvenate—perhaps these spaces could also strengthen Altaian identity.

`The Black Shaman put into vivid language the many threats he sees encroaching on the Altai. Religious influences such as Orthodoxy and the “Sects” are being sent into the Altai by dark spirits and these religious influences are weakening the social stability of the Altai and corrupting it from a purer Altaian past. He describes how Altaian eating and dressing habits are changing. The shaman shares many of the same concerns Kydyev and Tiukieneva did about industrialization and foreign religious proselytism but he understands their threats in terms of dark energy and spirits instead of political policy.

The White Shaman made similar references to dark energy. She told a story of a genocide of shamans during the Soviet period that caused the current tarnished state of

\footnote{\textsuperscript{31}Charles Gorkin is an Altaian national hero. He founded the Oirot Federation in 1918 that declared independence during the Russian Civil War. The Karakorum Committee was the administration of the Republic fashioned from traditional Turkic forms of government with Charles Gorkin as its head or “Khan” (Vinogradov 2003; 24). Also see Filatov 2001 and Znamenski 2005 for more details.}
Shamanism. She stated, “[the Soviets] made Shamanism stop.” She stressed that the genocide played a pivotal point in the degradation of Altaian culture and that she knew exactly why the event had occurred—the dark energy was on the rise and out to diminish all sources of positive energy like shamans. In her view, the current state of the world is far darker than in the past: “There was more positivity in the past than today.” The rise in dark energy she measured by the rate time passes: “Time is going faster now, 180 years ago, this much time,” she represented, holding her hands about a foot apart, “goes by like this,” she repositioned her hands to include only a few inches between them. Kydyeva translated that in the past one person with bad energy a year that would come to her, but now she is lucky if she comes across one person with positive energy a month. “There’s more negative energy in the world now and it’s growing really fast,” the White Shaman described. Since the Shaman genocide, the dark energy is no longer challenged and is now spreading rapidly.

We encountered a similar interpretation when Kydyeva took Lena and me to visit her friend, Yulia Opongosheva. It was her grandmother’s birthday so we went out to celebrate with her. During the evening Kydyeva told us to ask her grandmother, Maria Opongosheva, questions about religion in the Altai for she was quite knowledgeable on the subject. She told us about the same dark energy and spirits that had a grip on the Altai. Her grandmother described how shamanic knowledge had greatly declined after the Shaman genocide—“only fifteen percent of the knowledge remains.” Yulia and her grandmother also described how cities were centers of dark energy and could make you physically ill from staying in them too long. Yulia was studying in Novosibirsk, and described how she was relieved to come home on breaks to the Altai to rejuvenate from her time in the city. In contrast to urban areas, rural areas were seen as

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32 The Black Shaman told a similar story about a genocide of shamans.
33 Maria and Yulia Opongosheva, Gorno-Altaisk, July 24, 2010.
source of positive energy, and a place to escape. Just as the Black Shaman had described, city centers were sources of dark energy whereas rural and more remote the areas were sources of positive energy, especially in the mountains.

These religious understandings of the threats to Altaian identity make sense if we look at how Altaians relate to their homeland. After my interview with Vladimir Kydyev, his wife Svetlana Kydyeva also told me over tea that Altaians believe the Altai is a vital part of them. If an Altaian leaves the Altai for an extended period, they could become physically ill and even die. I had come across this concept in Halemba’s ethnography where she argues Altaian identity is built off conceptions of attachment to the land.  

Halemba states, “Personhood includes the Altai just as it includes parts of the body” (Halemba 2006, 18). Thus, the Altai is part of the human body and if removed a person could become ill just as if a part of their body were removed (Halemba 2006, 18). Likewise, Ludek Broz argues how Altaians derive their identity from their relationship to the land and describes this as a “relational model” rather than a “genealogical model” of national identity (Broz 2009, 57). Land is intimately connected and intertwined with Altaian identity.

In light of this notion, perhaps it is fitting that many of these religious understandings see the threats to Altaian identity and national stability as degrading and ailing Altaian culture. If we take into account the foundational relationship between land and culture these religious

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34 Svetlana Kydyeva almost used the exact same wording as Halemba: “The Telengits say that if an Altaian leaves the Altai, he or she will become ill and die” (Halemba 2006; 18). Svetlana Kydyeva stated, “We Altaians believe if we leave the Altai we could become sick and even die.”

35 In Halemba’s wording: “It is as if part of a person was severed, such as when people fall ill and die when parts of their body are removed.” See Halemba 2006 chapter three, especially page 85 for more details.

36 Broz uses a strong quote from Timothy Ingold to describe indigenous peoples’ concepts of land and personhood: “indigenous peoples draw their being from their relationships with the land. This is in contrasts to the West in which [land is seen as a] surface to be occupied . . . as a country to which people can move in order to take up residence, bringing their endowments of heritable substance and knowledge with them” (Ingold 2000; 150-151 in Bros 2009; 57).
understandings make sense; if concepts of land are subject to change due to land privatization, industrialization and the loss of autonomy, then Altaian identity is subject to degradation and illness. If Altaian concepts of land change, then Altaian identity will change with them. Perhaps there is a level of honesty in these religious understandings not captured in secular and political talk. Perhaps attributing these threats to national identity and stability to dark energy and spirits more clearly illustrates the dangers that face Altaian identity.

Section Three: Religion as Pharmakon

As explored in both secular and religious language, there are a myriad of threats to Altaian identity and national stability. Altaians see a solution to these problems in which religion plays a vital role in mediating these threats. I will illustrate from the various people I interviewed, the two general trends in thinking about religion: institutional religion offers a promise to cure national identity whereas traditional notions of religion poison it. Following Orsi’s relational model, I will demonstrate that the way religions create relationships between the spiritual and the everyday has the power to cure or poison an ailing national identity.

Religion in the Altai has been seen as an essential part of the nation and is understood to offer the possibility of unifying the ethnically diverse republic. Halemba states, “[religion] is seen as a unifying force, suitable for state-like formations” (Halemba 2003, 171). Almost every one of my informants had an opinion on what religion the Altai should promote to unify the Altai and give legitimacy to its nation identity. Tiukieneva described a group of young right-wing radicals called the Diargychi (Judges) who felt the Altai should adopted Ak Jang as a state religion. Kydyeva often met with a woman that claimed to be psychic who thought the republic

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37 An ancient Greek word meaning both poison and cure.
should promote Shamanism. In addition, Kydyeva and her father told me bluntly, “the Republic should go to Buddhism.”

Religion in the Altai was historically also thought of as a solution to national identity. Several scholars see the early Burkhanist movement at the turn of the twentieth century as a response to create a cohesive national identity during a time of national instability (Ekeev 2006, Filatov 2001, Krader 1956, Sherstova 2006, Tadina 2006, Tiukhteneva 2007, Vinogradov 2003 and 2006, Znamenski 2005). Religion has been important in recent Altaian history as well. Halemba notes, “Religion occupied a very important place in the discussions concerning national unity, especially in the first half of the 1990s” (Halemba 2003, 167). Kos’min also notes, “In the early 1990s, in the course of the Altai national cultural revival that had strengthened by that time, many organizations appeared whose objective was the development of Altai spirituality,” and illustrates the various forms of Burkhanism that sprung up after Perestroika (2007, 43-44). The period of the early 1990s is particularly important, because in 1991 the Altai Republic received its status as an autonomous republic separate from the Altai Krai. Religion has historically and contemporarily been seen as the answer to strong national identity; however, some religions are seen as being more capable of this than others.

