

# Indigenization and Contextualization

## A Case of Russian-speaking Believers in Central Asia and Israel

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### Introduction

This study aims to explore the process of indigenization and contextualization among Russian-speaking believers in Central Asia and Israel. Context is “surrounding conditions – the circumstances or events that form the environment within which something exists or takes place,”<sup>1</sup> but “indigenizing” refers to increasing local participation in tasks previously performed by outsiders.<sup>2</sup> Indigenous people can collaborate with former colonialists to revive their suppressed ideas and practices.<sup>3</sup> The cooperation presupposes

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<sup>1</sup> *Encarta World English Dictionary* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 392. In this definition, it is very likely that “something” refers to the reality of *logos* and *ethos*.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 915.

<sup>3</sup> The suppressed ideas and practices may include indigenous language, religious rituals, and indigenous systems of nomadism and agriculture.

the process of reconciliation and decolonization<sup>4</sup> in that the dynamics of symbiosis is indispensable.

With these definitions in mind, I will first examine how the religious context and political history of Central Asia and Israel shape the presuppositions missionaries must consider. And then, I will explore how the social positioning and practices<sup>5</sup> of Russian-speaking believers reveal missional landscapes. Why are those believers significant? What commonalities exist between these distinctive worlds?<sup>6</sup> What might a divine plan look like for Russian-speaking peoples in these two regions?

### **Religious Context of the Russian Speakers in Two Regions**

Central Asia is home to five main ethnic groups (Kazakhs, Uzbeks, Kyrgyz, Turkmen, and Tajiks), primarily Turkic-speaking, with nomadic traditions among the Kazakhs and Kyrgyz.<sup>7</sup> Historically, this region was a crossroads of religious influence: Iranian Zoroastrianism, Indian Buddhism, and aboriginal Tengrism before Islam spread in the 8th century. Although Nestorian Christianity emerged during Mongol rule in the 13th and 14th centuries, Sunni Islam remained dominant until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Reconciliation refers to efforts to repair the relationships between indigenous peoples and settler societies by acknowledging past injustice, while decolonization is the process of dismantling communist ideologies – authoritarian governance, centralized economic structure, Soviet-imposed borders, and the like.

<sup>5</sup> Social positioning, whether as a majority, minority, or marginalized group, is a missional indicator, while practices are missional expressions.

<sup>6</sup> Both regions are characterized by monotheistic faith – Islam and Judaism.

<sup>7</sup> Tajiks are Persic speakers.

<sup>8</sup> For the sake of ethnic Russians, V. V. Bartold summarized the religious background of Central Asia. See, V. V. Bartold, *Istoriya Kulturnoi Jzizni Turkestana* (Leninrgad: Izdatelstvo Akademii Nauk SSSR, 1927), 1-66.

As the Russian Empire expanded southward in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, Central Asians were gradually exposed to Orthodox Christianity. The formation of the Soviet Union in 1922 transformed indigenous Islamic culture into an atheistic communist society.<sup>9</sup> Although the socialist regime initially encouraged the creation of a peaceful paradise, it ultimately disillusioned local ethnicities, culminating in its collapse in 1991.

During the transitional period (1987-1995), Central Asians sought to fill the spiritual void left by the regime, restoring traditional Islam in reaction to the influx of foreign religious organizations. While foreign religious organizations sent their workers into Central Asia and reached out to the nationals, local Muslims viewed these foreigners as cultural colonialists.<sup>10</sup>

In the past decade, however, external religious influence has waned, and local governments recognize only registered religious organizations. In Kazakhstan, for instance, Muslims comprise 69.3% of the population, Russian Orthodox believers make up 17%, and evangelical Christians account for just 0.2%.<sup>11</sup> Other Central Asian countries reflect similar demographics, with Muslims as the majority.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The Soviet Union brought into Central Asia spiritual death, as lamented by Nursultan Nazarbayev: “The long years of building communism were accompanied by the destruction of mosques, churches, holy places and other religious buildings, active anti-religious propaganda and even the physical destruction of representatives of the clergy of all confessional movements, including the Muslim clergy.” *Kriticheskoe Desiyatiletie* (Almaty: Atamura, 2003), 89.

