

The problem of religious unity in modern Kazakhstan

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Abstract

The respect for religious diversity that Kazakhstan promotes appears to be under strain at home. Kazakhstan's legislation guarantees equal treatment of all religions, but acknowledges the historical role of Hanafi Islam and the Russian Orthodox Church. The purpose of the article is to highlight the results of an analytical and comparative study of religious communities operating in the territory of modern Kazakhstan. A comparative method is used as the main method in the classification, typology, assessment and generalisation of religious communities. In general, the presented analytical data should be related to comparative religious studies. Both are so-called traditional religions that have been present in the Kazakh territory for many centuries. Authorities seem unwelcoming of 'new' religious movements that have gained followers in Kazakhstan in recent years. However, due to the rise of religious extremism and terrorism around the world, religious tensions were found here. The study concluded that since gaining independence, religious activity in Kazakhstan has increased.

Keywords: Religious and ethnic tolerance, SAMK, ROC, religious expectations, terrorism.

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1. Introduction

The collapse of the USSR with the communist ideology and formation of new independent countries caused changes in national identity and personal life of these countries. In the Soviet past, people did not have the opportunity to satisfy their religious needs; the main inspiration for communists was their ideological identity, with the idea that there is no God, only the social accepted style of behaviour mattered. The communist party and Soviets controversies church; most of the churches and mosques had been destroyed in the early 1930s (Burova & Kosichenko, 2013). The early 1990s was difficult for plenty of citizens; there was no social stability, no jobs, no money and the growth of criminal cases was held in addition. Majority of the people lost guaranty in their financial and social future. This process was typical for Kazakhstan and that time religious interests and activity increased. The Government of Kazakhstan presented itself as a secular state. However, since the present religious situation in Kazakhstan has changed, the number of radical religious communities (ISIS) and the development of non-conventional religious beliefs have increased (Moldagaliyev, Smagulov, Satershinov & Sagikyzy, 2015).

The current religious situation in Kazakhstan is characterised as complicated and ambiguous; historically, Kazakhs showed dualistic beliefs; they believed in souls of their ancestors – ‘aruakhs’ (Valikhanov, 1985) – but they also were Muslims. Ethnical diversity in Kazakhstan, which is over 130 nationalities, shaped a mentality where the strengths of a nation could be described by world ‘tolerance’.

When we speak about tolerance, we base it on the basic idea of humanism. The emergence of the new tolerance philosophy, by changing the definition in a subtle way and merging the behaviour that requires tolerance with the person himself, has turned the concept of religious tolerance upside down. This subtle change in the definition is based on the philosophy of relative truth. Relative truth negates the belief that some beliefs are true and some are false. As a consequence, all beliefs are equally valid and all must be accepted. Combining the behaviour with the person makes anyone not accept the behaviour of ‘intolerance’. By accepting the new tolerance, we have gone from rejecting bad behaviour to accepting it. The new tolerance not only expects us to accept all behaviours, values and beliefs, but also expects us to approve of them and sometimes to celebrate them (Herrmann, 2010).

Religious tolerance should be considered as the complex phenomenon of public consciousness in which the world’s outlook and social mental sets combine and allow legitimacy of multiple religious traditions. Religious tolerance should be perceived and specific actions at the levels of individuals, public structures and the states. In other words, religious tolerance can be understood as the value and social norm of civil society shown in the right of all his individuals to be varied in both religion and confessional accessories (Bydarov, 2013).

First, it should be noted that because of the centuries-old coexistence of Islam and orthodoxy in Kazakhstan, a certain religious balance and tolerance has been formed, where each of the two religions form a niche. This balance of interests for many years was due to the stability and tolerance of the entire religious life of Kazakhstan society. Islam (Hanafite Madh’hab form of Sunnism) is one of strongest religions in Kazakhstan (Moldagaliyev et al., 2015, p. 220).

According to the Statistics Committee of the Republic of Kazakhstan, at the beginning of 2016, the population was 17,670,000 (Demographical Annual of Kazakhstan, 2016). The density of population in Kazakhstan is extremely low and it is about six-and-a-half people per square kilometre. This is due to two factors – the vastness of the territory of Kazakhstan and of little parts of these areas of life. The city has more than a million people in Kazakhstan; its former capital is Almaty (with a population of over 1.6 million people), but the population in other cities is much less.