Halemba argues how Buddhism and Shamanism offer a dialectical view on religion. She states, “Buddhism and Shamanism in the contemporary Altai serve as models of fundamentally different ways of religious life” (Halemba 2003, 171). She posits the difference between these two camps of religious life differ in their degree of institutionalization. By institutionalized religion I am referring to religions that have a high degree of structure and hierarchy with strict dogma, texts and a global community. Buddhism is seen as “suitable for state-like formations”

38 Sergei Filatov also mentions how several Burkhanist movements arose after Perestroika (Filatov 2001; 83).
because it is an institutional religion that has structure, texts, and a global community. Shamanism does not have this degree of institutionalization and is thus not considered an option for nation building; in fact it is considered a threat to the Republic’s stability. Halemba argues among some communities “[Shamanism] is seen as too diverse and uncontrollable to become the religion of a nation-state” (Halemba 2003, 174). In a very Durkheimian\(^{39}\) sense, institutionalized religion such as Buddhism is seen as a unifying force for society and thus a cure for a fragmenting national identity. Shamanism by contrast is seen as a poison because its various interpretations and sects split apart national identity. In other words, Buddhism’s more formal and homogeneous structure creates a cohesive social identity that adheres better to state politics than the informal and heterogeneous structure of Shamanism that fragments social identity.\(^{40}\) All other native religion in the Altai, Halemba observes, are measured on a scale between Buddhism and Shamanism. The more fixed, institutional and homogeneous the religion, the more curative it is to national identity. On the other hand, the more flexible, personal, and heterogeneous the religion, the more poisonous it is to national unity. Burkhanism is often compared to Buddhism and is seen by some communities as a cure but to others it is seen as a poison.

This dichotomy between homogeneous and heterogeneous concepts of religion in the Altai is related to a phenomenon Robert Orsi finds among mainstream American concepts of religion and notes how this view has a particular understanding of what religion is. Religion is used broadly in America to describe a number of behaviors but some of these behaviors the

\(^{39}\)Emile Durkheim is a well known sociologist of religion that argued at its most elementary form religion is what holds society together. It is a kind of societal clue (Durkheim in Fields 1995).

\(^{40}\)In Halemba’s words: “Buddhism stands for an institutionalized religion, based on authority of the ‘church’ and its hierarchy, with dogmas that can be clearly defined and evoked, and a cosmology that can be known, studied, written down and interpreted. Shamanism works as a generic term for those approaches toward religious life which are based on the idea of movement, changeability, without dogmatic knowledge, and without a stable, easily traceable cosmology” (Halemba 2003; 171).
mainstream does not see as genuinely religious. In this mainstream view, some religious movements such as vodou and practices such as putting holy water in one’s gas tank are described as religious but these aspects are not considered “good” or “true” religion in this particular understanding. Orsi details what the American mainstream thinks religion really is: “True religion is epistemologically and ethnically singular. It is rational, respectful of persons, noncoercive, mature, nonanthropomorphic, mystical as opposed to ritualistic, unmediated and agreeable to democracy, monotheistic, emotionally controlled, a reality of mind and spirit not body and matter” (Orsi 2005, 188). What this kind of religion does best is set firm and unbending boundaries—it has a clear definition and a well contained category. As Orsi states, what “good religion” does is strip away all the complex dynamism of religion—“its boundary-blurring and border-crossing propensities are eliminated” (Orsi 2005, 188). Orsi’s observations of what the American mainstream understands to be a “true” or “good” religion is important because Buddhism in the Altai is viewed in a similar way as true religion—Buddhism has a clear definition and a well contained category. It has no boundary-blurring and border-crossing propensities so characteristic of Shamanism and other practices in the Altai.

Buddhism’s institutional and homogeneous nature allows it to be thought of as a good religion by many Altaians. Many Altaians see Buddhism as more genuinely religious than Shamanism and other traditional religions which are more often called “traditions” or “world views” than religions (Khomushku 2007 and Tadina 2006). Like in the American mainstream concept of religion, Buddhism does not have those aspects of religion that are considered not genuinely religious such as trances and animal sacrifice, such aspects belong to Shamanism. Buddhism is a good religion because it has the power to exclude—to build up fix boundaries and vanquish all “boundary-blurring and border-crossing propensities.” Halemba echoes this point
and describes how Shamanism has a boundary between religion and non-religion (epitomized in the term tradition) that is always changing whereas Buddhism is uncontested and well defined. She posits, “While the practices and statements of shamans are always discussed and challenged, the lamas are considered to have access to indisputable knowledge” (Halemba 2006, 154). Therefore, Buddhism is seen as more curative to national identity.

In contrast to Buddhism, Shamanism would not be a good religion because “the Shamanic landscape relishes difference and the ability to change” (Halemba 2006, 137). Shamanism embodies the boundary-blurring and border-crossing good religion does not have. Buddhism, in contrast, does not have blurry boundaries and traversed borders. Its religious practices are predetermined and unquestioned. For example, Shamanism decides through discussion when to perform a ritual and what effect it will have whereas Buddhism already knows when and why to perform a certain ritual and what effect the performance will have. Like the American mainstream concept of religion, Buddhism to Altaians clearly defines what it is and what it is not. How useful such a religion is for state-like formations that attempt to do the exact same thing.

Before I begin to detail how religion is seen as both a cure and poison to national identity, it is important to locate what community these ideas stem from, and what Buddhism and traditional religions constitute in the Altai. Halemba locates these ideas to what she calls the Altaian Intellectuals. She states the Altaian Intellectuals are the people who consider themselves ethnically Altaian (or rather belonging to any of the ethnic groups that are labeled as ‘the

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41 She also describes among Telengit communities, “The lama is seen as a person who knows for sure—it is enough for him to open the book and give the answer. . . . From Telengit perspective the nama’s (lama’s) knowledge is not questionable” (Halemba 2006; 162).
42 See Halemba 2003 and 2006 for more details.
43 Halemba also states, “My argument is that the stress on unification and stabilization of images of spirits and religious dogmas accords with the main goals and structure of the national ideology” (Halemba 2006; 163).
Identities in Crisis

... and who take an active part in the public life of the Republic (Halemba 2003, 167).” Persons such as Vladimir Kydyev, Svetlana Tiukhteneva, and the Black Shaman certainly would fall in this community. Altaian Intellectuals hold a similar view on religion to the American mainstream; they perceive religion is something fixed without boundary-blurring or border-crossing propensities and hold a Durkheimian understanding of religion as the clue of society. This community’s concern is mainly over Altaian national unity and preservation and for them “religion has been seen as one of the possible ways of unifying the Altaians as a nation” (Halemba 2003, 170). Their understanding of the role religion plays in national identity is not unimportant or detached from the typical Altaian’s understanding for they are very connected and well known by the local people. Halemba reaffirms, “the Altaian Intellectuals are quite well known by people living in the countryside.” In addition, I was told by everyone I met how well Vladimir and Svetlana Kydyev were known around the Altai.