<sup>10</sup> In the early 2000, strict countries like Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan banned foreign religious movements. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan also adjusted religious laws in response, with local scholars critiquing foreign religious activities as potentially divisive. Cf. Karabaeva Z, “Voprosii Pravovovo Obesptcheniya Religioznoi Deyatelnosti v Kiruigizstane,” *Prava Cheloveka na Svobodu Religii I Veroyisповedanii* (Almati: Universitet im D.A. Kunaeva, 2011), 60-67.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/kazakhstan/summaries/>

<sup>12</sup> Oleg Korotki highlights several factors contributing to the revivalistic phenomena within Islam: the massive publication of Quran, the increase of missionary activities and in mosque construction. Oleg Korotki, *Philosophy and Methodology of Education in Central Asia Context* (PhD Dissertation [in Russian], Baptist Bible Seminary, 2010), 70-71.

The region of Palestine has been home to local Muslim Arabs for over a millennium, beginning with the Islamic expansion in the 7<sup>th</sup> century until now. Under Ottoman Empire (1517-1917), Islam became the official religion.<sup>13</sup> However, the political upheavals of the 20<sup>th</sup> century drastically altered the local demography that entailed a switched political and religious landscape.<sup>14</sup> Today, Israel's religious composition is predominantly Jewish (73.5%), followed by Muslim (18.1%), Christian (1.9%), Druze (1.6%), and other (4.9%, 2022 estimate).<sup>15</sup>

Within this framework, individual identities often blur in favor of national collectivity,<sup>16</sup> which tends to overlook non-Jewish minorities. Russian speakers in Israel encounter multi-layered Jewish society, including Ultra-orthodox (*haredim*), national religious orthodox (*dati-leumi*), traditional orthodox (*Masorti*), and secular (*heloni*) communities. Russian-speaking believers often face restrictions in expressing their faith and securing places of worship.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> The Empire allowed thousands of Sephardic Jews to live with Palestinian Arabs.

<sup>14</sup> In its early years, Israel aimed to establish a secular framework, potentially including a constitution. However, amid ongoing conflicts, it shifted toward nationalism, and in 2018, the parliament formally declared Israel a "Jewish" State, solidifying a religious-ethnic identity. This contrasts with early Jewish scholarship, which advocated for a democratic vision in the Middle East including constitutionalism and the separation of religion and state. See, Jacob Robinson, "A Democracy in an Autocratic World," in *Israel: Its Role in Civilization*, edited by Moshe Davis (New York: Harper, 1956), 146-64; Yehuda L. Kohn, "The Emerging Constitution of Israel," in *Israel: Its Role in Civilization*, edited by Moshe Davis (New York: Harper, 1956), 130-45; and, Hayim Greenberg, "Religion and the State in Israel," in *Israel: Its Role in Civilization*, edited by Moshe Davis (New York: Harper, 1956), 165-76.

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/israel/>

<sup>16</sup> "Judaism," *The Harper Collins Dictionary of religion*, edited by Jonathan Z. Smith (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995), 592.

<sup>17</sup> Jews are Jews whether they are religious, secular, atheist, or Buddhist, but if Jews accept Jesus as the Messiah, they are no longer Jews, as per Rabbinic law.

### **Political History of the Russian Speakers' Permeation into the Islamic and Jewish Worlds**

First, the spread of ethnic Russians into Central Asia began in the 18th and 19th centuries, during a period of vigorous colonization by the Russian Empire and Western powers amid a political vacuum among indigenous peoples.<sup>18</sup> By the early 20th century, the Russian Empire had established control over Central Asia, with ethnic Russian military personnel, administrators, merchants, and farmers settling in the region and influencing its political, economic, and social landscape. V. V. Bartold estimates they constituted about 12.5 % of the population.<sup>19</sup> The tribal and nomadic lifestyle of ethnic groups made it difficult for them to confront colonial powers.

