Fragile Conviction
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The miracle occurred on a cold Sunday morning in March 2004, in a poorly lit basement, actually a restaurant, which doubled as church hall for a chapter of the Church of Jesus Christ. The service had started with the usual worship songs, but soon everyone’s attention rested on one of the congregants. Venera, a Kyrgyz woman in her twenties, had not spoken a single word in her life, and was about to be cured of her speech impediment. The prayers of the approximately seventy congregants waxed and waned, their sound joined outcries for divine intervention, producing a rhythm that made the air heavy with anticipation and full of energy. This was the kind of atmosphere in which one would expect the Holy Spirit to descend. Pastor Kadyrjan stood right in front of Venera and pressed his hand on her forehead. The tension in the air was palpable, and anticipation peaked. The phrase “Help her, Jesus” came from everywhere. Still nothing happened. Venera stood trembling in the middle. Then, when some started to give up hope, the Holy Spirit descended on Venera, and she started to speak. She spoke hesitantly and barely audibly to most congregants, but those who stood closest reported that the first word she uttered in her life was “Jesus” (Russian, Iisus).

The miracle left me wondering about how to position myself in relation to the truth of miracles. If I accepted the miracle’s divine nature, would that not indicate I had lost the critical distance deemed indispensable for analysis? But if I denied the possibility of divine intervention, would that not amount to positivistic reductionism and reveal atheist bias? If the former were the case, I might marvel at God’s inscrutable ways and suggest that the miracle demonstrated the power of prayer. That view is what Bakyt, one of the congregants, expressed to me after the service had ended and we were having lunch in a nearby chaikhana (tea house). If, by contrast,
I adopted a secular perspective, then I might analyze how the buildup of momentum produced merely the illusion of a miracle. To prove this point I could have stressed that those who had suggested that Venera called out “Jesus” later mentioned that they were not sure and that perhaps it had only been a grunt. In fact, this is what Bakyt—the same Bakyt—told me a couple of weeks after the events, when it turned out that Venera had not made further progress in learning to speak.

Despite their centrality in Pentecostal churches, miracles have rarely featured as an analytical theme in studies of Pentecostalism. This is partly due to the awkwardness of the truth question; so even when the scholarly gaze has rested on miracles, it has tended to evade the issue of truth. Thus, one prominent writer has argued that “analytically there is no observable difference between true and false miracles” (de Vries 2001, 27). Bruce Kapferer, moreover, suggests there is no need to engage with the truth question because the significance of magic and miracles is in their effect and affect (2003, 23–24; see also Ewing 1994). Such approaches rightfully reject positivistic reductionism, but in this rejection they risk excluding more productive engagements with the truth question. That is, by not examining how truth is produced, they leave important analytical opportunities untouched. As Charles Hirschkind argues, attention needs to be paid to how people distinguish between true and false miracles (2011, 94). Indeed, effect and affect cannot be understood without addressing the truth question, especially when the reality of miracles—their truth—is not taken for granted by the involved, as was often the case in Kyrgyzstan. Bakyt’s shifting perception regarding the miracle’s truthfulness profoundly influenced how he spoke about the event and potentially affected his relationship with the church. This underlines the importance of analyzing the trajectories of miracle truth.

I maintain that a focus on miracles is intellectually productive precisely because the mysterious and unstable qualities of miracles (and their truth) resonate with the unstable nature of conviction. This resonance can be illustrated with reference to the term “charisma.” Charisma is a quality of the present, revealed in the here and now, which cannot easily be durably transposed across time or space. Charisma as divine gift is what makes Pentecostalism both effervescent and transient. But understood in a secular Weberian sense, charisma is also the key source of authority “at times of distress,” when legal structures have collapsed and tradition has been
uprooted, as was the case in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan. That is, the sociopo-

tical context in which the miracle occurred was itself unstable.

Pastor Kadyrjan often made comments about the economic and social

environment, seeing his church as being involved in a larger battle be-
tween the forces of good and evil. He and his wife had moved from Bish-
kek to Jalalabad in 1999 to “plant” a church branch. It had taken several

years of hardship to build a sizable and reasonably stable congregation.
The problem at the time was, according to Kadyrjan, that Jalalabad city

had been covered in the “spirit of death” (dukh smerta). He and his strug-
gling congregation had been thrown out of the venues they had rented

several times. But they fought back. Thanks to the collective prayers of

his church the city had been (partially) transformed: the “spirit of death”
dissolved, resulting in inhabitants becoming more energetic and inno-
vative; there was a decrease in crime, proper shops (rather than market
stalls) appeared, and hygiene in the streets improved. Moreover, in early

2004 Kadyrjan was able to purchase a large, if dilapidated, warehouse

that was being transformed into a church hall. This was a real victory

because it meant the congregation finally had a stable location they could
call their own.