It is the Altaian Intellectuals that make the argument that Buddhism will cure the crisis of national identity, and on the contrary, see traditional concepts of religions such as Shamanism, a poison to it. However, on the ground, Buddhism is more complicated and less structured than Altaian Intellectuals perceive. The kind of Buddhism in the Altai is a form of northern Buddhism often called Lamaism. It consists of a mixture of Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism and local religious concepts. This form of Buddhism is headed by the Dalai Lama and, as the Black Shaman argues, is institutional in the fact it has a figure head and major religious center—Lhasa, Tibet. Zhukovskaya, however, illustrates that there is so much variation within Lamaism that the fourteenth Dalai Lama has taken to referring to Lamaism by its national varieties, such as Mongolian Lamaism, Buryatian Lamaism, et cetera. Lamaism is more complex than the Buddhism Altaian Intellectuals have in mind because it often takes on the local (shamanic)
rituals within its national variety (Zhukovskaya 2001). Likewise, Filatov argues within these national varieties of Northern Buddhism, intra-national diversity is tolerated. Filatov also mentions the fourteenth Dalai Lama recognized Ak Jang as a form of Altai-Buddhism in 1992 (Filatov 2001, 87). Buddhism on the ground is far more heterogeneous that Altaian Intellectuals perceive it.

Altaian traditional religion most often refers to Shamanism and the various Ak Jang movements historically and today. However, Altaian traditional concepts are best explained with the Altaian word *jang*. *Jang* means a variety of things—authority, faith, custom, law, principle canon, rules, and so forth (Halemba 2003, 168). The term basically describes anything of importance concerning faith, morality, tradition, identity, and more and is often used to describe certain phenomena (Halemba 2003; Kos’min 2006; Tadina 2006; Vinogradov 2003 and 2006). For example, *Sovet Jang* refers to Soviet authority whereas *Christian Jang* refers to the religion of Christianity. *Ak* in Altaian means white or milky meaning holy, hence, *Ak Jang* is called White Faith or Milky Faith. Ak Jang often refers to the Burkhanist movement, but some Altaians see *Ak Jang* simply means being a pure and holy Altaian and feel it has no relation to the early Burkhanist movement or the contemporary sects of Ak Jang (Halemba 2003, 169). *Kam Jang* or *Kamdan Jang* refers to Shamanism (Vinogradov 2002). Altaians also have *Altai Jang*, which basically refers to the *right* way of being Altaian (Halemba 2003; Kos’min 2006; Tadina 2006; Vinogradov 2003 and 2006). Kydyeva and Svetlana Tiukheneva both told me most of the Altai would consider themselves Altai Jang when it came to religion. It is apparent that traditional concepts of religion are complex. In referring to traditional religion I not only mean Shamanism and Ak Jang but also the way Altaians conceive of religion.
Using Orsi’s relational model, I aim to show that the promise Altaian Intellectuals see Buddhism holds for national identity is its ability to be recognized as a good religion on the global stage, or in other words its ability to adhere well with Western concepts of religion. From my conversations with Altaian Intellectuals, I will show what holds the power to make a religion a poison or a cure to national identity is its degree of fixed, institutional and homogeneous qualities—it’s compatibility with a Western concept of religion.

The Threat of Traditional Religion

The Black Shaman viewed his own religious tradition as dangerous to national identity. He saw no future in Shamanism and reasoned it was inadequate for building national stability because of its flexible, personal and heterogeneous nature. He stated, “Shamanism is for the individual, not the nation.” Furthermore, he worried over the lack of a fixed and grounded cosmology in these traditional religions and felt without a firm foundation the Altaian people would be susceptible to foreign religious conversion. He was concerned about other religions weakening Altaian identity and stability through proselytism and felt an Altaian religion that had educated people could potentially stop the conversions. He said, “Shamans are not learned people…I am not a scholar, a learned person, I cannot go out and convert like other religions do.” Thus, a religion that is adequate for bolstering national identity is one with educated religious specialists capable of spreading their faith such as Buddhism or Orthodoxy. Shamanism is inadequate because it does not have this capability: “Shamans are not learned people; learned people can teach the nation.” This statement illustrates Shamanism does not have the authoritative knowledge needed to work in state affairs.
The Black Shaman stressed the fact that Shamanism does not have a book and therefore cannot have learned religious figures to proselytize and preserve it. In this sense, the non-dogmatic and non-authoritative nature of Shamanism prevents it from strengthening national identity. He stated, “Orthodoxy survived, White Faith (Ak Jang) survived but my people (shamans) have not survived, for the spirits don’t allow us to change and enter another world.” Therefore the makeup of Orthodoxy and Ak Jang has authoritative knowledge that allows religious specialists to establish an institution whereas the nature of shamanic contestable knowledge prevents such a thing from taking place. Halemba affirms shamanic knowledge is most always contestable; I found this to be true when Kydyeva disagreed with the shaman’s prophecy that she would marry an Altaian (Halemba 2006, 162). Although a shaman himself, the Black Shaman felt the contestable and non-dogmatic shamanic knowledge stood in the way of authoritative and fixed knowledge critical in state affairs.44

Kydyev also expressed a lack of confidence in traditional concepts of religion. He was baffled by the lack of structure and authority of these religions and found them impossible for nation-building initiatives. He stated, “Traditional religion, Shamanism and Ak Jang, have no canons or authorities, so anyone can say anything and do anything. There is no [foundation]!”45 He gave an example of the confusion that stems from this lack of structure:

44 From what I could tell from the translation, the Black Shaman never mentioned making Shamanism more institutional and dogmatic; however, Halemba notes this phenomena is happening in Tuva: “Shamanism is currently trying to enter the political arena and compete with Buddhism within the same domain” (Halemba 2003; 174). This supports the argument that institutional religion is viewed (even by those outside the group of Altaian Intellectuals) as a cure to a fragmented national unity.
45 Kydyeva had originally translated this word as “basement.” I have taken the liberty of changing it to “foundation” for more clarity.
Aleksa Yeva Janna was the first person to have an interpretation of Ak Jang\textsuperscript{46} and the Shaman you visited a few days ago also has an interpretation. And yet there is another person who says it is not Buddhism at all. And a woman now says she’s a shaman . . . and there is a new young man who has his own view. . . . One can almost hear the desperation in his voice as he worries over his threatened nation and hopes to unify his people through an authentic, shared faith. The problem Kydyev finds with traditional concepts of religion is that all interpretations and meanings are considered equally valid; this resists religious formality and consistency. Kydyev believes these multiple interpretations and contestations threaten the Altai with greater splitting, because many of these interpretations have formed sects that claim to be the most authentic religion of the Altai.