In the 1930s, Stalin forced relocation of ethnic and non-ethnic Russians to develop agriculture and industry in Central Asia.<sup>20</sup> Before and after WWII, he deported Volga Germans, Crimean Tatars, and Chechen-Ingush to Siberia or Central Asia.<sup>21</sup> To maintain control, the communist party assigned Russian nationals to lead administrative positions in the region. It is estimated that, by the 1970-80s, the number of ethnic Russians in Kazakhstan nearly matched that of indigenous Kazakhs.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> The territorial expansion of the Russian Empire ranges 1795-1914: the territory of Kazakhs (1796-1855) and the territory of other Central Asian ethnics (1855-1914). Patrick. K. O'Brien, ed., *Atlas of World History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 180.

<sup>19</sup> Bartold, *Istoriya Kulturnoi*, 149. For instance, from 1893 to 1912 were 2,513,000 Russian peasants in *Semirechenskoi Oblasti* and 2,307,000 in *Semipalatinskoi Oblasti*.

<sup>20</sup> O'Brien, *Atlas of World History*, 223.

<sup>21</sup> O'Brien, *Atlas of World History*, 236.

<sup>22</sup> Sebastien Peyrouse, "The Russian Minority in Central Asia: Migration, Politics, and Language," translated from Russian, Occasional Paper #297 (Kennan Institute of W. Wilson International Center, 2008), 4.

During the social upheavals of the 1990s, however, Russian-speaking individuals rapidly repatriated to their home countries,<sup>23</sup> due to various reasons.<sup>24</sup> Five Central Asian countries experienced serious population decline.<sup>25</sup> Today, Russian speakers account for 16.8% of Kazakhstan's population, totaling 3,403,681 out of 20,260,006.<sup>26</sup>

Second, the migration of Russian-speaking Jews to Israel had several waves: first Aliyah ("immigration"/Going up to Jerusalem) – about 25,000 immigrants (1882-1903); second Aliyah – about 40,000 immigrants (1904-1914).<sup>27</sup> After the Romanov dynasty fell, many Jews actively joined the socialistic movement of the Bolsheviks, but about 35,000 immigrants made the third Aliyah to Palestine (1919-1923).<sup>28</sup> During WWII, Soviet Jews fought against Nazi Germany, and after the war, the USSR provided a substantial support for Jewish people to establish the State of Israel, perhaps intending to create communist ally in the Middle East. However, Israel gradually took a different political route – Zionistic and democratic. In 1967, Israel won Six-Day

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<sup>23</sup> A church podium in southern Kazakhstan bears inscriptions in two languages: "Lord, help me" (in German) and "We preach the crucified Christ" (in Russian), symbolizing the community's recent history of ethnic migration. The emigration of multi-ethnic groups includes Russians, Belarussians, Ukrainians, Georgians, Germans, Greeks, Moldovans, Azerbaijanians, and Armenians.

<sup>24</sup> Peyrouse highlights several key reasons for the rapid emigration of ethnic Russians: the rejection of dual citizenship (between Russia and Central Asia), the promotion of linguistic nationalism, the ethnicization of political life, the deterioration of the education system, a pessimistic view of the future, and concerns over potential Islamization. Peyrouse, "The Russian Minority," 1-22.

<sup>25</sup> Peyrouse detailed the 2007 statistics of Russian emigration from five Central Asia republics. Peyrouse, "The Russian Minority," 3-5. In May 2014, however, the Russian Federation established the Eurasian Economic Union with Kazakhstan, so the further emigration of ethnic Russians has been curbed.

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.cia.gov/.../kazakhstan/>

<sup>27</sup> During 1882-1903 there were about 25,000 immigrants primarily from Russia. Bernard Reich, *A Brief History of Israel*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (Washington D.C.: Checkmark Book, 2008), 320. Many fled the Russian Empire to escape pogroms, and with the spirit of pioneers, they relocated to Ottoman controlled Palestine and laid the groundwork for future Jewish society.

