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Ethics of Sharing

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Sharing Being: Alterity and Sharing as an Existential
Question amongst Kyrgyz Christian Converts

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Abstract

In this article, my concern is the sharing of being, thus the existential question of what a person shares with others by virtue of her very 'thrownness', the circumstance of finding herself born as human in a particular place, into a particular family, and in a particular moment in history. Questions about what we share with others by virtue of our very being often confront us with a particular urgency in liminal situations where we are confronted with alterity amidst the familiar, when the world becomes porous and mouldable where we thought it was most solid. I explore how such questions become urgent amongst Kyrgyz people of Muslim background who have become evangelical Christians and who struggle to find a place of belonging that is welcoming to them and the values and virtues they see as central to who they are in a context where conversion to Christianity is seen as deeply controversial. Engaging with insights from the phenomenological tradition in philosophy and anthropology, I explore encounters with alterity as central to the efforts of Kyrgyz Christians to find a place of belonging in the world. I argue that we may experience the sharing of being most intensively when alterity draws us in, emplacing us in shared horizons of possibility whose contours are not yet clear.

Sharing Being: Alterity and Sharing as an Existential Question amongst Kyrgyz Christian Converts

Maria Louw

Blood and stones

I begin with Amir's story.[1] I had asked Aidina, a Kyrgyz woman in her late twenties, to meet up with me to hear her reflections on what it was like to be Christian in a Muslim-majority context, but she started elsewhere, with the story of her father, Amir. So this is where I begin.

Amir's story took us back in time to Kyrgyzstan in the 1990s, the years right after the collapse of the Soviet Union. During this turbulent period, when the world as people used to know it was replaced by something yet to come into being and when all sorts of hopes and fears for the future proliferated, missionaries from various Protestant churches settled in this country in which most people consider themselves to be Muslim. At some point – Aidina did not specify when – Amir met a German Baptist missionary who told him about the gospel and presented him with a Bible. Amir decided to read the Bible and its words eventually persuaded him to become a Christian.

Amir's parents had passed away young and Amir and his siblings grew up in an orphanage. But Amir remembered the name of the village in which he had been born, where his great-grandfathers had been imams at the mosque and where he still had relatives. Amongst the Kyrgyz, agnatic bloodlines play a central role in people's sense of, and claims to, identity and belonging (Ismailbekova 2017; Light 2018) and Aidina suspected that it was the blood ties that drew her father back to his place of birth. In any case, as a married adult man, Amir decided to move there together with his wife and two children to share the gospel with his kinsmen. But people in the village did not welcome him and did not appreciate his talking about Jesus. Orthodox Christianity has a long history in Kyrgyzstan, one that goes back to the incorporation of Central Asia into the Russian empire in the nineteenth century, and is generally accepted as the faith of Kyrgyzstanis of Russian background.[2] Yet, other Christian denominations and their evangelising efforts are commonly perceived as a threat to the community and the values that hold it together. They are referred to as 'sects', a concept most often used in binary opposition to 'church' or 'religion' and with connotations of something covert and sinister.

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1   Amir and all other names in this article are pseudonyms.
2   According to the National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, in 2021 there were 341.351 ethnic Russians in Kyrgyzstan out of a population of 6636.803 (NSC n.d.).

Christian converts are commonly understood to have betrayed their Muslim faith, community, and ancestors. Stories circulate about Christians who have been ostracised, beaten up, and even murdered and who, upon their death, were refused burial in the communal graveyards.

What Aidina remembered most vividly from the family's time in her father's village of birth was the sound of stones being thrown at their windows when she had gone to sleep and the image of the sink outside their house stained with blood: not a day passed when her father was not beaten up and had to wash blood off his face. One day, as Amir was feeding the family's animals and using a pitchfork, some people passed by, one of them leading a horse. Suddenly, the horse reared and jumped, scared by the pitchfork. This made the owner furious and he accused Amir of wanting to kill the horse. The men grabbed Amir, tied him to the horse by his legs, and made the horse run, dragging him along the stony road – as if they were playing *kok boru*, a traditional game where players on horseback chase a goat carcass. The family found him 300 metres from the house, alive but in great pain and the sink, once again, was stained with his blood.