Tiukieneva confirmed how traditional religion was too heterogeneous for a national religion. She described Ak Jang as non-dogmatic and non-authoritative: “[The nature of] Ak Jang is that it has no book; there’s no bible, no criteria. Ak Jang all depended on family preference.” Describing how Ak Jang is performed, “[All that happens is] the family gets together a minimum of four times a year to perform a ritual early in the morning. They take milk and smoke and walk around a pile of stones or fire. They feed the fire and feed the spirits. They ask for health. It happens really fast. There are no authorities.”\textsuperscript{47} Although she invoked how important the Ak Jang movement was to Altaian identity, she expressed it lacked the strength to unify the Altai as a state religion.

\textsuperscript{46} According to Halemba, the person who initiated the Ak Jang movement was Sergei Kynyev, an Altaian businessman (Halemba 2003; 175). Perhaps Kydyev is referring to someone in the early Burkhanist movement at the turn of the twentieth century.

\textsuperscript{47} Her description continued: “The ritual must be performed three to fourteen days within the growing moon. It need not be performed during the solstice or equinox. Just four times throughout the year perhaps one for each season but it can be performed more if needed. It is also performed when people travel, like when students go to another place to study. You should ask for thankfulness in only a growing moon, and they do it when someone is sick even in a waning moon.”
The Promise of Buddhism

In contrast to traditional religious beliefs, Buddhism is seen as a faith that is capable of unifying and stabilizing Altaian identity among Altaian Intellectuals. The Black Shaman stated, “The only faith that will save us is Buddhism—that’s the only way we will survive!” He talked hopefully about Buddhism in contrast to Shamanism as a strong institution capable of unifying Altaian identity and aiding national growth. Among Altaian Intellectuals, national growth is seen as a sign of a healthy nation; when comparing native populations in the surrounding Republics Kydyev expressed, “We dream about [national growth], being fifty percent, then one hundred percent, then being our own masters here.” Kydyeva and her father both told me verbatim during separate conversations, “Buddhism will help our nation grow.”

The Black Shaman, Svetlana Tiukhteneva and Vladimir Kydyev were all concerned about the threats of foreign religious proselytism and thought if the Altai had a strong national religion it would put an end to perpetrating foreign religions. Kydyev stated, “[Foreign] Buddhists look to the Altai as people to be proselytized too, yet if we were a World Religion it would be harder to proselytize us.” He thinks if the Altai had a state religion that remained in the parameters of a Western definition, then these institutional religions would not perceive the Altai as a space for religious proselytism. The Black Shaman stated that the many different (Protestant) Christian sects proselytizing in the Altai were sent by dark spirits to weaken the Altaian nation. “Black spirits have come into the Altai in the form of all sorts of sects and they all want to change the people from being Buddhist,” he explained. He believes that these different religions have an agenda to undermine Buddhism, the only force, in his view, that could unify the Altai. All of these informants feared their nation would become divided either by religious proselytism or federal incentives.
Kydyev hinted at his idea of a strong nation as I was about to leave from the interview. He discussed how Sweden celebrates the day of their defeat against the Russians because that battle (perhaps the Great Northern War) stopped the Swedish Empire from expanding and limited their state to one ethnicity—one nation. Russia’s biggest problem, he informed me, is that it is too big. He explained, “A state can only work if it is bound to one people, one nation.” In continuing his thought, I might add “one religion” to this list. Therefore to Kydyev, Buddhism is a cure to a splintering Altaian identity because it will help the Altai become a strong nation with a homogeneous population and religion.

Buddhism is valuable to Altaian Intellectuals and other nationalists because they believe it will bring the republic international recognition as an autonomous region. Kydyev feels a united Altaian nation needs a World Religion with which it can identify. He stated: “Altaian and Khakassian traditions are not included in any World Religions. Yakutsk and many other tribes are Orthodox and thus belong to a World Religion….after Perestroika [we] didn’t have a World Religion to go back to so our traditional religion is being resurrected.” Kydyev felt the Altai was not recognized as a legitimate nation after the collapse of the Soviet Union because unlike Yakutsk they lacked belonging to a globally recognized religious community.

This point is further illustrated in Halemba’s writing; she states: “There is also a strong recognition of the political advantages of Buddhism. It links the Altaians to the world of other Buddhist nations, especially neighboring Mongolia and Tuva. It would supposedly broaden the opportunities of support from abroad coming to the Republic” (Halemba 2003, 174). Having a large nation with communities extending beyond the national border is important to the Altaian Intellectuals’ idea of a strong nation. Halemba comments, “National leaders are keen on presenting Altaians as a big nation, with a socioeconomic organization and culture development
over centuries and with members living well beyond the borders of the Altai Republic and contemporary Russia” (Halemba in Donahoe 2008). Altaian Intellectuals think Buddhism will help the Altai gain recognition as a legitimate nation-state on the global stage because it would attach them to a larger international community. Their desire is to present the Altai as a nation equipped with a large population stretching outside the borders of the nation-state that all identify with a particular World Religion. Buddhism, to Altaian Intellectuals, is recognized as a good religion on the global stage—it is a religion taken seriously in state affairs.

The common thread in thinking about religion as a national unifying force and a force that will gain the recognition of a global community is that religion must appear as fixed, institutional and homogeneous; religion in this particular understanding must adhere well to Western concepts of religion. This is the reason why Buddhism is so appealing—it is thought of as fixed and institutional with uncontested dogma and knowledge in comparison to traditional concepts of religion. Furthermore, it is a World Religion, a religion recognized as on the global stage. Practiced on the ground, as I argued in Section One, Buddhism is more complex and overlapping; however, among the Altaian Intellectuals it is conceived of as free from these iniquities. Buddhism, to them, fits Western concepts of religion far more than Shamanism and is thus more politically expedient.

_Buddhism as an authentic Altaian religion_

The promise Altaian Intellectuals see in Buddhism with respect to other World Religions, is that it is not only an institutional religion that adheres well to a Western definition but it is also not a foreign religion. My informants worked to show me Buddhism was an authentic Altaian

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48 My suspicion is that this desire to appear as a legitimate nation-state is because Altaian Intellectuals want to show Federal authorities the Altai is capable of existing apart from the Russian Federation. Whether this is to gain greater rights and autonomy within the Federation or to separate from it is a topic for further investigation.
religion. The Black Shaman stressed that Buddhism has been in the Altai throughout its history. When I asked him if the Altai would someday be Buddhist he replied, “Buddhism is already here.” Vladimir Kydyev stressed Buddhism’s authenticity as an Altaian religion stating: “There were (Buddhist) Mandalas found here. Buddhism’s influence is even in the Altaian word hello, Kurdei.” When talking about Kydyev with Svetlana Tiukhteneva, she said, “Kydyeva’s dad says the Altai was Buddhist and will be Buddhist again.” Even the Buddhist Lama historicized Buddhism. I asked about Buddhism’s contemporary place in the Altai and he replied, “We are resurrecting what was once already here.” He saw Buddhism as indigenous to the Altai and can now be reclaimed after seventy years of Soviet repression.50

Halemba argues there is a concern among Altaian Intellectuals that Buddhism is not an authentic Altaian religion and she details how they have put an effort into showing its historical presents in the Altai; she states, “There is a general tendency towards underlying the ancient roots of Altaian Buddhism and presenting the Altaians as essentially a nation of practicing Buddhists, though not necessarily recognizing it themselves” (Halemba 2003, 174). Likewise, at a conference in Gorno-Altaisk in 1998, there was a decision among Altaian Intellectuals to acknowledge Buddhism as an ancient Altaian Religion (Halemba 2003, 173). In my opinion, part of the Black Shaman’s claim that Shamanism and Buddhism are the same is to give authenticity to Buddhism as a native Altaian religion. He defended how they were once one religion before the two were split distinctly into Buddhism and Shamanism by the border

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49 The translation became difficult here. Either the Altaian word for hello is the word for a big Buddhist drum or it refers to an Indian (Buddhist) goddess of Fertility.