<sup>28</sup> Reich, *A Brief History of Israel*, 320.

war which entailed another immigration: approximately 220,000 Russian-speaking Jews left for Israel during the 70s.<sup>29</sup>

By the 1990s, amid political and economic crisis and rising ethnic nationalism, Russian Jews began emigrating to other Western countries, along with almost a million immigrants to Israel. This influx significantly altered Israel's demographics. Following the outbreak of war between Ukraine and Russia, tens of thousands of Russian and Ukrainian Jews also moved to Israel. Today, Russian speakers, one of the largest immigrant groups, roughly represent 15% (1,500,000) of Israel's population of 10 million.<sup>30</sup>

### **Social Positioning and Activities of the Russian Speakers in the Two Cultures**

What is the social position of 3.4 million Slavic people in Kazakhstan? Over generations, they have been positioned there, becoming fully assimilated and acculturated.<sup>31</sup> To the local ethnics, they are identified as Russian Orthodox, with icons depicting Jesus as a Russian God. In areas where ethnic Russians live, Central Asians recognize that they form sub-cultural enclaves that contain Slavic customs, traditions, and aspirations. Ethnic Russians either love to remain with their ascribed privileges (European history, Slavic culture, and rich traditions) or strive to achieve new positions in wider social matrix of Central Asia.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Delia Rahmonova-Schwarz, "Migrations during the Soviet Period and in the Early Years of USSR's Dissolution: A Focus on Central Asia," *Revue Europeene des Migrations Internationales*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (2010), 23.

<sup>30</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian\\_Jews\\_in\\_Israel](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian_Jews_in_Israel)

<sup>31</sup> So, ethnic Russians visiting the Russian Federation often encounter discrimination from native Russians, who perceive them as being Central Asian rather than truly Russian. On the other hand, some Central Asians acknowledge them as their fellow citizens.

<sup>32</sup> They invest in "ethnicized businesses" (cf. "The Russian Minority," 15) or often act as political, economic, and educational liaisons between Central Asia and Russia.

How are 1.5 million Russian speakers contextualizing themselves in Israel? There are two social layers – Jewish and Israeli. The first two generations prior to 1991 have leaned toward Jewishness. Jewish society has been hospitable for those who had ethnic kinship, but simultaneously hostile for those without Jewish roots. As the second generation Russian-speaking soldiers enter the Israeli army, for instance, they often undergo conversion processes to attain Jewish status. According to Anita Shapira, the first generation Russian-speaking immigrants after the fall of Soviet Union are, however, exposed to “a divided society . . . between religious and nonreligious, . . . left and right,”<sup>33</sup> which is less collectivistic. In fact, those Russian speakers who experienced the totalitarian ideology in Soviet Union become secular and multicultural.<sup>34</sup> It is thus feasible for them either to preserve their ascribed Russian status or to navigate their achievable positionings in Israeli society.

### ***Missional Living of Russian-Speaking Believers as Minority Movement***

In the Republic of Kazakhstan, there are 301 Russian-speaking Orthodox churches.<sup>35</sup> While I do not know the total number of their membership, it is well known that the Russian Orthodox is supportive to local government and officially recognized by it. Apart from orthodox churches which are liturgical, there are evangelistic Russian-speaking churches. Evangelical Russian Baptist membership in Kazakhstan, for example, stands at 9187 across 256 churches (2023),<sup>36</sup> being a minority

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<sup>33</sup> Anita Shapira, *Israel A History*, trans. Anthony Berris (Waltham, MA: Brandeis Univ., Press, 2012), 453.

<sup>34</sup> Shapira views the current Israeli society as “a society of diverse cultural communities.” Shapira, *Israel A History*, 465.

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.gov.kz/memleket/entities/qogam/activities> – religious sphere.

<sup>36</sup> The downsized Union of Evangelical Christian Baptist in Kazakhstan was due to the continuous emigration of its members. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Union\\_of\\_Evangelical\\_Christian\\_Baptists\\_of\\_Kazakhstan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Union_of_Evangelical_Christian_Baptists_of_Kazakhstan).



group among 3,403,681 Russian-speaking citizens (0.27%) and among 19.9 million total population (0.046%).

In Israel, there are 280 Messianic congregations.<sup>37</sup> Russian-speaking churches are, whether they want to be called or not, categorized as part of Messianic churches. Russian-speaking believers make up around 7447 across 136 congregations, being a minority compared to 1,500,000 Israeli Russian speakers (0.49%) and to 10 million total Israeli population (0.074%).