Sharing being

My concern in this article is the sharing of being: it is the existential question of what a person shares with others by virtue of her very thrownness. I understand 'thrownness' in the phenomenological sense as the circumstance of finding oneself being born as human in a particular place, into a particular family, and in a particular moment in history (Heidegger [1927] 1996). 'Thrownness' captures circumstances which may shape a person to the core, but which may also remain a mystery she may spend a lifetime trying to understand and name (cf. Meinert and Grøn 2020). When Aidina was asked to talk about herself, she felt she had to begin her story with the fact that she was born as Amir's daughter, weaving the story of her life together with the story of her father's life. She grounded her own being in what were open questions for her: Why did he have to move back to the village? Why was he drawn there by blood ties that, in the end, did not really seem to matter? And what did all of this have to do with what it meant to be Christian and Kyrgyz, to share a faith, or to share family bonds?

I had asked Aidina to meet up with me to hear her story. But not only did her story start with her father, she kept returning to it and to her own early childhood memories from the village. She spoke about her later experiences growing up in Bishkek in bits and pieces and only because I kept asking about them. Here, sitting at a table in a noisy café in the Dordoi shopping centre in Bishkek where crowds of people were passing by and where most of them, as she reasoned, did not really care whether she was Christian or Muslim, it was still the sound of stones thrown at the windows of her family's house and the

image of blood in the sink that animated her stories about being Christian. 'Believers are not promised an easy life. You will go through difficult moments. This was what Jesus said in the Bible,' she reasoned, recalling what her father had told her one evening when she and her brother had once again been told to stay in the room furthest from the front door so that whoever might come to the house would not find the children first. But in Bishkek, she said, life *was* relatively easy, also for a Christian: there were quite a lot of churches and many Christians. And yet she was often haunted by a feeling that she did not really belong amongst them.

> *During my father's time, people evangelised through stories, but nowadays people evangelise the younger generation through different training programmes: how to be rich; how to be successful; how to get abroad; how to study foreign languages. This is what [young people] are interested in. But in my father's time it was different: they evangelised through stories or just talked about the Bible. That was enough.*

Questions about what we share with others by virtue of our very being often confront us with urgency – become existentially salient – in liminal situations where we are faced with alterity amidst the familiar, when the world becomes porous and mouldable where we thought it was most solid. For Amir, the agnatic bonds that, as Aidina reasoned, drew him back to his birth village lost their grounding potency and he ended up leaving again, together with his wife and children. Now, at the café in Bishkek, Aidina also seemed to be haunted by the feeling that what grounded her being was less solid than she had thought. She was born and raised in a Christian family and community, but what did she share with her fellow Christians if they were seeking Christianity as a way of gaining worldly wealth and success rather than for love of the gospel? Could she be Christian in a world where Christianity, so it seemed, had become tied to dreams about global networks and career opportunities, when her Christian world was marked by blood in the sink and stones thrown at the window? What did she share with the Christians she admired for standing up for their faith in the face of persecution and suffering when the people to whom she talked about her faith here in Bishkek most often reacted with an indifferent shrug?

What do we share as human beings, what can we possibly share, and what are the limits of sharing? What do we share when we share a faith? When we share family bonds? When we belong to the same generation? Or the same nation? Questions like these permeated the reflections of Kyrgyz evangelical Christians of Muslim background and the children of Christian converts whom I interviewed and had conversations with over the last couple of years. My project focused on the experiences of being Christian and Kyrgyz in a context where understandings of Islam are very closely tied to

understandings of Kyrgyzness. In this context, the act of adopting another faith is often seen, by others, as a rejection of one's family, community, and ancestors; that is, of what, in the Kyrgyz context, is commonly seen as grounding one's very being.[3]

This article pursues two aims: first, to offer a phenomenologically oriented approach to religious 'conversion' that stays with the ambiguity, trouble, and doubt so central to many Christians in this context; and, second, to contribute to the anthropology of sharing by understanding sharing as an existential theme which may be central to conversion experiences. Sharing often came up in conversations with my interlocutors, all members of evangelical Christian communities in Bishkek and Karakol, when they spoke about their efforts to find a place of belonging in the liminal spaces between worlds that were marked by concepts that appeared solid and self-evident: 'Christian', 'Kyrgyz', and 'Muslim'.

