

Research impact: making a difference

Reinventing ways to study religion across the former Soviet bloc

A new wave of academics from the former Soviet Union has been introduced to contemporary, critical ways to study religious belief

What was the problem?

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, there was a rise in the practice of both Christianity and Islam across the former Soviet Union.

While religion and nationalism became tightly interconnected, foreign missionaries flocked to the area to try and convert inhabitants.

University departments were still led by academics from the 'scientific atheist' tradition, who viewed people of faith as 'backward' and religion as dangerous. This situation stifled debate on religious dynamics in the region just at a period when they were in need of robust and critical analysis.

What did we do?

Associate Professor Mathijs Pelkmans, LSE anthropologist, conducted a series of research projects across the region. He analysed the rise of religious nationalism as well as the rapid conversion rate from Islam to Christianity in a Muslim-majority region of Georgia. His data revealed that conversion was a means to overcome marginalization and to assert membership of a nationstate that was increasingly presented in Christian terms.

In Kyrgyzstan, Pelkmans examined why foreign missionaries were attracted to the country and why conversion might be an attractive option in a 'post-atheist' context. In particular he analysed the appeal of charismatic Christianity and scripturalist Islam to understand how people can be persuaded to stop doubting and to embrace new belief systems.

The results were published in the monograph *Defending the Border* (2006) and the edited volumes *Conversion after Socialism* (2009) and *Ethnographies of Doubt* (2013).

What happened?

Pelkmans introduced a new generation of local academics to contemporary approaches to social science and to the idea that religious conversion rates are closely connected to modernity and inequality.

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As an 'International Scholar' at the American University of Central Asia, Pelkmans assisted its Anthropology Department in shifting away from its previous emphasis on folklore and towards critical engagement with wider social issues such as development and religious change. As a result the department redesigned its undergraduate degree along three tracks of History, Culture & Identity and Anthropology of Development.

Between 2010 and 2013, Pelkmans trained and supervised over 75 Anthropology and other social science lecturers from across the former Soviet Union. As facilitator for the Academic Fellowship program, he coordinated the content of several Disciplinary conferences in which anthropologists from the Balkans, the Caucasus, and Central Asia participated. As a 'core faculty' member of the Regional Seminar for Excellence in Teaching, he led training sessions in ethnographic research, using several of his own publications as course material. Pelkmans gave lectures and workshops on teaching, writing and publication, as well as on the anthropology of religion. Several of the

participants then initiated new courses and research projects in their home universities. As an International Scholar for the Open Society Foundation's Central Asia Research and Teaching Initiative, Pelkmans supervised PhDs in Uzbekistan, Georgia, Armenia and Kazakhstan. His mentoring of five anthropologists at the American University of Central Asia led directly to their research being published in international academic journals. This enhanced their academic status and reputation.

In 2012, Pelkmans was asked by the Open Society Foundation to carry out a comprehensive review of the Academic Fellowship Programme which had been active in 18 countries since 2004. Co-authored with the former US Ambassador to Georgia and Belarus, Pelkmans drew on his own experience as an International Scholar to create a strategy which improved the programme's effectiveness and reach as well as a set of guidelines for assessing future progress.

Pelkmans' academic achievements are crucial to the region's next generation of social scientists. This new wave will have a direct impact on the region's religious dynamics by leading more sophisticated critical discussion in the classrooms as well as rigorous study of religious phenomena.

“Mathijs' engagement has been to intensify dialogue between different research, educational and broadly scholarly traditions and thereby to facilitate our own efforts to develop a discipline which is relatively new in Central Asia. It is important that his involvement was not restricted to a few visits...and will continue in the foreseeable future”

Dr Emil Nasritdinov, Associate Professor, Department of Anthropology, American University of Central Asia

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Dr Mathijs Pelkmans is Associate Professor of Anthropology at the London School of Economics and Political Science. His primary research interests concern the social, political, and ideational transformations that have occurred across post-Soviet Eurasia. Based on long term ethnographic research in Georgia and Kyrgyzstan, he has written extensively on religious change, identity politics, and border regimes. His latest edited book is *Ethnographies of Doubt: Faith and Uncertainty in Contemporary Societies* (2013). He is also co-editor of *Focaal: Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology*.

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