How then do Evangelical Russian Baptists carry out their missions? The overall ministry spectrum of the so-called Evangelical Christian Baptist Unions<sup>38</sup> reflects the transition of ethnic Germans to a Russian majority. In 1992 when the Union of ECB of Kazakhstan was formed, however, it collaborated with four other Central Asian Baptist Unions, organizing annual conferences for pastors, evangelists, and teachers. Under the umbrella of Union, there are regional associations and autonomous local churches that primarily focus their ministry on Slavic people. Yet educational institutions, emphasizing the importance of contextualized ministry, provide appropriate trainings for future leaders.

What are the missional activities of Russian-speaking believers in Israel? Their ministry lacks systematic organization due to the absence of a unified denominational structure.<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, various pseudo-denominations have emerged among Russian-speaking churches, including Pentecostal, Living Israel, and “baptistic” fellowships, which aim to reach Russian im-

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<sup>37</sup> The epithet “Messianic” derives from their faith in Jesus as the Messiah of the Jews. Based on the report of the Caspari Center, Messianic congregations account for 15323 members, in *Mishkan: A Forum on the Gospel and the Jewish People* (Issue 86 / 2023), 7. On the other hand, Israeli government statistics presents a different picture: 36,630 non-Arabic Christians, which includes all aged from 1-85+, though. *Oclosiya lefi kvutzat oclosiyah, dat, gil, vmin – omdal mefaked haoclosiyah* (2022).

<sup>38</sup> In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, the current denominational landscape resulted from a merger between most Protestant Germans (Mennonites, Moluccans, and Lutherans from 1946 to 1991) and minority Ukrainian and Russian Baptists (1917 to 1991).

<sup>39</sup> Messianic Judaism, a newly born phenomenon in Israel, is non-denominational or often anti-denominational.

migrants and socially marginalized peoples. Many churches often adopt charismatic worship styles to attract individuals seeking spiritual support. Baptist churches emphasize expository preaching, relational evangelism and discipleship. Particularly, Baptist-minded leaders accentuate theological education for the existing and potential church leaders, aiming at church multiplication all over Israel.

### ***Indigenization and Contextualization***

*Missiological Necessity for Ethnic Russians in Central Asia.* During the colonial and communist periods (1860s-1991), ethnic Russians invaded, controlled, and transformed the Central Asian region. They extracted and exploited its natural resources while asserting dominance over the native peoples. Although their presence contributed to the modernization of indigenous communities<sup>40</sup> and the industrialization of the region,<sup>41</sup> their colonial and totalitarian practices<sup>42</sup> also triggered widespread discontent, leading to rebellion and migration among the ethnic groups. So, with historical grievance against ethnic Russians, the five Republics of Central Asia undertook under indigenous sovereignty the process of ethnicization in every area of life (politics, public service, education, culture) as a way of retribution.<sup>43</sup> These phenomena are the signs of de-colonization which cannot be completely pursued without the process of reconciliation.

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<sup>40</sup> Russian pedagogists utilized existing Islamic schools (*madrashas*) and seminaries to implement European way of education – Russian literacy, law, arithmetic, and craft. Bartold, *Istoriya Kulturnoi*, 131-32.

<sup>41</sup> Masanov points out that “Only in the 20th century did industrial production come to Kazakhstan, when the process of urbanization began.” N. E. Masanov, et al, *Istoriya Kazakhstana, Narodui I Kulturui* (Almaty: Daik-Press, 2001), 18.

<sup>42</sup> Gavin R.G. Hambly notes that “the Soviets developed an ingenious strategy for neutralizing the two common denominators . . . Islamic culture and Turkish ethnicity.” Practically, SU consolidated individual landholdings and labor into state-controlled farms. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/history-of-Central-Asia-102306/Under-Russian-Rule>.

<sup>43</sup> Peyrouse, “The Russian Minority,” 13-14.