Anthropologists have long been critical of the concept of 'conversion' and the way it suggests an absolute crossing of religious boundaries and a complete personal transformation. Instead, they have pointed out that processes where people are drawn to, and embrace, other faiths and/or denominations are often much more complex, less absolute, and often reversible (see, for example, Buckser and Glazier 2003; Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; Pelkmans 2009, 2010). In the introduction to the anthology *The Anthropology of Religious Conversion* (Buckser and Glazier 2003), Diane Austin-Broos, building on Victor Turner's ideas about liminality, suggested that we approach conversion as a 'form of passage' that is not an absolute breach, but which does usually imply a consistent course and orientation (Austin-Broos 2003). Whilst I am more reluctant than Austin-Broos to see the course and orientation of 'conversion' as 'consistent' (as I explain below), I do find the term 'passage' to be illuminating for the cases I discuss here and, more generally, for a phenomenologically oriented approach to 'conversion'. The term 'passage', Austin-Broos argued, is a suggestion to think of the quest for human belonging as a central dimension of conversion, conversion being 'a type of passage that negotiates a place in the world': a world experienced as turbulent or constraining or, in some way, as wanting in value (Austin-Broos 2003: 2). If there was one thing my interlocutors seemed to share, it was indeed a sense of disorientation and a longing for belonging. They yearned for their being to be 'integrated with and integral to a wider field of Being' (Jackson 2002: 12)

that was welcoming to them and the values and virtues they saw as central to who they were (cf. Odgaard 2022). I wish to add an aspect that is not apparent in Austin-Broos's approach, maybe because of her debt to Victor Turner whose ideas about liminality imply a relatively stable world into which those undergoing a liminal state are eventually reintegrated (Turner 1967). It is the aspect that the 'passage' of conversion sometimes gives rise to experiences of alterity that are not easily contained within the horizons of possibility provided by such a world. In other words, a 'passage' may be an opening to a place whose contours are not clear; and sometimes those undergoing it may be unsure of what kind of world they are moving in and where the 'passage' is leading them to. Aidana was born into a Christian family but still saw herself as being on a 'passage' to Christianity, figuring out what it means to share a Christian faith.

Engaging with insights from the phenomenological tradition, I explore encounters with alterity as central to the efforts of Kyrgyz Christians on their passage of finding a place of belonging in the world and, in the larger perspective, as central to the experience of sharing as an existential theme. For this I draw, first, on Bernhard Waldenfels's (2011) responsive phenomenology, in which alterity plays a central role, and, second, on Cheryl Mattingly's (2018) use of Waldenfels to conceptualise ordinary life as a privileged site for exploring ethical possibility. Their theories allow me to emphasise how experiences of alterity draw us in, emplacing us in openings to worlds that we need to find our orientation in before the experiences are made the object of reflection and conceptualisation. Furthermore, their theories will help me to emphasise how, in reflections on such experiences, ontological and ethical questions are often intimately intertwined. For Amir, for example, the question of what he shared with his relatives was not an abstract question he pondered over through distanced reflection; it concerned his very existence and its relation to the existence of others, namely the sharing of being. In anthropology, liminal experiences are often understood as temporary and thus as prompting the urge to repair, to find solid ground, to return to a world where things are in their proper place. But sometimes one may want to hold on to possibility, caring for alterity in the shadows of one's being. I argue that this is what my interlocutors often did and that such caring for alterity found its way into their stories through images (Stevenson 2014 and 2020), which allowed ambiguity and doubt to linger. Finally, I argue that a phenomenological approach to conversion suggests that we may experience the sharing of being most intensively when alterity draws us in, emplacing us in horizons of possibility whose contours are not yet clear, before they are conceptualised, and whilst indeterminacy still reigns. Before I develop this argument, let me describe the context of Kyrgyzstan to provide a better understanding of why being Kyrgyz is intimately bound up for many with being Muslim and why so

many consider a passage away from Islam and towards Christianity to be so controversial.