50 Although the Altaian Intellectuals have an influential view in the Altai, some communities of Altaians see Buddhism as less authentic than traditional concepts of religion. Halemba discusses the many conflicts over Buddhism’s increasing presence in the Altai, as discussed in Section Two. She elicits how shortly after the construction of the first Buddhist stupa built in the Altai, it was vandalized by the local community (Halemba 2006; 33). See Halemba 2006 chapters three and five for more details.
between Mongolia and Russia—Buddhism became a Mongolian religion and Shamanism became an Altaian religion. To these informants, Buddhism offers a *cure* to Altaian identity because it is an authentic Altaian religion that can unify the Republic and be recognized in a global community.

*Burkhanism’s Curious Position in the National Debate*

Burkhanism occupies a curious position as both *cure* and *poison* to national identity. Burkhanism is seen as a poison to national identity in some communities such as the Altaian Intellectuals but to others such as the Diargychi it is seen as a cure. I argue the communities that understand Burkhanism to be a cure, do so for the same reasons Altaian Intellectuals understand Buddhism as a cure. Therefore, Burkhanism is seen as a cure to some communities because of its ability to adhere well with a Western concept of religion. Burkhanism had elements of forming and institutional religion in its past but today it is less unified and more heterogeneous. Hence, Altaian Intellectuals focus on the contemporary heterogeneous aspect of Burkhanism and thus see it as a *poison* whereas the Burkhanist groups focus on the historic aspects of Burkhanism that were institutional and see it as a *cure*.

Many of my informants, as well as several articles on the early Burkhanist movement, described the movement as an attempt to become an institutional state religion. Kydyev echoed this statement: “What happened in 1904, during the original religious movement that gave birth to Ak Jang, was an attempt to get into a World Religion category.” He continued: “Ak Jang started in 1904 because of the land privatization acts. At that time they knew they needed a religion to amplify them and they wanted it to be Buddhism because of their close relations with Mongolia, but to hurry it up it took on some local concepts.” Thus, to Kydyev, Burkhanism in
its early years became more institutional because it was based on Buddhism, for the same reason he feels the Republic should adopted Buddhism today. Burkhanism helped the Altai during the crisis of 1904 because it was more in line with what Orsi observes the American mainstream would see as a “true religion.” Tiukieneva also expressed this, “The USSR didn’t let Ak Jang institutionalize, which was the direction it was heading, but it still survived somewhat during the Soviet period.” Thus, if history would have been different Ak Jang would have become a legitimate or good religion recognized on the global stage (perhaps even as a World Religion) and there would be no need to promote Buddhism today.

Several scholars also see the early Burkhanist movement as an attempt to become an institutionalized state religion. Halemba affirms this argument, “In Burkhanism there was an attempt to present Altaian beliefs as a system, backed by the authority of the messenger of Oirot-Khan. Hence, in addition to detailed rituals, there was also a structural similarity to Buddhism as a religious system based on a certain kind of authority” (Halemba 2006, 31). Several scholars comment about the institutional aspects of the early Ak Jang movement. Vinogradov describes the early years of the Burkhanism movement from 1906 to the 1930s as the movement’s formative years; during this period there was a development of a “priesthood and elaborate system of rituals and beliefs” (Vinogradov 2003, 27).

Other scholars point to the dogmatic and institutional structure of early Burkhanism. Kos’min and Halemba describe how in its early years Burkhanism became more institutional with a priesthood, called the Jarlykchi, that had a figurehead, Tyryi Agemchi (Kos’min 2006, 55 and 60 and Halemba 2006, 31). The movement even had a series of commandments like in
Christianity. Halemba states how this hierarchy and unification of practices were practiced, “Twice a year [Tyryi] would gather all the Jarlykchi of the Altai (who were also divided into rank) and explained to them the details of rituals” (Halemba 2006, 31). She also describes how this movement fits well with the American mainstream’s notion of a “true” or “good” religion: “It is important to note that Burkhanism had a tendency towards monotheism, institutionalization, unification of practices and a hierarchical structure” (Halemba 2006, 31).

She contrasts this new structure to Shamanism:

The hierarchy of Jarlykchi was established, which constituted relations between Jarlykchi in a very different way from those of between shamans (kamdar). Shamans could be considered more or less powerful, but there was no clear hierarchy between them in terms of dependency. However, there was such a hierarchical structure among Jarlykchi. (Halameba 2006, 31)

Halemba notes the distinct change in how religious authority was presented in Burkhanism. This change can be seen as an attempt to appeal more to the Western concepts of religion that has a fixed, hierarchical and institutional structure, a concept that works well with nation-state formations.

Znamenski also details how the movement became more like a western category of religion (1999 and 2005). He describes how the leaders of the movement envisioned Burkhanist as a new ideology for Altaians in contrast to the contestable knowledge of the Shamans. He states, “Burkhanism represents an example of such a cultural construction that emphasized the cultural unity of the nomads” (Znamenski 1999, 237). It is apparent how the early Burkhanist movement had a desire to become more like a “true religion” recognized by a Russian and Western audience and better adapt for national identity.

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51 Balzer depicts all the commandments of Ak Jang in an appendix to a series of articles on Ak Jang publish in her journal Archaeology and Anthropology of Eurasia in 2006.
Andrei Vinogradov, a scholar of religion in the Altai, argues that Ak Jang was used by the Oirot Federation as a state ideology. The Oirot Federation was founded in 1918 by Charles Gorkin and the Karakorum Committee. During the Russian Civil War, the area of Turkic Siberia which includes today’s Republics of Tuva, Khakassia, Altai and parts of Northwestern Mongolia, declared itself independent from the newly forming Soviet Russia. The Federation was dismantled in 1921, and the Oirot Federation became absorbed back into the USSR (Vinogradov 2003, 24 and Znamenski 2005, 44-47). As Vinogradov explains, the Oirot Federation was founded on traditional concepts of national unity:

It is evident that the pattern of the Karakorum Committee organization and function exactly followed the traditional Turkic-Mongolian pattern of “state-consolidation” in that the delegates to the Committee belonged to the ethnic groups, which earlier, in the Dzungarian period, were the “oirots”—a federation of allies, led by a kagan . . . . Very significantly, the function and authority of the “imperial religion,” which traditionally sanctified such consolidations and especially validated the election of a kagan, was taken over by Ak Jang at the meeting of the Karakorum Committee. (Vinogradov 2003, 24)

Thus, during the period of the Oirot federation, Burkhanism or Ak Jang served as a state religion. Kydyev also views the period of the Oirot Federation as a model for Altaian nationalism—this Oirot federation was an Altaian nation with an Altaian “imperial religion.” As seen here, Ak Jang in its early years supported the national agenda of the Oirot federation because of its institutional qualities.