Who can then take an initiative in the process of reconciliation between Russian-speakers and Central Asians? Evangelical Russian Baptists can take that issue into serious consideration because they are representatives of ethnic Russians.<sup>44</sup> Ethnic Russians might ask themselves: “Were our parents forced to relocate to Central Asia as political victims, or did they volunteer to the region? Did they contribute to oppression under communist ideology?”<sup>45</sup> If Central Asians harbor grievances against us, can we create a safe space for them to share their trauma? How can we help reduce unresolved biases, contempt and discrimination toward one another?” By addressing these questions, Evangelical Russian Baptists can pursue reconciliation both individually and institutionally.<sup>46</sup>

Was there any example of indigenizing partnership in Central Asia? During and after Perestroika,<sup>47</sup> when Russian Bibles were scarce, foreign mission organizations<sup>48</sup> produced illustrated children’s Bibles, leading many Russian speakers to faith. These organizations also supported linguistic contextualization efforts in the region’s Bible translation projects.<sup>49</sup> A “Biblica” project with a group from GCC and International Mission Board with ethnic editors

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<sup>44</sup> Historical grievances extend even to Russian-speaking believers. In fact, ethnic Russian and Slavic believers took part in peasant colonization during the imperial period.

<sup>45</sup> Or “were my/our grand-parents part of imperial colonizer?”

<sup>46</sup> Its metaphysical basis can be found even in the theological underpinnings of Russian Orthodoxy, particularly its emphasis on interpersonal relationships within the doctrine of Trinity. Michael A. Meerson argues that “the Holy Trinity [is] ontological love, over-flowing and self-diffusive, excluding the absolute loneliness of the one and consummating itself in the eternal communing of the three divine persons.” Michael A. Meerson, *The Trinity of Love in Modern Russian Theology* (Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 1998), xix. The Orthodox anthropological understanding of “personality” as a “*sobornyi*” entity, rather than a component of collectivism, should be deeply considered in the process of reconciliation. *Sobornost* . . . ‘spiritual harmony based on freedom and unity in love,’ in *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary of the English Language Unabridged*, Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc. (1976), 3:2161.

<sup>47</sup> In Russian, “rebuilding,” which means political and economic reform.

<sup>48</sup> Bible League, Bible Mission, and Institute for Bible Translation produced their own pictorial Bibles for Russian-speaking children.

<sup>49</sup> IBT translated the Bible into Tajik (1992), Uzbek (2016), and Turkmen (2017).

produced *indigenized* scripture for Russian-speaking Central Asians familiar with Islamic culture.<sup>50</sup>

How can then Evangelical Russian Baptist churches be vital partners in the process of indigenization? The first strategic approach is planting churches targeting *Russian speakers* in urban and small-town areas of Central Asia<sup>51</sup> The second approach is to reach native Asians. Russian-speaking believers have established “House of Prayer” (*Dom Molitviy*) churches, which attract *Central Asians* and enable them to hold native worship services within these host Russian churches. God raises up visionaries from Russian Baptist churches to engage in cross-cultural ministry. Russian Baptist churches sometimes collaborate with indigenous church leaders to help them minister to their own communities. Fortunately, some Protestant churches actively engage multiethnic communities, including younger generations,<sup>52</sup> while Orthodox churches primarily attract ethnic Russians.

Outreach to Central Asians in small towns and villages requires a different approach, as they often preserve pagan practices and Islamic folk traditions, resisting outside influences.<sup>53</sup> Ethnic Russian believers can humbly facilitate dialogues that encourage indigenous people to raise probing questions about

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<sup>50</sup> Artemev explains Central Asians' view of Quran as follows: “(They) ‘believe that the Quran was the last in the chain of revelations from Allah, which includes the hundred scrolls sent down to the ancient prophets (alayhi-s-salam), as well as the Taurat (Torah), Zabur (Psalms) and Injil (Gospel).’” A.I. Artemev, et al, *Religii v Kazakhstane*, Vol. I: Filosofiya I Istoriya Religii (Almaty: Antei, 2002), 6. Therefore, *Svyashennoe Pisanie* (Holy Scripture) published in 2003 offered a semantic translation of the Torah, Prophets, Psalms, and Gospels, using name *vsivushniy* (the Most High = Allah) for God, and into *Isii Masich* for Jesus, aligning with Islamic terms, which had faded during Soviet times in favor of *heristos* (Christ).