Evangelical Christianity in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan

The years following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and Kyrgyzstan's independence in 1991 saw an influx of missionaries from a variety of Protestant Christian denominations. They benefitted from what was initially a relatively liberal policy of non-interference by the state in religious matters (McBrien and Pelkmans 2008; Radford 2015). Yet, the ease with which the missionaries entered Kyrgyzstan did not mean that the people they strove to evangelise approved of their activities or that conversion to Christianity was easily accepted by the families, relatives, and neighbours of the new converts. During Soviet rule, anti-religious policies and measures meant that, for many Kyrgyz Muslims, the practice of Islam became largely confined to the private sphere. Islam came to be associated, notably, with the performance of lifecycle rituals such as weddings, circumcisions, and funerals, all central to community life and often congruent with what was perceived to be markers of ethnic identity, promoted by Soviet nationalities policies (Khalid 2007; McBrien 2009; McBrien and Pelkmans 2008; Tett 1994). On the one hand, as Mathijs Pelkmans (2017: 128) pointed out, 'the resulting "cultural Islam" was largely devoid of Islamic knowledge and religious effervescence, and therefore vulnerable to subsequent post-Soviet challenges'. On the other hand, it may be exactly because Islam, in local understandings, was closely entangled with notions of ethnicity and community that religious conversion caused such a great uproar amongst families and communities: participating in Muslim ritual life is seen as a way of paying respect to one's family, community, and ancestors (Borbieva 2012: 51; Louw 2022; Privratsky 2001). Embracing a different faith would, therefore, be perceived by many as an act of betrayal, not merely of Islam but of those, in the present and in the past, to whom one owes one's life and existence. Christian evangelists who proselytised tended to be perceived as sinister people who lured the younger generations into such acts of betrayal through promises of salvation and worldly success (Borbieva 2012; McBrien and Pelkmans 2008; Radford 2015: 25). Indeed, in the years following independence it became common amongst Kyrgyz people to explain the relative popularity of Christian churches with reference to the economic and social opportunities and hopes for a better future they seemed to offer in particular the younger generations through the provisioning of English classes and various social clubs, through scholarships and job opportunities, and through their connections to global networks (Borbieva 2012).[4] As Aidina's reflections indicate, such explanations are not entirely unfound-

4   In 2007, Mathijs Pelkmans estimated that there were around 20,000 Kyrgyz converts to Christianity (Pelkmans 2007). Numbers are difficult to estimate, however, as census data do not exist.

ed and resonate even amongst Christians, who may be concerned that the access to opportunities provided by Christian organisations may lead people to embrace Christianity for the 'wrong' reasons (cf. also Borbieva 2012).

Some of the more conspicuous reactions to evangelical Christian proselytising and conversion – beatings, killings, attacks on church buildings, the refusal of burial in community cemeteries (cf. also Peyrouse 2007; Radford 2015: 34) – have been the subject of media coverage in Kyrgyzstan. Most do not reach the news, however. My interlocutors spoke about rumours that claimed they had organised rituals in which they drank human blood and ate babies; some converts related how their mothers had had a nervous breakdown or how their fathers had thrown them out of the house or had burnt their Bibles when told about their conversions; others gave accounts of how they were rejected by their families; and yet others about how they were 'kidnapped' and kept hostage by their families or taken to the *moldos* (local Muslim authorities) to free them from Christian 'brainwashing'. The converts experienced these as acts of persecution and repression but those carrying them out considered these measures necessary as acts of care to protect the families and communities. Some of my interlocutors emphasised how they were continuously and persistently engaged in efforts to disentangle the perceived close link between Kyrgyzness and Muslimness, trying to persuade families and community members that practices that are associated with Islam in local culture are, rather, expressions of Kyrgyz culture and custom and could thus be fully compatible with Christianity (cf. Pelkmans 2007).[5] Others rather continued to participate in the ritual life of their communities, doing what they could to accommodate local conceptions of Muslimness whilst silently praying in their own way and to their own God as not to create problems for their families.

As Aidina's reflections suggest, Christian converts tend to experience more freedom and tolerance in a big city like Bishkek, which is characterised by a much larger diversity of culture, religion, and lifestyle than many of the village communities from which converts originate. And yet Aidina's reflections also indicate that a passage to Christianity may be everything but consistent in Bishkek and that it can be replete with experiences of alterity.