Burkhanism is not only seen as a cure for national identity because of its historical function as such but because it is also a religion that eliminates the boundary-blurring not seen in “good religion.” As mentioned in Section One, behaviors such as putting holy water in one’s gas tank blurs the boundary of established good religions such as Catholicism; in the eyes of good

52 Tuva is an exception to this as it joined the USSR in 1944.
53 Vinogradov gives an elaborate footnote with further detail, Vinogradov 2003; 23 footnote 44.
religion the religious behavior of sacrifice is perhaps the most perverse boundary-blurring behavior. When describing why the early Burkhanist movement came about, many informants told me it was to stop “Bloody Shamanism.” Tiukieneva stated, “Ak Jang helped defend the Altai from Bloody Shamanism.” Likewise the Black Shaman stated: “[The Shaman] would find a girl up to twelve years old, put her in the taiga and it would take her. Then the taiga would take care of the people. Milky faith came about to stop this. They wanted to make Shamanism stop human sacrifices.” Taking into account Orsi’s observations of what mainstream America sees good religion is not, what these statements suggests is that the Burkhanist movement worked to cull the qualities of Shamanism that were not like “good religion.” Tiukieneva and the Black Shaman portrayed that the early Burkhanist founders were already thinking of religion in the same ways Orsi sees religion viewed in the mainstream in America. Bloody sacrifice is not a part of Burkhanist’s understanding of good religion because of its visceral and bodily aspects, its lack of “respect for persons” and “emotional control”—in other words; basically because it is uncivilized (Orsi 2005, 188).

The Black Shaman also reflected how Shamanism is considered “uncivilized” in contrast to Buddhism in a very powerful statement, “Let them prove there was no Buddhism here, let them prove we were wild men like Western scholars say!” The Black Shaman shares with the early Burkhanist movement, the belief that Buddhism represents the Altai as civil and not “primitive” or “wild.” The early Burkhanist movement over a century ago did not tolerate the uncivilized aspects of Shamanism because it blurred the boundary of they saw was “good religion.” Hence, some communities find Burkhanism suitable for a state religion because in the past, like Buddhism, it eliminated all “boundary-blurring and border-crossing” propensities.

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54 This is simply a pejorative way of referring to Shamanism. It accentuates the visceral sacrifices common among Shamanism over hundred years ago.
Some groups such as the Diargychi argue that Ak Jang is more authentic to the Altai than Buddhism. Kydyev was aware of this argument and detailed why it was insufficient to national progress. He explained: “Ak Jangists want to stick to being Altaian; they state, ‘God elected us and we want to stick to our authentic faith.’ They feel if we pay attention to our authentic religion/tradition (Ak Jang) then God will reward us.” He quoted their thoughts about Buddhism, “These radicals have said ‘Those who support Buddhism sell themselves to the enemies of the Altai!’” Despite their justification as legitimately Altaian, Kydyev saw no practicality in their movement for they lack the ability to find a commonality among Altaians. He stated, “They have their own version of Ak Jang and Altai Jang,” a version not shared by the entire Republic.\footnote{Kydyev continued to talk about the present state of the movement. He commented: “These radicals aren’t that radical anymore. They got tired. Furthermore it became a sect; they all became rude and unhappy with life for nothing was progressing and people didn’t except them.” He affirmed their desire to be truly an authentic Altaian religion made them so narrowed they became a sect and now threaten the Altai with fractioning.}

Although in its early years Burkhanism was more institutional, today there are multiple movements all of which are diverse and lack the structure of an institutional religion. Tiukieneva explained Ak Jang was able to survive through the persecution of the Soviet Union by becoming very personal and based on family preference. The faith became less fixed, institutional, and dogmatic. Because today Ak Jang no longer adheres well with the qualities of “good religion,” Altaian Intellectuals like Kydyev see it as unsuitable for supporting Altaian identity and find it threatening to national stability. The Black Shaman was afraid the Republic would be divided and weakened by the many “sects” of Ak Jang that sprung up in the early 1990s. In his view “Black spirits have come into the Altai in the form of all sorts of sects and they all want to change the people from being Buddhist.” Burkhanism’s non-dogmatic, ever changing and multiple forms, distracts people from going to Buddhism for they see Burkhanism as more
authentic. The Black Shaman summarizes the Altaian Intellectual argument in an interesting religious prose:

Some people don’t want Buddhism because the black spirits come in from these sects and other religions but Buddhism will be here because there are already many names of streets and places that are Buddhists or Indian. Those that do not want to stay will leave; they can’t handle the realm of Buddhism. [Buddhism] is here to stay. All those non-Buddhists will be destroyed and many already have been. All those non-Buddhists will disappear into nothingness.

His statement clarifies the historic authenticity of Buddhism, the threat of a diverse religious identity and the promise of a strong nation that will eliminate all other opposition—all this he articulates in his religious understanding of black spirits.

The Altai is rife with conflict in both the spiritual and mundane worlds. In the eyes of Altaian Intellectuals, an ailing national identity is in need of a religion to give stability and unity. However, certain religions can also create the very instability and division so feared by this intelligentsia. Only a certain kind of religion can offer a cure to national illness—an institutional religion. The Altaian Intellectuals desire an institutional religion that retains firm and decided boundaries as Orsi describes, because they feel Altaian Identity needs firm and decided boundaries.

This need for an institutional religion has led Altaian Intellectuals to find promise in Buddhism which is recognized on the global stage. Buddhism offers more potential to unifying national identity in contrast to the ever changing, flexible and non-dogmatic character of Shamanism and other traditional religions. Compared to these traditional religions however, Buddhism appears less authentic to many local Altaians and thus much work has been put into making Buddhism historicized in the Altai as an authentic religion.
Burkhanism offers a temptation to some communities as a national religion because of its historical origin as a state religion, but to Altaian Intellectuals it is understood as inadequate for nation-building today because of its heterogeneity which threatens national unity with greater splintering. Although religious behavior is not confined by its categorical definition, Altaian Intellectuals believe adopting an institutional religion has great implications for their national identity. In Orsi’s words, they believe it can forge a more politically expedient relationship between heaven and earth. I detail in my concluding section what such a relationship could entail—the paradox of preserving Altaian culture and autonomy through an institutional religion.