<sup>51</sup> The process of a mother church reproducing a daughter church has proven to be an effective and replicable model.

<sup>52</sup> Korotki observes that in major cities like Alma-Ata, Bishkek, Dushanbe, Tashkent, and Ashgabat, postmodernism has influenced many young Central Asians, leading them to view Christian and Islamic values as relative. Korotki, *Philosophy and Methodology*, 68-69.

<sup>53</sup> For details of the cultural modes and *ethos* of five Central Asia countries, particularly regarding those rural dwellers see, Korotki, *Philosophy and Methodology*, 24-69.

their religious tradition and reorient it into correct worldview and ethos.<sup>54</sup> After attending a course on Messianism, my Russian students learned how to ask thoughtful questions to local Central Asians. They would say, “The Quran gives Jesus the title ‘Isa Masiah,’ right? But what does ‘Masiah’ really mean?” Later, one shared, “I used to be afraid to share the gospel with Muslims. Now I can confidently explain how Jesus is the Savior, not just a prophet, by using this very title from the Quran.” Ethnic Russians, with their language barriers,<sup>55</sup> are unlikely to effectively reach sedentary and nomadic dwellers in remote areas. Instead, Central Asian ethnic believers, supported by Russian Baptist churches, can engage these communities through “translatable” methods like storytelling, poetry, proverbs, and music.<sup>56</sup>

*Missiological Challenge for Russian-Speaking Believers in Israel.* As indicated in III-A, contextualization poses challenges for Russian-speaking believers in Israel. To succeed in assimilation, Russian speakers establish subcultural communities within the broader Israeli society.<sup>57</sup> Like various ethnic syn-

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<sup>54</sup> As a reformed Muslim, Irshad Manji who experienced the freedom of her soul in a relocated place raised self-critical questions about Islam theology, hermeneutics, and praxis: “Will we snap out of our rites and spark our imagination in order to free Muslims worldwide from fear, hunger, and illiteracy? Will we move past the superstition that we can’t question the Quran? By openly asking where its verses come from, why they’re contradictory, and how they can be differently interpreted, we’re not violating anything more than tribal totalitarianism. If my analysis is wrong, can *you* (‘fellow Muslims’) explain why no other religion is producing as many terrorist travesties and human rights transgressions in the name of God?” Irshad Manji, *The Trouble with Islam: A Wake-up Call for Honesty and Change* (Toronto: Random House Canada, 2003), 236.

<sup>55</sup> A Russian living in western Kazakhstan speaks fluent Kazakh but struggles with his ethnic language.

<sup>56</sup> Harvie M. Conn defines indigenization as “a term describing the ‘translatability’ of the universal Christian faith into the forms and symbols of the particular customs of the world,” Harvie M. Conn, “Indigenization,” *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, ed. A. Moreau (Ada, MI: Baker Academic, 2000), 481.

<sup>57</sup> Shapira, *Israel A History*, 456. Shapira takes note of new phenomenon among Russian immigrants who had not known a community life in their native country and now desire for a Russian speaking community that does not encounter criticism from the Israeli establishment. Of course, Christian or Messianic congregation who wants to rent is not always welcome by local landlords, but its formation is not prohibited.

agogues, churches can serve as primary platforms for new immigrants to adapt to their new environment and achieve social positions. At a micro level, the Russian-speaking church can foster social dynamics through the active participation of its members, each entrusted with specific rights and responsibilities.<sup>58</sup> Theologically, the church as the body of Christ is not at society's periphery but rather at its central core, as illustrated in Paul's Letter to the Ephesians (1:20-23; 3:10). To reach out to Russian speakers, like-minded church leaders emphasize the formation and maturity of local faith communities. Encouragingly, in major cities, there are church-planting candidates and practitioners aged 40 to 50 actively engaged in this business.<sup>59</sup> These individuals play key roles in fostering formative faith communities.