In these same four years Kadyrjan had overseen the “planting” of five

new congregations in the province. Some of these new congregations were
growing steadily, but not the congregation in Kokjangak, which therefore

frequently occupied his mind. In fact there had been several attempts to

establish a congregation in Kokjangak, but each attempt, he explained,
had been sabotaged. His most recent endeavors seemed initially success-
ful when approximately sixty people attended services for several months,
but by early 2004 the majority of these attendants stopped coming. Instead
of being disillusioned, Kadyrjan was convinced that these difficulties con-
tained an important sign: “It means that [Kokjangak] is under the spell of
Satan, and, if that is so, it must mean that Kokjangak is somehow a strat-
geic place.” In Kadyrjan’s view, the establishment of a vibrant congregation
in Kokjangak would deliver a serious blow to Satan’s powers, and thereby
ease the advance of Christianity in other locations as well. For the time
being Kadyrjan instructed Gulbarchyn, whom he had sent to the town as
a missionary and local church leader, to intensify the collective praying on
top of a hill overlooking Kokjangak in an effort to change the atmosphere
in the town.
We may not want to follow Kadyrjan in attributing success and failure to a larger cosmic battle, while still appreciating that the concept of struggle shaped and defined this Pentecostal church, and that the effects of this struggle could be counterintuitive. As Pastor Kadyrjan once told me: “We pray for [local government] officials to stop hindering us. But this may not be God’s way. Our faith thrives when it is being repressed.” For Kadyrjan, it was essential to remain on the offensive and to confront the “dark forces” that surrounded his church. As I will go on to argue, it is this “frontier mentality” that is at the core of the production of conviction. And yet, as we will see, the forward-moving drive eventually reaches its limits, with the forces that produced conviction ultimately responsible for its demise. It is at this intersection that the convergence between conviction and “miracle truth” is clearest. Both are produced on the edge, under the strain of forces that can propel as well as crush them. The truth of miracles becomes simultaneously more pertinent and less stable as we move into the frontier, not least because the “power of prayer” is more difficult to sustain in contexts where success stories are few and congregations are fragile. The unstable Pentecostal mission carried out on the “postatheist” Muslim-Christian frontier offers a stark illustration of the effervescent as well as fragile qualities of Pentecostal conviction.

The Post-Soviet Pentecostal Frontier

With approximately forty thousand church members in 2004, the success of Evangelical-Pentecostal Christianity in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan has been remarkable. This is not to say that Pentecostal Christianity was completely new to the region. In Soviet Kyrgyzstan several underground Pentecostal churches had been active, including one in Kokjangak, but my Kyrgyz Pentecostal acquaintances referred to these somewhat dismissively as “traditional” and “legalistic,” which anyway only catered to a narrow circle of Russians. It was only after the collapse of the USSR that Pentecostal churches started to attract larger numbers, including people of Muslim background. By 2004 approximately twenty-five thousand Kyrgyz had converted to Evangelical-Pentecostal Christianity (ethnic Kyrgyz made up approximately 60 percent of these churches, alongside Russians, Koreans, Tatars, and others). Boasting ten thousand tithe-paying members
and forty-five congregations throughout Kyrgyzstan, the Church of Jesus Christ was the largest Evangelical-Pentecostal Church in the country.

This section discusses the advance of the Church of Jesus Christ and asks how Pentecostalism, with its characteristics of rupture, charisma, and intensity, resonated with the post-Soviet Muslim geography in which it advanced. Given that conversion from Islam to Christianity is exceptional and rare, it is relevant to ask how and why conversion became an option for some Kyrgyz, that is, how the conditions that made conversion possible had emerged historically. This is particularly significant because in the pre-Soviet period the idea of conversion to Christianity was inconceivable to the Kyrgyz. Missionary activities, such as those of German Mennonites in Talas Province in the first decade of the twentieth century, had instead reinforced the notion that Christianity was a religion of alien Europeans and that Kyrgyz were Muslim by definition (Pelkmans 2009a, 3–4). However, seventy years of antireligious campaigning and Soviet modernization profoundly altered the playing field.

From the late 1920s onward, Soviet antireligious policies destroyed Islamic institutions, curtailed the circulation of religious knowledge, and “domesticated” Islamic practices (see Khalid 2006 for a good discussion). This did not mean that Islam was completely eradicated. Ironically, in fact, Soviet rule affirmed the connection of ethnic and religious identities. The implicit contradiction in the Soviet attempt to repress religion while promoting culture, when in fact the two cannot be easily disentangled, resulted in the incorporation of many “religious” practices into a standardized “cultural” or Kyrgyz repertoire. This also meant that adherence to an ethno-national group automatically conjured up a specific religious tradition. Even when not professed, religion continued to be a key marker of difference. Thus, Kyrgyz members of the Communist Party, even those who held an atheist worldview, would still claim to be Muslims, as this indicated their cultural background. Indeed, as we saw in chapter 3, the notion of “atheist Muslim” was not perceived as an oxymoron. The resulting “cultural Islam” was largely devoid of Islamic knowledge and religious effervescence, and therefore vulnerable to subsequent post-Soviet challenges.

Such “national” forms of religion flourished in the initial phases of the post-Soviet period. But the “nationalization” of religion also produced discontent from within, and excluded those who fell outside the bounds of the
(imagined) nation. In addition, “nationalized” religions became increasingly vulnerable when, as in the case of Kyrgyzstan, the newly independent states failed to deliver on promises of affluence, stability, and security. These tensions between national and religious categories produced various outcomes. Discontent with “official” Islamic structures reinforced the attractiveness of decentralized Islamic networks such as those of the Tablighi Jamaat that voiced frustration with the outcome of postsocialist “transition” and offered their own versions of “true Islam.” However, as we saw in the previous chapter, the views of such new Muslim movements were not always compatible with the ideas of post-Soviet citizens, especially those of urban women. The tensions thus produced rendered these women’s original Muslim identity increasingly problematic, creating a space in which many women—especially those in marginal positions—felt drawn to Evangelical and Pentecostal communities.

In short, Soviet secularism had relegated religious expression to the domestic sphere while contributing to the objectification of religion, which enabled Kyrgyz actors to consider their position vis-à-vis Islam. This condition of possibility coincided with the Kyrgyz government adopting the most liberal religious policies of all post-Soviet Central Asian countries, which in practice meant that missions and churches faced few state-imposed obstacles (in the period between 1991 and 2008). The destabilization of Islam and the liberal policies of the Kyrgyz government created an environment in which Evangelical-Pentecostal churches could be active and relatively successful. Although this background sketch suggests why conversion was conceivable, we now need to look at the appeal of Pentecostalism in the post-Soviet context.