Alterity and the opening to indeterminate horizons of possibility

Questions about alterity and questions about whether we, by mere virtue of being human, share the world or not have recently come to occupy many an-

5   The concept of *musulmanchïlïq* (Muslimness) is commonly used in Kyrgyzstan to refer to Muslim virtue and what it means to be a good Muslim. Sometimes the concept is used in order to distinguish local ways of understanding and practicing Islam from those of pietistic Muslim movements, which became increasingly visible and influential in the years after independence.

thropologists, not least in discussions around the so-called ontological turn. In a discussion of the ontological turn (Venkatesan et al. 2010), Martin Holbraad argued that anthropology as a discipline is primarily distinguished by 'its peculiar investment in [...] "alterity"' (Venkatesan et al. 2010: 180). What Holbraad and other proponents of the 'ontological' approach have argued for is an anthropology that reckons with profound human difference: an anthropology that does not try to explain away alterity by containing it within an already existing analytical approach but that allows alterity to 'dictate the terms of its own analysis' (Henare et al. 2007; Venkatesan et al. 2010: 180; Holbraad et al. 2014). This has led to several thought-provoking studies that have pushed the boundary between ethnography and theory in inspiring ways (see, for example, Holbraad 2012; Kohn 2013; Pedersen 2011).

Being confronted with alterity, however, is not peculiar to anthropologists. It is at the heart of the human experience, as has been emphasised in the phenomenological tradition in philosophy and in anthropology (Waldenfels 2011; Meinert and Grøn 2020; Mattingly 2018; Wentzer and Dyring 2021). As Thomas Schwarz Wentzer and Rasmus Dyring formulated it in a discussion of the difference between how alterity is understood in the ontological turn and in the phenomenological tradition,

> *truly taking alterity seriously as a starting point for anthropological analysis would have to entail taking seriously that there are aspects of living a life that simply defy conceptualization and that such aspects – their radical 'imponderability' notwithstanding, or perhaps exactly due to this 'imponderability' – encroach with a certain unsettling force in the lived experience of being with others. Hence, to take alterity seriously would mean to take seriously not just the more or less well-formed ideas that people might hold, but equally to trace those elements of life in community with others that due to certain experienced formlessness elude conceptual formation all together. (Wentzer and Dyring 2021: 66)*

My interlocutors' stories about their 'passages' to Christianity were indeed often interrupted by moments where such 'formless' experiences struck them and drew them in and made them reorient. Although these moments had become part of life stories and, as such, had been conceptualised to some degree, there was often a sense that they were still somewhat undetermined; they still came with a sense of wonder and excess that kept possibility open. Aidana's sense of alienation amongst other Christians, for example, lingered in her narratives, undetermined. Other interlocutors shared stories about dreams of ancestor spirits and other spectral beings that were dismissed as meaningless by fellow Christians, but which kept haunting them and connected them in uncanny ways with the worlds and worldviews of their ances-

tors.[6] Others again told about the urge, similar to that experienced by Amir, of returning to their ancestral lands and being buried in ancestral ground. These were experiences which did not fit neatly into their conversion narratives and that they struggled to understand and find words for.

Reflecting on those aspects of living that defy conceptualisation, Wentzer and Dyring refer to philosopher Bernhard Waldenfels, in whose responsive phenomenology alterity plays a central role. According to Waldenfels (2011: 8–20), any kind of order is, per definition, partial and selective and always surrounded by the shadows of the extraordinary. This makes what he terms 'the alien' an omnipresent phenomenon to be found in all spheres of life and in various grades, ranging from the 'everyday alien' to the 'radically alien' (cf. Leistle 2014: 64). Alterity, it should be emphasised, should not be seen as a peculiar domain of experience set aside from the ordinary or the everyday. Indeed, we are constantly responding to phenomena and events we cannot fully grasp. Quite often it is phenomena which, at first sight, seem unremarkable and ordinary that, in certain situations, suddenly appear as alien and perplexing. The phenomena are familiar and alien at the same time: we get it, but we also do not. Lone Grøn (2002: 86) described it thus: 'We fall into sleep, into dream; we find ourselves engulfed in a childhood memory; somebody we know very well may suddenly seem like a stranger.' Such familiar yet perplexing phenomena reveal 'how the everyday lifeworld [...] is rife with destabilizing potential' (Grøn and Mattingly 2022: 8). Returning to Aidana's experiences in Bishkek, an indifferent shrug, for example, is not a response that is out of the ordinary as such. But when it appears as a response to a cautious confession about being Christian by a young woman who grew up where such confessions were most often met with violence, it may appear as familiar and perplexing at the same time.