Conclusion: The Paradox

Tsing discusses how west of the the Meratus Mountains, the Banjar consider themselves more progressive and civilized than their wild uncivilized neighbors, the Dayaks—a term for several groups of people that surround the Banjar on the Hulu Sungai peninsula, on the island of Borneo, Indonesia. She states, “To Hulu Sungai Banjar, the contrast between civilization and the wild begins with what one might call religion—Banjar are Muslims, Dayaks are not” (Tsing 1993, 181). Banjar retain their status as civilized and mainstream nationalists Indonesians because they participate in a World Religion in contrast to their shamanic counterparts (Song 2005, 957). However, because the Banjar share the same space as their wild uncivilized counterparts in southeast Kalimantan, they are still considered backward “primitives” like the Dayaks by mainstream Indonesians despite their belonging to a World Religion. Interestingly enough, often Banjar seek healers from Dayak shamans to heal themselves of their own primitiveness. Dayak shamans are known to be the best curers (Tsing 1993, 180 and Song 2005,
The Banjar imagine the primitive aspects of their identity to be a “splinter” or *suligih* that inhibits them from becoming a full mainstream Muslim Indonesian. As argued by Song, Dayak shaman are most effective at pulling out this splinter and restoring the Banjar to his/her civilized, mainstream identity. Paradoxically, it is a “primitive” Dayak shaman that has the most propensities to return the Banjar to a mainstream Muslim Indonesian.

I find the same paradox in the Altai but in reverse. While in the case of the Banjar, mainstream national identity is restored by a marginal Dayak shaman; in that of the Altai, Altaian identity is restored from the mainstream (Western and Russian identity) by a mainstream concept of religion. The Banjar want to protect their identity from a marginal, “primitive” identity and find a cure that comes from a marginal shaman most effective whereas the Altaian Intellectuals want to protect their Altaian Identity from the mainstream Western and Russian identity and find a cure in a Western concept of religion most expedient. Song describes how this paradoxical process works, “To put in the terms of ethnic relations, it is as if the authentic Banjar self can be restored via a dosage of its [rejection]” (Song 2005, 957). The same is true in the Altai—Altaian identity is restored by a dose of what it rejects—the mainstream. The threats my informants saw to their national identity came from the West, namely Russia; paradoxically however, the cure to their ailing identity was a Western concept of religion. In other words, Altaian Intellectuals believe their identity can be cured by what made it sick in the first place.

As discussed in Section Two, the Altai is faced with many threats that the Altaian Intellectuals believe can be solved by an institutionalized religion capable of unifying the Republic. As discussed in Section Three, Buddhism is seen as the cure to national instability it is an institutional and “World” religion authentic to the Altai whereas Shamanism and traditional concepts of religion are poisonous because they weaken the nation with greater division. What
Identities in Crisis

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can cure Altaian identity from disappearing into Russian and Western culture is fixed and defined categories of religion such as Buddhism that can fortify the boundary of Altaian identity. As Orsi argues, in the mainstream American view, what true or good religion does best is eliminate all border-crossings and boundary-blurring—a “real” religion like Buddhism will help restore the boundary of Altaian identity from its previous border-crossing state (Orsi 2005, 188).

However, as seen in Section One, religions in the Altai are overlapping, intermingling and ever changing. As seen with the Black Shaman, the categories of Buddhism and Shamanism do not inhibit him from mixing the two. Religion in the Altai is not thought about in institutionalized, fixed, and stable terms—in other words, religion with no boundary-blurring behaviors. As demonstrated through the people I met with, Altaian concepts of religion are more complex in comparison to Western concepts that are more ideological and institutional, and hence their very nature appears messy and confusing in comparison to Western concepts. Halemba describes this flexible and ever changing understanding of religion as a “process of understanding” in contrast to “the content of knowledge” characteristic of institutional and defined religion (Halemba 2006, 194). Although she notes both epistemologies are evident in the Altai, a more flexible and “non-ideological” understanding of religion is most common and she states “national ideology is based on a paradigmatic shift…mobility is to be replaced by stability” (Halemba 2006, 194-5).

Thus, Altaian Intellectuals, in attempting to preserve their

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56 Halemba’s full quote is powerful but too large to include in the text. She writes: “If we accept that most of the everyday practices in Telengit life are based on the ideas of movement and flexibility, this focus of national ideology on stability and content would support Bloch’s idea that the social establishment of ideology requires ‘a systemic and furious assault on non-ideological cognition’ (Bloch 1985, 1989: 129; as quoted in Humphrey 1996: 142). I am not sure that I would call the influence of national ideology a ‘furious assault’, but it does seem that national ideology is based on a paradigmatic shift. Mobility is to be replaced by stability, the spirits as indices by the clear-cut hierarchy of spiritual beings, and the changeable land by the tamed and subjugated homeland.” (Halemba 2006, 194-5)
culture and national identity through Western concepts of religion may end up changing the very way Altaians understand religion, and even their own identity as Altaian—this is the paradox.

Filatov illustrates my point almost exactly: “It is not out of the question that the more resolute the political effort that the nationalist exert toward the founding of an ‘Altai faith,’ the more quickly they will be compelled to resort to borrowings from neighbors. And the more quickly they will Russify, incorporating . . . elements of modern-day Russian mass culture” (Filatov 2001, 90). Therefore, in borrowing Western concepts of religion to preserve their culture and defend themselves from Western influences, Altaian Intellectuals have shown these influences are more deeply engrained than at first thought. The crisis of Altaian identity is found in the very way in they wish to preserve it.

Unfortunately for Altaians, the promotion of this Western concept of religion shows how Russification and Western acculturation or the “colonization of consciousness” is already well on its way (Comaroff 1992 in Halemba 2006, 191). Halemba shows how the creation of the Uch Engmek nature reserve park in central Altai was done by Altaians in hopes of protecting their land and by extension their identity from Federal and international (tourist) affairs. Despite their efforts to protect themselves, this process shows Altaians have already seceded to these colonizing forces in using their tools and terminology. By creating a park, Altaian ideas of the inseparability of land and personhood are already being undone. Halemba uses the Comaroffs’ study of missionary efforts in Africa to explain:

The turning point of the colonization process can be located at the moment when the local people are drawn into conversations with missionaries. Although, they do not adopt Christian notions or beliefs, they nevertheless learn to argue their point of view in a way understandable to the missionaries. Although, at the first sight, they argue quite successfully . . . the Comaroffs claim that the very fact of engaging in an argument structured according to the colonizers’ rules, shows that
the processes of colonization of consciousness are well on their way. (Halemba 2006, 191)

Thus, although Altaian Intellectuals seek to protect the Altai from Russian and Western influences, the fact that they are already engaging in the terminology of the West by using Western concepts of religion shows a high level of colonization has already happened.

Similarly, Krader describes the early Burkhanist movement as a nativistic movement—a movement characteristic of appearing deep into the colonial process and showing signs of the “colonization of consciousness.” He states, “[In Burkhanism] the Messianic element is unmistakable. The acculturative impact of Western (chiefly Tsarist Russian) culture on the Altai Turks is seen in the presence of undoubtedly Christian motifs in the movement, despite the rejection of the West by these Turks” (Krader 1956, 283). Even over a hundred years ago, with the founding of Burkhanism, signs of the “colonization of consciousness” were evident. This shows how deeply engrained and complicated and how very sad the issues of colonization are—even the very language and tools Altaians use to defend themselves stem from Russian and Western origins. I am arguing this process is colonial because Altaians are interested in adopting an institutional religion not to navigate in a globalized world but to defend their culture from assimilation into a Russian culture. If there was not the pressure from the Russian Federation or Western international tourist agencies, there would not be a desire for a state-religion.