The attractiveness of Evangelical-Pentecostal churches was partly constituted through the general appeal that the West had in the wake of the Soviet collapse. They represented “the modern,” understood here as the promise “to reorder society by applying strategies that have produced wealth, power, or knowledge elsewhere in the world” (Donham 1999, xviii). But while the association with the “modern West” proved advantageous to the position of Pentecostalism, it is important to note that the most successful churches in Kyrgyzstan were not foreign missionary churches but rather those run by Kyrgyzstani citizens of various ethnic backgrounds (see Wanner 2007 for a similar observation regarding Ukraine). The Church of Jesus Christ is a case in point. It boasted its connections to
international Christian networks such as Calvary International, the Russian Union of Christians of Evangelical Faith, and Derek Prince International. But the church was not founded or run by foreign missionaries. Ever since its foundation in the early 1990s it had been led by local pastors, with the senior pastor being an ethnic Russian (born in Kyrgyzstan), and Pastor Kadyrjan in Jalalabad (like most pastors outside the capital) an ethnic Kyrgyz. The combination of transnational involvement and local organization allowed the church to present a transnational image and to muster international support when necessary, while its home-grown leadership ensured that it was plugged into the realities of Kyrgyzstani society.

The Church of Jesus Christ grew rapidly. In the mid-1990s it “planted” church branches in the major cities and some district centers in the north; around the turn of the millennium the church expanded its activities in the south of the country. This implied a move from a region with a strong Russian presence and that was locally seen as secularized to a region that was seen as more Islamic. As mentioned above, Pastor Kadyrjan established his congregation in Jalalabad 1999, and over the next four years oversaw the planting of five additional branches in the Jalalabad region. These geographical shifts were paralleled by changes in the ethnic makeup of the congregations. While in Bishkek a (slight) majority of church members was Russian, in Jalalabad 75 percent of the approximately two hundred tithe-paying members were Kyrgyz.

Important aspects of the church’s attractiveness and success were its organization and message. The church offered not only salvation, but access to prosperity, health, and success by faithful prayer. Moreover, it did so by integrating its members into a tightly organized community of “believers.” Apart from the weekly service, all members were expected to take part in “home-church” meetings (domashniaia tserkov′) that would gather at least once a week. During home-church meetings, the congregants collectively pray, study the Bible, discuss their efforts in combating addictions and poverty, and testify about the ways in which God changes their lives, thus reinforcing the church’s theology in an intimate setting.

It is easy to see the attractions of this Pentecostal message and organization to people living in a state of “post-Soviet chaos” (Nazpary 2002), who are struggling with the effects of an unraveling welfare state in which life became more difficult and less predictable, especially for those who found themselves at the margins of society. These factors were reflected in the
overrepresentation of marginalized groups in the church’s demography. The Jalalabad congregation consisted of 75 percent women, slightly more than half of whom had lost a husband through divorce or death. Moreover, the vast majority of church members (71%) were migrants to the city, the majority of which had migrated there after the Soviet collapse (based on a survey among 121 congregants; see Pelkmans 2009b, 152–53 for details). Although I cannot provide percentages, it was quite common for congregants to have suffered from addictions before they came to the church.

The church acknowledged such patterns, and in the capital proactively engaged with it, for example, through its elaborate outreach programs to prisoners and the homeless. When asked, church representatives explained overrepresentation of marginalized people with reference to Jesus’s teaching that “the last will be first and the first will be last” (Matt. 20:16). Pentecostalism offers hope and direction to shattered lives, and concrete answers for dealing with the multifaceted existential uncertainty of post-Soviet life. Moreover, the idea that divine intervention can be invoked by prayer pushes people to assert their agency in dealing with an unruly world, that is, to tame the unpredictable forces of the post-Soviet chaos (see also Wanner 2007).

As is typical for Pentecostal conversion, church members reported an experience of radical discontinuity (cf. Robbins 2007). They presented their conversion as having plunged into their new belief, pushing aside hesitations and apparently overcoming their initial confusion. But these radical conversions were not necessarily of a permanent nature. Possibly because the speed of conversion meant that their worries and confusions were never fully resolved, possibly also because life in the late Soviet period had taught people to be reticent about official proclamations of truth, it meant that these new truths did not always become permanently internalized and that their suppressed doubts could easily resurface. The destabilization of fields of meaning and practice created an environment in which everything was potentially true and possibly a lie, which also meant that new religions were not always very firmly, or very permanently, embraced. Two kinds of uncertainty converge here: epistemological uncertainty (referring to knowledge) and existential uncertainty (referring to conditions of life). The centrality of miracles reflects this uncertainty, both in the sense that miracles work to overcome such existential uncertainty and in the sense that their epistemological status remained unstable.
Producing Pentecostal Truth

Zamira had moved to Jalalabad city a couple of years before we met in the autumn of 2003. Her marriage had ended, which meant that she had had to leave her in-laws’ village home and move with her two daughters to the city. She was lucky to find a new job as a teacher, but surviving on an inadequate salary in a city where she had no direct relatives was an uphill battle. The battle became an imminent crisis when her five-year-old daughter fell seriously ill.

I didn’t have any options left. I had taken my daughter everywhere—to the mullah [here: Islamic healer], the hospital—but all they did was take my money. That’s when I accepted [my colleague’s] offer to take me to her church. For a whole night I didn’t sleep; I stayed up and prayed. I gave myself over to God, asked Jesus for forgiveness. And by the next day my daughter started to feel better!