Just like questions about alterity are at the heart of anthropologists' discussions about whether there are many 'worlds' or one, so experiences of alterity can give rise to reflections about sharing among humans more generally: reflections about what they share or do not share with others and about the limits of their worlds and of the concepts they use to describe their worlds. The reflections often waver ambiguously: between, on the one hand, an impulse to explain away alterity, containing and domesticating it within already existing concepts and, on the other, dwelling on alterity, going with it, letting it 'dictate the terms of its own analysis', letting it be an opening to other possibilities for being and sharing being. Even when experiences of alterity are quickly contained and explained away within pre-existing norma-

6   In Kyrgyzstan, dreams are seen as borderlands between the manifest and hidden dimensions of reality. Dreaming is a potential gateway to spatial or temporal realms other than the waking one and thus to establishing relations that cross temporal and spatial boundaries. For many Kyrgyz Muslims, dreams are gateways to the *qayip duino* – the otherwise hidden world of the past, the future, God, or the ancestor spirits (Louw 2019, 2023).

tive frameworks – as in 'that was just a dream' – a sense of other possibilities often hovers in the shadows. We cannot dream and be awake at the same time and our attempts to order and contain are always 'separated from the "alien call" by a time lag' (Grøn 2022: 86).

In her article 'Ordinary Possibility, Transcendent Immanence, and Responsive Ethics: A Philosophical Anthropology of the Small Event', Cheryl Mattingly (2018) suggested that Waldenfels's responsive phenomenology may be useful for thinking about ethics. More particularly, she argued it could help us see and conceptualise how ordinary life, far from being a site for the unthinking reproduction of moral order, is indeed a privileged space in which to explore ethical possibility. Building on Waldenfels, Mattingly (2018: 174) explored ethical possibility 'as related to structures of experience that disclose the unsettledness of the ethical, including the culturally inherited categories and practices that specify a certain range of norms and virtues'. Thus possibility, as revealed in encounters with alterity, can take on ethical importance in the context of projects of moral change, or what I formulated above as a concern to find a place for belonging that is welcoming to the values and virtues one sees as central to who one is. In other words, the ontological and the ethical are intimately intertwined in attempts to order and contain alterity. We are not merely confronted with questions about what kind of world we live in but also about how we wish to live our lives within it, with whom we wish to do so, and the possibilities it provides us for doing so.

Sometimes, when we try to order and contain in the face of alterity, we deliberately try to keep possibility open – to allow space for the shadows of the extraordinary or maybe because we are dealing with ethical concerns that are not easily solved. Indeed, the experiences of alterity that were so central to my interlocutors' stories about their 'passages' were rarely explained away; rather, they were allowed to linger in all their indeterminacy through what may be seen as images that played a central role in the stories. In my use of the term 'image' I am inspired by Lisa Stevenson who suggested that what is peculiar about images is that they, rather than being straightforward representations, express without formulating and drag the world along with them. They may capture uncertainty and contradiction without having to resolve it (Stevenson 2014: 10–13; Stevenson 2020). As such, they often appear as puzzles that leave us in doubt. On the other hand, unlike concepts which may have a tendency to 'explain away' and 'freeze' thought (Mattingly 2019), images may sometimes capture the richness and density of experience better. They may allow for other possibilities to still linger in the ways things are understood and conceptualised. When Aidina kept returning to the blood in the sink and the stones thrown at the window, I suggest that she was referring to images which, as such, dragged the world along with them: a shared Christian world predicated on suffering, perhaps; or a world that was ethically loaded and with a potential for moral transformation; or a world she still

struggled to understand even if it was in this world that her understanding of Christianity was grounded, a world she shared with her father.

Let me turn to another story to unfold these points about how the ontological and the ethical are intertwined in responses to alterity. Similarly to Aidina's story, it takes us back to the early 1990s and the aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet Union. This story allows me to introduce my final reflections on how the sharing of being may be most intensively experienced when alterity draws us in and places us into horizons of possibility whose contours are not yet clear.