Kazakhstan, as well as other CIS countries, is a multicultural state, with more than 100 different nationalities living in its territory. Most of the population (over 65%) identify themselves as Kazakhs;

the second largest is Russian (more than 23% of the population). 70% are faithful Muslims in Kazakhstan; another 26% of the population are Christians (orthodox). Over 12 million represent themselves as Muslims (Agency of the Republic of Kazakhstan for Religious Affairs, 2012).

2. Results

Leadership in these two confessions is carried out by the largest religious centres – the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan (SAMK) and the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC).

In the world today, there are more than 3.6 million mosques. Kazakhstan occupied a leading position by building mosques in the post-Soviet Asia. According to International Centre of Culture and Religion, the total number of religious buildings is 2,404 and 424 namazhana (preying houses) (Guide of a Theologian, 2014, p. 32).

In recent times, Kazakhs have gradually employed determined efforts in revitalising Islamic religious institutions after the fall of the Soviet Union. While not strongly fundamentalists, Kazakh people continue to identify with their Islamic faith, especially in the countryside.

Valikhanov (1985) was a first Kazakh scholar, who studied the ethnogenesis of the people, and concluded that a person's ethnic history cannot be studied in isolation from religion and beliefs. In this regard, he paid great attention to the study of Shamanism, which is considered a kind of primitive religion inherent to Kazakhs. In 'Traces of Shamanism in Kirghiz', Valikhanov (1985) wrote that despite the fact that Islam has long been accepted by Kazakhs, traces of Shamanism remain and are intertwined with the life and customs of the Kazakhs: 'Shamanism resulted from the need to know the universe and its wonders, questions about life and death, man's relation to nature, and which resulted in the adoration of the universe or the nature and spirit of the dead and the ancestors'. As an alternative to Islam among the Kazakhs, Valikhanov (1985) considers Tengriism. Religion Kazakhs, he noted, are different where, on the one hand, they worship the spirits of their ancestors and, on the other hand, they believe in Allah. To characterise these features, religion Kazakhs (Valikhanov, 1985) coined the term 'dualism', which is covered in the article 'Dual Faith in the Wilderness'.

Thus, the rooting of Islam in Kazakhstan took place in close connection with the pre-Islamic beliefs, Zoroastrianism and Tengrianism.

As a consequence, Kazakh Islam is characterised by tolerance for dissent, recognition of freedom of opinion in religion, lack of rigor in compliance with fanatical ritual and legal norms of Sharia.

The ROC in Kazakhstan is the second largest religious denomination. According to official data, the number of Orthodox institutions is 273 parishes and 8 monasteries, together with 17 other institutions. The churches were divided in 1991 by the decision of the Holy Synod of the ROC for three diocesan administrations: Almaty and Semipalatinsk, Shymkent and Uralsk (Guide of a Theologian, 2014, p. 48).

At present, the ROC occupies rather influential positions, strengthening and expanding its influence throughout the republic.

The positions of the Roman Catholic Church in Kazakhstan have significantly strengthened. Catholics have more than 84 different church institutions in the territory of the Republic, including the Greek Catholic parish, run by the four apostolic administrations. The total number of followers of Catholicism is 1% of the faithful population of Kazakhstan (Guide of a Theologian, 2014, p. 61).

The active missionary activity of western preachers led to the emergence of new Protestant churches in the republic and, accordingly, to a significant expansion and strengthening of the position of Protestant religious associations and communities, the number of which is already about 1,000. In general, there are more than 652 Protestant churches (Guide of a Theologian, 2014, p. 72).

The non-traditional Protestant denominations are so-called charismatic. These in our country are the following religious communities: ‘Grace’, ‘The Living Vine’, ‘Agape’, ‘New Heaven’, ‘The Good News’, ‘New Life’ etc. The most significant, in the number of believers and the community, is the religious association ‘New life’, which arose in Kazakhstan in recent years, a multi-ethnic composition. They have organised a Bible college called ‘New Life’. Currently, there are about 40 communities in the country, covering about 3,500 believers. In the ‘Grace’ church in Karaganda, there are more than 50 branches, including in Astana, Petropavlovsk, Abai, Sarani and other cities. In the whole country, the number of believers is close to 7,000. The largest communities are located in Almaty and Karaganda. In order to better manage the community and provide it greater influence, the Karaganda Grace Church is divided into ‘cells’. Each ‘cell’ includes 6–10 families of believers, with head ‘cell’ having the leader. ‘Cells’ meet regularly in homes of believers, where services are held, to analyse biblical texts and informal discussion on various topics (Guide of a Theologian, 2014, pp. 72–88).