Zamira joined the church’s home group meetings straightaway, meanwhile keeping her conversion hidden from her relatives. When they found out several months later, they were shocked. Her brothers, one of whom had been involved in an Islamic piety movement, accused her not only of apostasy but also of betraying her Kyrgyz-ness (Kyrgyzchylyk). Her parents also responded negatively, but they increasingly “took it for what it was. They knew how I had suffered from the sickness of my daughter,” Zamira said. She stressed that since then she had continuously witnessed to others “about the healing of my daughter through Jesus Christ, and that He has completely transformed my life. I have witnessed to my acquaintances, my relatives, my colleagues.”

This story is one of many that I collected among members of the Church of Jesus Christ, in Bishkek, Jalalabad, and Kokjangak. Zamira’s account has many parallels with Pentecostal conversion stories from other parts of the world. The swiftness of conversion, the discourse of discontinuity (Meyer 1998; Robbins 2007), and the importance of witnessing (Coleman 2003) are elements that feature prominently in Pentecostal discourse and practice worldwide. As one would expect to be the case in any Muslim context, Zamira’s conversion to Christianity was controversial and drew hostile responses from relatives, but Zamira’s actions also illustrate how
seventy years of Soviet antireligious modernization had eroded the position of Islam to the extent that conversion was a distinct possibility.

The central feature in the story, however, was healing through divine intervention. Numerous converts told me that they first became interested in the Church of Jesus Christ after hearing of the healing powers ascribed to Pastor Kadyrjan. As in the case of Zamira, who came into contact with the church during her search for medical aid, many approached the church with the hope of being cured of illness or addiction. And like Zamira, they often had previously visited the hospital or local spiritual healers or both, without obtaining the desired effect. As one male congregant said, “I thought that they [Kadyrjan and his wife] were a kind of shaman [Kyrgyz, shamandar], especially when I heard them speak in tongues” during a service. Healing was not just the point of first contact, but an important element in conversion experiences. A former alcoholic mentioned that one night she went into the street and cried out: “Jesus, if you are the living God, please help me.” After that, she collapsed, later waking up in the house of a church leader, having lost the desire to drink alcohol. Another common theme was how God helped combat poverty. Almaz, a young man, told me, “For a long time I didn’t have work. Then, on January 19, 2004, I prayed to God and asked for work. The following day, when I was having lunch in town, I was invited to work. I understood that God had heard me.”

As will have become clear, my acquaintances in the church saw evidence of divine power in many corners of life. It was detected in the slow and creeping changes in the cityscape as suggested by Pastor Kadyrjan in the introduction of this chapter, and was just as likely to be witnessed in fleeting events, as when during a service the worship leader ascribed the return of electricity (after a power outage that had lasted for an hour) to the Holy Spirit. Divine power was seen to be at work when people recovered from their illnesses, got rid of other physical problems, or were liberated from their addictions. It was evident when they received unexpected help from a neighbor, enjoyed an economic windfall, or received a job after praying, as Almaz experienced.

An important aspect of these examples of divine intervention is their narration. It is through their circulation that happenings may gain status as miracles. To put it differently, central to the miracle business was the process by which people become cognizant of them, and start to recognize
miracles in their own lives and in the world around them. Indeed, the church actively encouraged interpreting positive events as gifts of God and as examples demonstrating the effectiveness of prayer. In services and home-church meetings, new converts learned—often literally—to interpret their experiences in terms of Pentecostal thought.

For a happening to be a miracle, the decisive factor is that it is caused by divine intervention. But for such a happening to be recognized and acknowledged as having been caused by divine intervention, several ingredients need to be present. First of all, of course, there needs to be a favorable outcome: an addicted person who is liberated, an ill person recovered, a jobless person who receives a job, or indeed an electricity outage that is restored. Second, this outcome should be unexpected: the addicted person had tried many times to quit drinking; medical doctors had given up hope of recovery; the jobless person had been jobless for a long time; the electricity returned at exactly the right moment. Two additional features are not indispensable but are conducive to miracle status: the absence of an alternative explanation, and the happening having occurred after (i.e., in response to) the prayers of congregants. Certain phenomena fit these criteria better than others, but the fit is always dependent on interpretation, influenced by presentation, and open to contestation.

The specificities of miracle truth production in the Church of Jesus Christ can be illustrated by a brief contrast with the institutionalized process of miracle validation in the Roman Catholic Church. There, putative miracles are painstakingly documented and registered, examined by experts belonging to a “college of physicians,” and tested against the alternative explanations of an official “devil’s advocate,” before the validity of the miracle can be (hesitantly) acknowledged (Duffin 2007). By contrast miracles were never formally tested in the Church of Jesus Christ. Instead there were powerful informal mechanisms by which miracle truth was produced and generalized. The reality of miracles was affirmed in sermons, shared and communicated informally between congregants, and staged in public encounters.

There was clearly no deficit of miracles in the Church of Jesus Christ. A seemingly paradoxical way of phrasing this would be to say that the miraculous was rather mundane—in the sense that the occurrence of miracles was routine and commonplace. Such an attitude was encouraged
within the church. Sermons often focused on the occurrence of miracles, and congregants were encouraged to share their own experiences with divine intervention. Stories of healing through prayer also filled its newspaper *Tvoi Put'* (Russian, *Your Way*) and was a recurring theme in the book series published by the church, seen in titles like *Power in the Name Jesus Christ*, *Breaking the Chains of Slavery*, and *Lord, Help Us to Pray*. The pastors often referred to the power of prayer and the need for committed prayer. Miracles were not to be questioned or scrutinized, but rather repeated and embellished.