Salty tea, smiles, and a very small bottle of vodka

When I asked Mirgul to tell me about her experiences of becoming and being Christian in Kyrgyzstan, she started with a story about smiles. It was a story that took us back to her childhood in a village in the region of Issyk Kul and her encounter with a group of American missionaries who had settled there in the early post-Soviet days. The first thing she noticed was that they smiled. They smiled to each other and they smiled to people they encountered, including random people they passed in the street. Those days, as she remembered, most people never smiled. If you walked the streets with a smile on your face, people would take you to be an idiot. And most people had no reason for smiling anyway: in the immediate post-Soviet years, Kyrgyzstan witnessed a severe economic decline which led to a drastic reduction of social services, high rates of unemployment, a growing inflation, and widespread poverty. There was no food to buy in the shops. Mirgul remembered being sent to the shop with a coupon that would supposedly enable her to buy a loaf of bread, but there was no bread in the shop. There were only empty shelves and an old babushka standing in the middle of the floor with her arms stretched out and shouting, 'Boga net!' (There is no God!). If, unexpectedly, there happened to be food in the shop, they had no money to buy it. People would add salt to their tea instead of sugar. For Mirgul, that was the taste of the early 1990s.

During these years, Mirgul's father started drinking heavily. The burden of providing for the family fell entirely on her mom, who would go to work in the morning and come home in the evening, only to start doing all the chores around the house. She would never talk with Mirgul. She would never ask her how she was feeling. She would never give her a hug. And, she would never smile. Then she fell ill, maybe because she had been overburdened, and Mirgul, who was about 15 years old at that time, had to take over most of the chores. She would cook, she would clean, she would do the laundry, and she would go to the bazaar to sell the milk from the family's cow, their only source of income for several months.

One day she was doing the laundry as she used to, by hand. And there, with her hands in the soapy water, she was suddenly overwhelmed by a feel-

ing of darkness. She could not shake it off; it was vague but insistent. 'And I was like, oh, let her be sick and […] even die,' she recalled thinking, right there amidst the laundry, unsure whether she was thinking about herself or her mom. Times were dark and she felt a darkness growing inside herself. As she described it: 'I did not want to live, but because I was a living creature I still, like, wanted to live.'

It was in that period – whilst she went on living even though she was not sure whether she wanted to or not – that she first encountered the missionaries and noticed their smiles. They seemed to offer her an opening to a different world, which was not at all clear in its contours but maybe most of all rested on a mere feeling that something new was possible. 'Light came in,' she said, looking back at their first encounter. She started visiting the missionary couple, and later moved in with them, helping them take care of their children and increasingly taking part in the Bible reading groups they held. Thus started what she termed her 'journey' to become believer. A year passed when, as she visited her family, her parents suddenly asked her, 'Who are you?' Mirgul did not reply; indeed, she did not know what to reply. She just smiled. Her mom, then, asked her if she had converted to Christianity. Mirgul still kept quiet, but her mom, now furious, took a knife and threw it to the floor. Mirgul escaped to the missionaries' house and, for a long time, ignored her siblings who would call the couple and threaten to burn down their house and 'do something' to Mirgul. It was only when her brother called and said that their mom had become crazy and was wandering the streets that she packed her stuff and went back home. She found her mom lying on the couch with tears streaming down her face. After that, she stayed in her childhood home, although she did not really feel at home there.

But Mirgul did not always feel at home amongst the Christians, either. The luring sense of possibility had started to give way to an experience of Christian life as just as filled with conflict and hassle as the life she had come from and of Christians who often behaved rather differently from how Christians ought to be: gossiping about others behind each other's backs or causing others to suffer to advance their own career ambitions.

Whilst her mother and her brothers were furious when they heard about her conversion to Christianity, her father, as she recalled, remained silent. He did not say anything when she told the family she had become Christian. Maybe, she reasoned, it was because he had always read a lot, such as books by Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky. These might have widened his world and taught him that there were other possibilities for being a decent person than those that were prevalent in the village. Even as he fell into a depression and drank heavily, he would continue to read, finding in literature a refuge from the darkness of the early 1990s. One day, Mirgul recalled, her father wanted to drink but did not have any money to buy alcohol. Mirgul, then, decided to propose to him that she would buy him a bottle of vodka on condition that

he read the Bible. Her father agreed and so she bought him a bottle of vodka – a very small bottle it was, she emphasised – and he started reading. Later she found him exhausted. It turned out that he had read the whole Epistle to the Romans and was now pondering the question of what would have happened had Jesus not died. She sat down and they had a conversation about the question. She recalled that it was deeper and more meaningful than any of the conversations she had had with her Christian friends. A space for being with, for sharing, had been built between them through the Letter of Paul to the Romans and a small bottle of vodka – an odd and indeterminate space, perhaps, but a generous one (cf. Grøn 2022: 94; Odgaard 2022) that was welcoming to who they were.