Thinking of religion as institutional is Western because the category of religion was invented in the Western academy. In her book, The Invention of World Religions, Tomoko Masuzawa shows how the concept of World Religions was invented based on a Protestant Christian model in the European academy. Buddhism in particular fit the model of World Religions well. Masuzawa illustrates through historical examples how Buddhism was forged as
a singular ideology from its heterogeneous practices that appeared across Asia by European
philologists (Masuzawa 2005, 126). It is of little surprise that this ideology took on a Protestant
Christian outline. Buddhism had a “hierarchy of significance” with canonical texts being the
most significant and local practices and beliefs the least (Masuzawa 2005, 127). Like Protestant
Christianity it was a rejection of another religion—the “historical Buddha challenged and
ultimately rejected Vedic authority—just as Luther had rejected papal authority” (Masuzawa
2005, 134). Similarly, “Buddhism was a religion born of a nation, but [rose] above it”
(Masuzawa 2005, 137). In short, Buddhism easily became a World Religion because it fit well
with the Protestant Christian model of what a religion should constitute. This shows how
institutional and World Religions such as Buddhism stem from a logic rife with Western
concepts. The Buddhism the Altaian Intellectuals want to claim for the Altai is not the
Buddhism that was historically practiced or even practiced today, but a Buddhism that is based
on a Protestant Christian outline.

In contrast to Western concepts of religion, Altaian religious concepts can be seen as a
“process of understanding” that is non-ideological, non-institutional and non-defined. Despite
how heterogeneous and diverse Shamanism and other traditional religions are in the Altai, there
is something similar about all these aspects that overlap, confuse and blur boundaries. They are
similar in the fact they all promise things can be otherwise. As Halemba quotes Bloch, they are
all similar in their “non-ideological cognition,” their impossibility to unify and stabilize
(Halemba 2006, 194). Borders can be crossed, boundaries can be blurred, and two religions can
be practiced at the same time so long as the possibility for change is always taken for granted.

Imagine a scale. Without weights, the scale is loose and wiggles around in constant
motion. It cannot be steadied or find a fixed location to settle; however, it is always balanced.
When a weight is applied to the scale, it becomes sturdy, weighted down to one location. It no longer wiggles or moves around. However, it is imbalanced precisely because of its sturdiness. The empty scale is even whereas the weighted scale is always uneven and weighed against a standard. Using the scale as a metaphor, traditional concepts of religion such as Shamanism and Altai Jang appear like an un-weighted scale. Their understandings of religion are flexible and mobile where there is always the possibility things could be otherwise. Likewise, an un-weighted scale is not measured against external Western standards like World Religions or good religions. Western concepts of religion are like a weighted scale. They are stable, fixed and sturdy.

Again we return to Orsi’s relational model. Looking at religion in terms of relationships between heaven and earth instead of focusing on the content of a definition or category or in Halemba’s language, looking at religion as a “process of understanding” instead of the “content of knowledge” can account for more of what religion actually does on the ground. Studying religion by the content of a category such as Buddhism or Orthodoxy misses elements such as the Black Shaman’s mixed practice and Orthodox pilgrimages to Shamanic sights. Studying religion as an un-weighted scale opens up the possibility that things can always be otherwise. In this view, boundary-blurring is taken for granted, a shaman can be a Buddhist, and Orthodox pilgrims can go to shamanic sites without conflict. Studying religion in this view can account for more of the inconsistencies and oddities that occur when looking at categories and definitions of religion. Furthermore, this view also takes seriously the reality of these categories and the effects they have in the world. Most importantly, studying religion as an un-weighted scale does not carry the assumptions or judgments that are carried in categories and definitions of religion such as “World Religions” and “good religions.”
Both epistemologies for looking at religion exist in the Altai. The question remains to be asked what would happen if the Altai Republic did somehow adopt a “World Religion” that could eliminate the overlapping, border-crossing and boundary-blurring that is seen as threatening to Altaian unity? What if religion no longer overlapped in the Altai? What then might religion look like? What then would happen to traditional concepts of Altaian religion? The Altaian Intellectuals foresee the Altai would become globally recognized as a Buddhist nation such as Tuva, in need of liberation or greater autonomy within the Russian Federation. However, how might religion look on the ground if Buddhism became the state-religion of the Altai? My guess is that there would still be a considerable overlap between an institutionalized Buddhism and traditional concepts of religion such as Shamanism and Ak Jang. Not much would change initially except the fact that Altaians might, if pressed by a foreigner or government official, claim Buddhism as their faith. Eventually however, I believe a state-sponsored Buddhism would purge out any elements of religion that conflicted with the notion of a good religion and the logic of an empty scale would be extinguished.

My goal is not to predict the religious future of the Altai but to show how complicated and culturally dependent religious thought is and how religion could be thought of otherwise. What is important to learn from this situation in the Altai is that universal categories of religion—be it “World Religions” or “good religions”—do not interact among cultures universally. Rather, there are important lessons to be learned from what local concepts of religion have to offer. What does a concept of religion that universally promises things can be otherwise entail? What does a “process of understanding” and the logic of an empty scale allow for? Like my informants’ religious descriptions of the threats to Altaian identity, does this concept of religion capture life on the ground more accurately? If this concept of religion in
which everything has the possibility to be otherwise was adopted as a means for studying religious phenomena could the discipline of Religious Studies also capture quotidian life with an element of clarity missed by strict definitions and categories of religion?

In this paper I have shown that categories of religion are always more complex than they claim to be. These complexities do not always line up with the universal category which they prescribe, but this does not make these practices go away; these overlapping and messy practices are real and happening all the time. What all the complexities in religion are showing in the Altai is that religious behavior is never fully accounted for or categorized despite how specific and detailed their definitions are. Categories of religion do not limit religious beliefs, practices or behavior. Perhaps this is the value in thinking about religion “loose-endedly” or as an un-weighted scale; a non-defined and non-categorized religion, or as Orsi states, in looking at its “messiness and multiplicities” (Orsi 2005, 169).57 The most valuable lesson to be learned from the Altai, or rather Wonderland, is yet another paradox—as the definition of religion becomes more defined, the less religious it becomes.

57 Jonathan Z. Smith also discusses such an approach to religion, calling it a hotch-podge approach (Smith 1982; 18).
Images

Image One: The Black Shaman’s small cabin, Gorno-Altaisk.
Image Two: Buddhist Temple, Gorno-Altaisk.
Image Three: Ak Burkhan, the Master Spirit of the Altai, appears on the wall of the Buddhist Temple, Gorno-Altaisk.
Image Four: Map of the Altai Republic; note the valuable border with China. This map was taken from WaytoRussia.net.
Image Five: I took this picture in the Gorno-Altaiisk library; I included it to better show the regions of the Altai.
Image Six: Gorno-Altaisk, the capital of the Altai Republic, taken from a nearby mountain.
Image Seven: The emblem and flag of both the Russian Federation (above) and the Altai Republic (below). This picture was taken on the Center Square in Gorno-Altaisk. The emblems appeared on a plaque dedicated to significant people in the Altai.
Works Cited

(accessed Dec. 08, 2010).


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