Acceptance of miracle truth was facilitated by the links with existing cultural repertoires, and the flexible adjustment to local realities. For example, the senior pastor Kuzin in Bishkek would regularly invoke the dangers of immorality in the city and talk about the spirit of slavery (Russian, *dukh rabstva*) as evident in alcoholism and drug addiction, but I never heard him preach about the evil residing in local forms of spiritual healing. By contrast, in Jalalabad and Kokjangak, references to “occultism” (*okkul'tizm*) were common, as in the following excerpt from a sermon by Pastor Kadyrjan. The preceding week he had been invited to the house of an ailing Kyrgyz girl in Kokjangak. He immediately felt “the ice-cold atmosphere” that indicated the presence of evil. He explained:

There were pieces of paper with Arabic phrases everywhere: above the door, on the wall, next to her bed. Such a piece of paper floated even in her water jug. The girl had received medicine and had been treated by a közü-achyk [Kyrgyz, clairvoyant] and a moldo [mullah], but nothing had helped.... She feared that if she closed her eyes she would die instantly. Then I told her about Jesus. She didn’t understand at first. But when I started to pray, she started to understand, and protested that she was a Muslim. Nevertheless, she agreed to talk about [faith] and she started to feel better. Later I took her out of the house into the sun and she really felt better. When I left she asked me if I could visit her again. I promised her that I definitely would! Praise the Lord!

Following Kadyrjan’s example, the local church leader in Kokjangak, Gulbarchyn, tried to identify the evil spirits present in Kokjangak. In her analysis the main types of evil were “witchcraft” or “sorcery” (Russian, *koldovstvo*), the “spirit of destruction” (*dukh razrushenia*), and the “spirit
of poverty” (*dukh nischchety*). But she was open to suggestions that would improve her analysis. She explained that she asked all visiting “believers” about their opinion concerning the evil spirits that needed to be confronted and defeated.

This vocabulary demonstrated the manner in which the church adjusted to different contexts to address locally relevant problems. In fact, there were remarkable similarities between the worldview promoted by Pentecostal churches and local notions about spirits, as well as between Pentecostal faith healing and traditional “Muslim” healing. Kadyrjan once inadvertently commented on this when recollecting that he and his wife had initially often been mistaken for *közü-achyklar* (Kyrgyz, clairvoyants). Or as one of the congregants who had previously been active as a (Muslim) spiritual healer told me: “I saw many miracles of Jesus. I believe that he is savior and healer because when I put my hands with the name of Jesus on ill people they recover.” At least two messages can be taken away from these examples: they demonstrated the insistence on adjusting church doctrine to local realities whereby ensuring relevance, and they took seriously previously existing ideas about the spiritual world (see also chapter 6).

In contrast to atheist activists and Tablighi Muslims, Pentecostal church leaders did not dismiss “occultism” or “shamanism” as ineffective superstition, but rather incorporated these practices and ideas into their theories of spiritual warfare.

Ideas about miracles, propagated in sermons, made meaningful through their semiotic connections, achieved realness in the *domashka* (Russian, home church). Here, congregants exchange ideas and experiences, and thereby become experienced in recognizing divine influence on events in their lives. Or that’s what supposedly happens according to stories told by congregants. They referred to the *domashka* as a space of learning, where the confusing and mysterious aspects of the Pentecostal emphasis on the Holy Spirit became meaningful and understandable. A woman told one such story: “My husband accompanied me to the *domashka* at the pastor’s house. The atmosphere was cozy, everyone was uninhibited. They treated me as if they had known me for a long time. Then the pastor and his wife prayed for me. . . . I accepted [Jesus] in my heart, and that same day I was blessed with the Holy Spirit.” But it was not just about recognizing God’s ways. Inclusion in the *domashka* often facilitated positive transformations in people’s lives, also because it provided the mutual support necessary to
overcome addictions or to deal with social and economic problems. Zamira commented extensively on this point:

How shall I put it? The quality of interaction is different. When you meet new people outside [the church] you always need to be cautious. They have their interests, want something from you. They may steer you in the wrong direction. But among believers it is not like that. We call each other brother and sister. And it really feels like that. We watch over each other, help each other not to go the wrong path. During our meetings I feel energized. It feels like, “Yeah, I’m ready for this life.”

The surge of Pentecostalism across the post-Soviet landscape resembles in some ways the proliferation of magic. As Galina Lindquist has argued: “Magic deals with uncertainty, . . . neutralizing its destructive potential, and making hope, as a mode of existential orientation, once again possible” (2006, 21). Like magic, Pentecostalism is able to provide direction to agentic power within contexts that are uncertain and appear chaotic. An important difference, though, is that it does so not in a dialogue between two individuals (healer and client) but while embedding people in new solidarity networks. Moreover, these networks are not only about support and guidance, but about jointly facing a hostile external world.

The miracles presented in sermons and embellished in more informal settings had the potential to transform lives: incurable diseases could be cured, long-term addictions overcome, personal flaws repaired, jobs provided. For this potential to be realized, miracles need to be recognized as miracles. This point implies that they need to be seen as not only positive and relevant but also meaningful. They need to be, on the one hand, “miraculous,” while on the other, believable. There are several tensions at work here. First, miracles were craved most when and where they were least likely to occur. Second, while the church’s mundane approach to miracles allowed them to play a central role in everyday life, it also meant that miracles could easily lose their enchantment.