In a welcoming local church, the dependent and vulnerable individuals become a meaningful agent in which various social patterns arise: Reflection on life in the Former Soviet Union, new look at gospel truths within their cultural context, and navigating complex issues like interracial wars, religious nationalism, and messianic Judaism. For instance, many Israeli believers tend to overlook 2,000 years of Christian history under God's providence, emphasizing Midrashic over doctrinal interpretation of the scripture. As this tension reflects the imbalance between Scripture's universal truths and cultural distinctions,<sup>60</sup> my Russian-speaking national partner's statement should not be underestimated: "The 95% of Gospel content is far more important than the 5-10% of cultural aspects." Believers from the Former Soviet Union, exposed to Orthodox and Protestant traditions, naturally connect with global evangelical Christians, as seen with Alexander Men. As an orthodox

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<sup>58</sup> Social positioning theory, as an extension of critical realism, clarifies how individuals and objects "are relationally organized as instances of community components." Stephen Pratten, "Social Positioning Theory and Dewey's Ontology of Persons, Objects and Offices," *Journal of Critical Realism*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (2022), 288.

<sup>59</sup> Four brothers we relate to became believers during the tumultuous '90s, felt divinely called to Israel, and are now planting churches.

<sup>60</sup> James E. Plueddemann, *Leading Across Cultures: Effective Ministry and Mission in the Global Church* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 150

priest, Men had been freely associated with Protestant believers. Repatriated Russian-speaking believers are also receptive to Christian theology, including Jesus' divinity and the Trinity. Their openness to Western Judeo-Christian civilization<sup>61</sup> is vital to the growth and maturity of evangelical communities in Israel.

First-generation Russian-speaking believers are focused on establishing themselves in a new context, so outreach beyond their community is not their immediate priority. Having come from the Former Soviet Union and trained within Baptist traditions, including IMB, they are likely to see their 2nd and 3rd generations to reach Former Soviet Union Russian speakers with the gospel.<sup>62</sup>

## Conclusion

Why should we seriously consider Russian speakers as potential people group in these two challenging worlds? First, geographical and demographical reasons rooted in geopolitical events highlight their significance. Just as European believers have reached out to Africans and North American Christians to South Americans, Russian speakers – long integrated into Central Asia and immigrated to Israel – can impact the two monotheistic-religious worlds of the south. The presence of Russian-speaking believers, within the framework of divine sovereignty, is a unique and fundamental aspect of social reality that cannot be reversible.

Second, the religious implications are profound. Russian-speaking believers, especially Baptists, embody a blend of Russian Orthodox and Protes-

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<sup>61</sup> Abba Eban, valuing modern Western civilization which the Hebrew spirit has profoundly affected, wanted to position Israel “not as a national entity of the Middle East but as the Mediterranean country that influenced the Western world spiritually and accepts it,” “Nationalism and Internationalism in Our Day,” in *Israel: Its Role*. 22, 127-28.

<sup>62</sup> Shapira, *Israel A History*, 455. Shapira rightly observed that “The immigrants from Russia did not ‘divorce’ the country of their birth. Connection with the *Rodina* (motherland), Russian culture, and preservation of the Russian language were all important to them.”

tant evangelical traditions. Their influence extends into the *monolithic* Islamic world alongside Central Asian believers, while those in Israel engage actively in church planting as explicit and implicit norms. This positioning, unconsciously competing and breaking any cultural hegemony, suggests that these minority groups are well equipped to fulfill the *missio Dei* in their contexts.

Finally, ethnic Russians, including Russian Jews, are patient and resilient, akin to farmers waiting for the right season to cultivate the soil. Russian literature often uses land as a symbol of the Russian spirit. Leo Tolstoy notes, “Spring is the time for making plans and resolutions, and Levin, like a tree which in the spring-time does not yet know in which direction and what manner its young shoots and twigs . . . will develop, did not quite know what work on his beloved land he was going to take in hand, but he felt that his mind was full of the finest plans and resolutions”<sup>63</sup> These analyses strengthen our conviction as expatriates that the sovereign God is using His called ones in Central Asia and Israel as the disciples of the Messiah.

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<sup>63</sup> Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, trans. Louise & Aylmer Maude (New York: Everyman's Library, 1992), 181.