When things fall together

Mirgul's story, too, was punctuated by images which 'drew the world with them'. Although she and the people around her made attempts to understand and contain these images, they allowed the images to keep their indeterminate quality. This indicated, perhaps, the ethical intensity or complexity of the worlds these images carried with them. The image of the salty tea and the babushka shouting 'there is no God!' – the recalling of which threw Mirgul back into the early 1990s and the taste and feeling of an epoch where the world as she had known it had been turned upside down, when she and her family were forced to find other, new ways of being in the world together. The image of the 'darkness' that had rolled over her – pointing to possibilities that felt dark and evil but were nevertheless hers. The image of the missionary smiles – promising openings to something new that stood in contrast to the darkness, a 'light' that 'came in'. 'Light' (like 'darkness') is a concept with a long history in Christianity and may seem like a trope, even a cliché. But in the way it was presented by Mirgul, it retained an openness, a mysterious quality, that she kept returning to even after becoming a practicing Christian and Christianity's enticing openness and sense of possibility had given way to the realisation that the Christian everyday could be disappointing. And then there was the moment when she was discussing Paul's Letter to the Romans with her intoxicated father – a sharing of being in an unexpected way – which, as she looked back, still filled her with wonder and gratitude.

What the images that animate the stories of Kyrgyz Christian converts point to is a fundamental ontological ungroundedness of experience (cf. Dyring 2022; Dyring and Grøn 2022; Grøn 2022). In her beautiful reflection on how life with dementia and the non-discursive modes of expression and communication that are central to life in a dementia ward reveal something fundamental about the human existence, Lone Grøn (2022: 85) argued that 'the lived experience of ungroundedness is accentuated in old age, where bodily functions, social worlds, and selves deteriorate or transform with a

heightened intensity. When things fall apart.' To this point we might add: the lived experience of ungroundedness may also be accentuated when things fall together in unexpected ways, like they fell together between and around Mirgul and her father, the Letter to the Romans and a small bottle of vodka, creating a space for the sharing of being in a way that could hardly be understood and contained within existing frameworks for understanding. Sharing such openings where alterity draws us in – situations where ambiguity and doubt, or ontological indeterminacy, (still) reign, when it is not, say, religion, history, culture, or norms that we share but the contours of something yet unknown – then it may be that we experience the sharing of a world most intensely: the sharing of being as a sharing of possibility.

Conclusion

Maybe, when we tell stories about ourselves, we tend to start with images, openings, that connect us to the worlds we take to be ours: a father or a smile, for example, that grounds our very being but that we may also spend a lifetime trying to understand. In this article, I argue that questions about what we share with others by virtue of our very 'thrownness' – being born as humans, being born as Kyrgyz, being born as Muslim or as Christian, for example – appear to us with a particular urgency in situations when we are confronted with alterity within the familiar; when the world appears as porous and mouldable where we thought it was most solid, offering new possibilities for being and sharing being. I propose that a phenomenological approach to 'conversion' may dwell on such experiences and show that encounters with alterity are indeed central to the experiences of converts to evangelical Christianity in Kyrgyzstan, moving, as they are, between worlds that are seen, by others, as incompatible. What these Christians' reflections on their experiences suggest is that the ontological and the ethical are intimately intertwined in their attempts to order and contain in the face of alterity. We are not merely confronted with questions about what kind of world it is we live in but also about how we wish to live our lives in it, with whom we wish to do so, and the possibilities it provides us for doing so. In my interlocutors' stories about their 'passage' to Christianity, alterity is often allowed to linger in images that point at the shadows of the extraordinary that accompanies their attempts to find a place for belonging in the world and to the ethical complexity involved in doing so. Finally, I argue that we may experience the sharing of being most intensively when alterity draws us in, emplacing us in horizons of possibility whose contours are not yet clear, before they are conceptualised, and whilst indeterminacy still reigns, laying bare a fundamental ungroundedness of being.

Acknowledgements

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