**Truth Decay**

I asked Aikan if she had experienced any doubts when she became involved with the church three years previously in 2001: “No, not at all!
With me it was rather the other way around. I was proud to be a believer, to go to this church. . . . I didn’t doubt anything. I simply—well, I quickly adopted that belief.” Not only in this instance but also on other occasions Aikan described her conversion as straightforward and complete. She and her husband had been living in Jalalabad at the time, and like so many others, she had converted through healing. After having visited bakšiš (Kyrgyz, shamans) without any positive result, her son had been healed by Pastor Kadyrjan. She became an active congregant immediately after her conversion, went out on evangelization trips, and was convinced that her prayers had not only cured her son but also given her a job. Aikan insisted that the church even had a positive influence on her marriage, because after his conversion her husband started to take his role as provider more seriously.

I liked it when they said that at home the husband needs to command, that the husband should be the one who works, and that women should be able to ask their husbands for household money . . . . When my husband forbade me to go, I told him: “What they say over there is good. They say that at home the husband should be in command, whereas with us it is usually me who scolds you.” So then he agreed that I would attend church, and a few months later he also started to go. After that, we both had well-paying jobs and we had a lot of money.

Two years later, for reasons not entirely clear to me, Aikan’s husband moved to Bishkek, leaving his wife and children behind. Because they had been living in an apartment that belonged to his relatives, Aikan returned to her native Kokjangak in 2003. After getting by on poor-paying temporary jobs, she began praying fervently for a real job. “I prayed for a job that could be combined with taking care of my children. And then I was given a job at the city administration. I didn’t search for it; they just came to me and offered me the job.” What struck me, however, was that she spoke of this fulfilled wish without emotion, which indicated that she did not perceive it (any longer?) as a miracle. Given the harsh realities of life, this was not so surprising. Her salary was barely sufficient to buy flour, potatoes, and cabbage for herself and her three children. Perhaps it was also because her prayers did not deliver her most intense wish. Aikan had prayed often and intensely for her husband to return.
Finally, after two years, he visited her house: “He stayed here for fifteen minutes, and then left again, saying he had to go back to Bishkek the very same night.”

In the months thereafter Aikan became more irregular in her church attendance, no longer participated in evangelization, and failed to contribute the tithe (church contribution) for several months. Pastor Kadyrjan admonished her to return to the church, but judging from Aikan’s words this was unlikely to happen. “I am still interested, that is not the thing. Simply, how can I tell you? I am simply tired of this life. I find it interesting when they talk about God. . . . As long as they sit in my house [during home-church meetings], I listen intensely and then I think ‘I should probably do as before.’ But it doesn’t work out. And I can’t pull myself together.”

When Aikan described to me the first years of her involvement in the church, she sketched a life of being on a high, an emotional intensity that was somewhat reminiscent of what Venera must have experienced when
congregants collectively prayed to cure her speech impediment: a trembling pressure with a clear focal point that produced a momentary outburst of energy. What both stories indicate is that although the church’s mechanisms for generating miracle truth were effective in the short term, they faced difficulties in the long run. The example of Venera, who after two weeks was still unable to produce more than just a few sounds (and had she not been able to do that before anyway?), showed that miracles may stop being seen as miraculous. Meanwhile, Aikan’s story illustrated that miracles involving healing or employment may lose their gloss or may even cease to be seen as miraculous.

The problem can be referred to as the “charisma paradox.” While essential for generating temporary conviction, charisma is inherently unstable. The amazement, the temporary fascination will necessarily wear off. If the charisma is not to evaporate completely, either new miracles need to occur or the charismatic needs to be connected to more permanent structures (i.e., institutionalization). But in neither case will charisma remain what it used to be in the beginning. Whereas new miracles will produce problems of credibility, more permanent structures are likely to result in a loss of effervescence. Aikan’s story is illuminating not only because it offers an example of this charisma paradox, but also because it shows that this paradox needs to be understood in relation to the socioeconomic environment in which the miraculous is asserted.

It is decidedly more than a coincidence that Aikan maintained her religious fervor while living in Jalalabad, only to lose it relatively soon after moving back to Kokjangak. In fact, her experiences dovetailed with the trajectories of the Pentecostal congregations in these two locations. As mentioned previously, after a few difficult years the church in Jalalabad began to flourish, boasting 250 tithe-paying members in 2004, most of whom had been with the church for over a year. Although the congregation in Jalalabad certainly fluctuated, the ups and downs were far less dramatic than they were in Kokjangak. When Kadyrjan first started activities there in 2001, he cooperated with locally residing Russian Pentecostals. After attracting a sizable crowd of sixty to eighty Russian and Kyrgyz attendants for a few months, the congregation shrank considerably amid internal bickering. Kadyrjan made a second attempt in fall 2002, when he sent Gulbarchyn, a female Kyrgyz church member, to live as a missionary and church leader in Kokjangak. This time the prospects seemed
promising, and for about a year the church services and prayer meetings were well attended, mostly by Kyrgyz women. But by spring 2004 interest had dwindled, and Kadyrjan was worried that his efforts would once again fail to produce the desired results.

On the face of it, Kokjangak would appear to be the perfect environment for the “prosperity gospel.” Not only were living conditions miserable, inhabitants believed that a better life should be possible. They had experienced better in the past, and the neoliberal “gospel” trumpeted by the Akaev government (1991–2005) had promised the “second coming” of an earthly paradise. Personally, I had experienced how a (temporary) surge of hope and anticipation was generated when a UNDP development project announced the start of its poverty alleviation program (see chapter 2). The Pentecostal Church, with its promise that earthly success and health were attainable through faithful prayer, was perfectly placed to stimulate the same needs and desires. Indeed, the quick surge of church attendance experienced by the Church of Jesus Christ testified to that very fact.

