

BOOK REVIEW

Languages of Islam and Christianity in Post-Soviet Russia by Gulnaz Sibgatullina, Brill, 2020, 220 pp., €126.00 (e-book, hardcover), ISBN 9789004426450, ISBN 9789004426443.

“Translation is never neutral,” Gulnaz Sibgatullina (13) notes in the introduction of this book that explores Russian and Tatar Islamic and Orthodox Christian rhetoric as well as the relationship between religious language and political realities in Russia. Wisely, Sibgatullina does not assess what the correct translation is but scrutinizes how different choices of words are used to persuade the audience, create identities, and make theological interpretations, and observes what they convey about the religious and political underpinnings of the author.

The book begins with two introductory chapters that explain the research design and map the main groupings in Orthodox Christianity and Tatar Islam in Russia. The analysis is divided into two parts that address the Russian language of Islam and the Tatar language of Christianity through selected cases. Many of the chapters or versions of them have previously been published as articles, but the structure of the book is balanced and there is not much repetition. The last chapter of the second part, which focuses on the translations of the New Testament, operates on a more detailed level than the previous ones in the book. However, sociolinguists studying the post-Soviet context will undoubtedly find Sibgatullina’s meticulous analysis of Russian, Arabic, Tatar and Kräshen terminology useful. Not only do the selected cases offer intriguing viewpoints on questions of translation, but they also nicely cover major trends in post-Soviet Muslim-Orthodox relations.

In the Russian mainstream discourse on religion, Sibgatullina argues, the main gatekeepers are the state, the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), and the Islamic Spiritual Directorates or Muftiates, the latter of these playing a subordinate role. Sibgatullina notes that the representatives of the state-sanctioned Muftiates often seem to target their speeches more at the political elites than at ordinary believers. For example, the Chairman of the Russian Council of Muftis, Ravil’ Gainutdin, regularly uses Russian and Orthodox expressions instead of Islamic terms derived from the Arabic or Persian languages. With these kinds of linguistic choices, Sibgatullina argues, he aims to create an air of familiarity and Russianness for the Islam his Muftiates represent. As is typical of Russian Muftis, Gainutdin’s speeches and writings also follow the political ideology of the Kremlin, emphasizing traditionalism, nationalism, and conservatism.

Though Islam in Russia comprises myriads of different Islamic traditions and competing organizations, Gainutdin — like many other Russian Islamic leaders — aims to bolster the position of his Muftiates as an equivalent of the ROC. There have been several attempts to create some unifying framework for what “Russian Islam” is and an institutional structure that would resemble the ROC more. However, such attempts regularly fail because of the diversity of Islam in Russia and because they are based on very non-Islamic traditions. Similar processes have also been noted in Europe and, as in that area, Sibgatullina argues that the attempts at the “churchification” of Islam usually lead to deepening the internal divisions.

The idea that one’s ethnicity determines one’s religion is deeply rooted in Russian thinking. This societal norm has been challenged by ethnic Russians who have converted to Islam. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these converts have been painted as a major social and security threat in Russian public discussions as the intriguing case of the National Organization of Russian Muslims (NORM) demonstrates. Some of the founders of this organization had previously been active in right-wing ultra-nationalist circles. However, it can be suggested that the crackdown on NORM was largely due to its support for the opposition that demanded fair elections in 2011–2012. An alternative route was

taken by Viacheslav Polosin, now one of the most influential Islamic leaders who was an Orthodox priest before his conversion. At the beginning of the 2000s, he collaborated with NORM and participated in the peculiar theological debates about the true nature of God and his teachings between the representatives of Orthodox Christianity and Islam. Sibgatullina analyzes the changes in Polosin's stance as he began to distance himself from NORM and refrain from criticism of Orthodox Christianity, ending as a firm supporter and guardian of "traditional Islam" and Kremlin politics.

Though Sibgatullina does not discuss Russian colonialism or debates on it at length, her book makes an original contribution to these as well. One of the most fascinating insights of the book is Sibgatullina's analysis of the imperialist and colonialist traits in the thinking of ethnic Russian Muslims. For example, NORM differentiated itself from Russian ethnic Muslims who they scorned for broken Russian and for having corrupted the true Islam with their own ethnic non-Islamic traditions. Their Islam was portrayed as intolerant, patriarchal, and undemocratic. It was juxtaposed with the pure Islam that NORM claimed to crystallize the true Russian values of rationality, freedom, and moderation. Thus, Sibgatullina argues that NORM exemplified a case of "Islamophobia among Muslims" (173).

The second part of the book, which focuses on Christianity, begins with the case of Daniil Sysoev, who was known for his fierce Orthodox missionary work among Muslims and who was murdered by an unknown assassin in 2009. As Sibgatullina points out, the ROC often uses marginal ultra-conservative groupings as "trial balloons" (28), but it seems that the activity of Sysoev, whose teachings diverged from the Church line, for example, in his condemnation of all kinds of nationalism, also posed a genuine challenge to the ROC and pressured it to accept more aggressive forms of missionary work. At the same time, this change is in line with and reflects the growing influence and confidence of the ROC in demonstrating its hegemony at the expense of minority religions.

Religious and minority politics are often inseparably intertwined in Russia. A good example of this is the case of the Kräshens, Orthodox Tatars. There are ongoing debates on the date and methods of their conversion as well as on whether they are a distinct ethnic group and Kräshen is a language or just a dialect of the Tatar language. The various stances on these questions often boil down to the dilemma of being a sizable enough minority to defend one's interests and the threat of being assimilated into the majority, whether Tatars or Orthodox Christians. Sibgatullina's analysis sheds light not only on the strategies of the different actors but also on the changes in Soviet and post-Soviet national policies. It also exemplifies her thesis on how language has the capacity to both unify and divide.

In the conclusions, Sibgatullina argues that in the current political realities of Russia, the ROC and the Muftiates are coming closer together on many levels. They are relying on the state and the model of governance that prefers established, centralized institutions as well as the "traditionalist paradigm." The status that these policies grant to the ROC and the Muftiates protects them against the challenges posed by their competitors. To secure the support of the political elites, both the ROC and the major Muftiates employ similar rhetoric that juxtaposes Russian traditions with the "pernicious" West and the radical Islam from the Middle East. At the same time, the Islamic actors must cope with the narrowing limits of religious expression for minority religions. As Sibgatullina astutely points out, in religious policies, traditionalism is the yardstick for good religiosity and the state and the ROC "the main referees" (168). Consequently, Sibgatullina poses the important question of whether it is possible to be both a "good Russian" and a "good Muslim" under the circumstances where, on the one hand, the state puts pressure on Islamic organizations to adopt non-Islamic standards and structures and, on the other hand, supports the ethnicization of Islam (103).

This book is an invaluable source for anyone interested in Islam and Tatars in post-Soviet Russia but undoubtedly all scholars of religion in the area will find Sibgatullina's analysis an important contribution to the discussions about the governance of religion in post-Soviet Russia.

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