Pastor Kadyrjan remembered how in the early weeks dozens of people had been baptized in Kokjangak: “People just came forward by themselves, pushed along by the Spirit.” The skeptic might argue that many of these conversions were about experimentation rather than full commitment, but in any case a core was formed of twenty to thirty women (and a few men), who became deeply involved with the church in 2003. But even among them, many ended up being disappointed when the promised prosperity and health failed to arrive. Congregants prayed for an end to poverty, for new jobs, and for success in small business. Although Kadyrjan and other church leaders stressed that the reason their prayers remained unanswered was a lack of faith or lack of devotion in prayer, this type of explanation worked only to a degree. Ultimately, the credibility of prosperity teaching depended on the perceived success of prayer, and the failure to deliver tangible results was therefore a problem that could lead to disillusionment.7

Aikan’s experiences are particularly instructive in this regard. She had been an experienced church member when she moved to Kokjangak, and was expected to uphold the church view on failure. Church members would argue with her, saying that “if God is alive, then Kokjangak wouldn’t have
fallen apart and people wouldn’t live in such poverty.” Aikan’s reply to such comments had been that “only the old things are being taken apart. After this, everything will be built up again—and better than before.” The question was, however, to what extent she continued to believe these things herself. One evening she told me: “Sometimes I sit by myself and I think, ‘What has God given me?’ OK, he gave me an apartment, he gave me work, but I prayed for my husband for so long. And what happened? He came and said, ‘No, I won’t live with you.’ So where did my prayers go to then?”

The problem of disillusionment was more pronounced in Kokjangak than it was in Jalalabad. The destitute condition in the former mining town, the lack of stable jobs, and the risk and low pay of others, meant that economic success was a rare exception. Moreover, the patterns of migration and the abundant alcoholism meant that prayers for stable family life and reliable husbands were unlikely to be fulfilled, as Aikan’s story illustrated. Even though life in Jalalabad was also hard, its more vibrant economy made success stories more common. Many of the Jalalabad congregants were recent rural-urban migrants who had felt lost in the city and struggled to survive, but once plugged into the congregation’s close-knit network, they quite conceivably would find their way upward.

Although conversion to Pentecostalism can be seen as an emancipatory strategy for those involved, the act of conversion complicates relations with the wider society. In the mentioned survey of 121 congregants, more than 60 percent of Kyrgyz respondents reported negative reactions to their conversion, including heated arguments, prohibitions (by parents, husbands, and brothers) on visiting the church again, and (temporarily) deteriorating relations with relatives. Another 10 percent characterized reactions as very negative, including violence, expulsion from home or the family circle, and prolonged attempts at bringing them back to Islam. As the percentages suggest, these challenges were very common, but their effects were far from straightforward. They could both contribute to and detract from commitment to the church.

Ainura, who lived in Jalalabad and was part of a vibrant congregation, told me that her relatives, especially those on her husband’s side, had strongly disapproved of her conversion: “They told him to divorce me, they called him to the mosque, and an ajy [woman knowledgeable in
Islam] visited me, but I told her that I wouldn’t leave God.” In fact, the agita-
tion with which she told me her story suggested that these challenges had
strengthened her in her faith. Aikan’s recollections of her time in Jalalabad
were similar. She did have ample negative encounters with “nonbeliev-
ers.” People used to ask, for example, if they had orgies on special Sundays
(replaying Soviet propaganda about the Baptists) and how much she was
being paid to show up at the church. Reactions were also often negative
on evangelization trips, with people calling her “a traitor” and blaming
her for having “sold her religion.” But when she lived in Jalalabad these
negative encounters failed to erode her faith. As a counterbalance to such
negative reactions, there was the church and a relatively large community
of “believers” on whom she could lean.

This balance was disrupted after she moved back to Kokjangak. For
one, the negative confrontations became more direct, and they were no
longer restricted to encounters during evangelization activities. Several
times Muslim men came to Aikan’s door in the apartment building. Al-
though she insisted that she did not care about such visits, and gave de-
tailed reports of how she replied to their accusations, she still said that
one of the hardest things about living in Kokjangak was that everyone
knew her as a Christian. On top of the negative reactions she had to face,
it turned out that an increasing number of people in her immediate sur-
roundings turned their backs on the Church of Jesus Christ. Home-church
meetings that were held in Aikan’s apartment used to be well attended,
but more and more people “became afraid and stayed away. The moldo
[mullah] had visited them, or their parents did not agree.” Likewise, her
brother, who had converted not long after Aikan, visited her one day and
said: “Aikan, it turns out that it is a Russian God and not our God. Ugh!
I won’t go there anymore.”

In Jalalabad city negative encounters did not necessarily have a negative
impact on the church’s prospects. On the contrary, such encounters con-
firmed the ideas of church members about the corrupt nature of Kyrgyz
society and as such increased the cohesiveness of the church. Moreover,
negative reactions provided valuable material for testimonies, thus add-
ing to the heroism of “true believers.” Another reason why this invigorat-
ing dimension existed in Jalalabad was that the church offered a space of
refuge for congregants, often rural-urban migrants, who struggled to get
by in the relatively anonymous space of the city. In Kokjangak, however,
there were far fewer possibilities for retreat. Inhabitants, including members of the church, were in contact with their relatives on a daily basis and depended more heavily on the (non-Christian) social networks that had formed over their lifetime. As such, it appeared that any further growth of the Church of Jesus Christ hinged on both the emergence of a socioeconomic environment that would lend credence to the “power of prayer,” and on the stability of the congregation such that it could serve as a viable alternative community capable of neutralizing the hostile reactions of Islamic leaders and others.

By analyzing the relationship between the ideas of the Church of Jesus Christ and the social fabric within which they obtained their experiential reality, we begin to understand the complex dynamics of (temporary) conviction. These dynamics were influenced by the ideology and structure of the church, the motivations and actions of its members, and the responses from (predominantly) Muslim relatives, neighbors, and community leaders. This set of conditions led not only to the creation of Christian niches in a predominantly Muslim environment, but also to the appearance of new dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, which in turn influenced conversion trajectories.

The attraction of Pentecostalism was linked to the destabilization of Muslim and socialist contexts, but its prolonged impact depended on the possibility of demonstrating the fruits of prayer through the achievements of its members, and was thus interrelated with the socioeconomic dynamics of the locality in which it operated. The ethnographic materials contained in this chapter show that the popular idea that the messages of Pentecostalism thrive on social, economic, and political collapse risks ignoring that Pentecostalism needs an environment that offers (at least limited) social and economic opportunities to its members. In other words, the sustainability of new communities of faith also depended on the extent to which the church’s promises—of health and wealth—continued to be convincing. This was contingent both on the strength of the congregation within which success stories circulated and on actual possibilities of success. While economic destitution quite straightforwardly limited the reach of the prosperity gospel, the negative responses triggered by the Pentecostal presence in a Muslim-majority situation had more unpredictable results. In the case
of Aikan, once the enthusiasm wore off and the experienced miracles lost their gloss, the confrontation with Muslim neighbors resulted in gradual disengagement from the church. But the confrontation with disapproving neighbors and relatives could just as well have the opposite effect, such as in the case of Zamira, contributing to a sense of being uniquely chosen.

It is impossible to establish exactly whether these different outcomes were the result of personal characteristics, the deliverance of the fruits of prayer, or the strength of the congregations. But what is clear is that the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion can contribute to, as well as erode, the structures of faith. As was mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, Pentecostal effervescence needed challenges to produce a sense of exclusivity, of belonging to a chosen group. However, when such external challenges worked on an already weakened congregational structure and when prayer failed to produce success stories, they could easily lead to the erosion of conviction, and to disengagement from the church.

**Permanent Struggle**

[Church membership in Jalalabad city] rose to 250 and then it fell again, then it rose again, it is a process we go through. If you would add up all the people who converted in our church, you would probably get to eight hundred people. It happens all the time. People join the church, and then suddenly they say that they no longer have time. And that’s the end of it. What happens is that the “open” people come to our church, but then relatives and others start to put pressure on this person, trying to convince them that they should not go to the church, offer money so that they won’t go, and if that doesn’t help, they will ostracize them. It is the usual thing; persecution is part of Christianity. We pray for [local government] officials to stop hindering us. But this may not be God’s way. Our faith thrives when it is being repressed.

*Pastor Kadyrjan*

Engaging with the question of miracle truth does not necessarily lead to either positivistic reductionism or a collapse of critical distance. Rather, by taking seriously the empirical observation that miracle truth is unstable, and by analyzing how truth status is ascribed to and removed from specific incidents, important aspects of the working of Pentecostal conviction are revealed.

With its emphasis on prayer and divine intervention, Pentecostalism encountered fertile ground in Kyrgyzstan. The dislocation of society, and the unraveling of the welfare state, produced an environment receptive to
Pentecostal promises. But it was also an unstable one. This instability was reflected in the miracle business. Miracle status was fragile partly because of the unstable characteristics of the post-Soviet condition, highlighting the way in which truth is often less about evidence than about the organization of information (cf. Hastrup 2004, 456). The specific manner in which this information was organized, and how it related to the wider social field, made miraculous happenings momentarily convincing. However, the invocation of the divine could fail to deliver results, and miraculous happenings could lose their charismatic gloss or run up against rival interpretations. The congregants’ assessment of miracles depended not only on their epistemological underpinnings but also on the social relations that surrounded these miracles. The encouragement, repetition, and explication of unexpected happenings enabled the production of effervescence. But when these social relations would break down, and on top of this a non-Pentecostal network asserted itself, the truth of miracles started to unravel. The risk of failure was largest in contexts where the need for miracles was greatest, because these were also the situations in which it was most difficult to produce success in the form of jobs, regained health, and reliable husbands. And when effervescence decreased, when doubt set in, the challenge posed by rival epistemological and existential points of reference loomed particularly large. Such processes not only underlined the effervescence of Pentecostal truth, but also highlighted the tension between Pentecostal Christianity and Islam, and the active steps undertaken by relatives and neighbors to dissuade Kyrgyz congregants from engagement with the church.

What needs to be stressed is that people actively engaged with the epistemological and social dimensions of different bodies of knowledge. As I have argued, Pentecostal truth was about gaining a hold over elusive forces, about asserting one’s own agency. The notion that divine intervention can be invoked through prayer was empowering in and of itself. It gave people the motivation to try to overcome their addictions, the confidence to search for a job. It provided direction in a context of post-Soviet chaos, in a situation of ideological excess. This logic also holds true for the ascent of Pentecostal Christianity in Kyrgyzstan more generally. It was asserting its own presence by claiming to make an impact on society, by seeking challenges. The Church of Jesus Christ was a forward-pushing
movement, and could survive only by staying on the offensive. Numerous people fell by the wayside, but that was only to be expected because not everyone is chosen to be saved. In a sense, failure was part of the struggle between good and evil in this world, and it was through this struggle that a fragile conviction could be maintained.