The charismatic movements appear under different names: ‘Agape’, ‘New Life’, ‘New Heaven’, ‘Elijah’, ‘Good News’ of Jesus Christ Charismatic Church and so on. The most powerful movement – the church ‘New Life’ – shows a real missionary dynamism, forming communities that consist only of Kazakhs and Uighurs, and even has a company engaged in the evangelisation of the Jews. In Kazakhstan, there are more than 40 communities which comprise about 5,000 people. There are also a few communities of Mormons who settled in the capital of Kazakhstan, Astana (Agency of the Republic of Kazakhstan for Religious Affairs, 2012).

Among the organisations that have achieved the greatest growth in Kazakhstan is ‘Jehovah's Witnesses’. The movement has a congregation in almost every town in Kazakhstan; there are more than hundreds of communities. In particular, the position of the sect ‘Jehovah's Witnesses’ is strong in the south of Kazakhstan. For example, they are active in Shymkent, Turkestan, Kentau, Lenger, Sarah-Agash, Zhetysai and other populated areas populated by ethnic Kazakhs and Uzbeks. But nowadays ‘Jehovah's Witnesses’ feels a great pressure from government authorities (Toguzbayev, 2017).

Until the introduction of a restrictive law on religion in 2011, US Commission on International Religious Freedom considered the legal system of Kazakhstan the most tolerant towards religious groups in the region (US Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2015). Kazakhstan had already banned most Islamic groups associated directly with extremists or even tangentially seen as potentially extremist, including the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Hizb-ut-Tahrir al-Islami, Jamaat of Central Asian Mujahedins, the Islamic Party of Eastern Turkestan, Lashkar-e-Tayba, Al-Qaeda, Taliban and the Muslim Brotherhood (McDermott, 2014). The Tabligh Jamaat was also banned, and its members have been arrested and jailed for alleged extremist activities. Changes in the criminal code and administrative law in 2014 further increased the penalties for association with them, and for any other forms of behaviour that could be legally defined as extremist or increasing social tensions.

As part of the 2011 law (see Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2015), all religious groups had to apply for re-registration. Registration is now more difficult for smaller religious communities, as local registration requires 50 members, regional registration requires 500 members in 2 different regions, and national registration requires 5,000 members, with groups being banned from conducting any religious activities outside the localities or regions in which they are registered.

Considering amendments to the law about activity of religious organisation in their registration, all of them till October 25, 2012 passed the state re-registration.

Table 1. The number of religious organisations before and after registration

Number of religious organisation in Kazakhstan	Before registration	After registration
Islam	2,811	2,229
ROC	304	280
Old ROC	400	189
Baptist Church	364	100
Catholics	118	79

As shown in a Table 1, the government paid attention to the Protestants (members of the Baptist Church) and the Old Orthodox Church activities. The Baptist Council of Churches, with some 11,000 members, remains unregistered, refusing to apply because of requirements that it accept the primacy of the constitution of Kazakhstan. Smaller Christian groups, including evangelical Christians and those like the Seventh Day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses who focus on missionary work, have generally found it hard to register, and even if registered, they frequently find it very difficult to operate. Central Asian officials claim that the members of these religious communities can be socially disruptive, that through their efforts at proselytising they undermine the traditional Islamic family unit.

The Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan declared the secular nature of the state, determining and guaranteeing the rights of citizens to freedom of speech, thought and expression, which is also no provision for patronage or special relationship with any religion, declared by an equal and tolerant attitude to all religions. The basic principles of the Republic of Kazakhstan state policy of regulation in interfaith relations are quite liberal. They stated the position on religious freedom, equality, tolerance and pluralism. The legislative and regulatory frameworks of interfaith relationships are regulated by the law 'On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations' of 1992, which, according to experts, is fully in compliance with international standards. For complete legislative support in this sphere, the settling phenomena, not provided for by law in 1992, a law was passed 'On amendments and additions to some legislative acts of Kazakhstan on issues of religious freedom'. There were imbalances in education which cancelled the course of religion and abolished the Religious Affairs Committee.

Open borders and liberal religious legislation of Kazakhstan contribute to strengthen and expand the field of activity of various religious groups and cults, which contributes to the massive movement into the country of foreign religious missionaries and emissaries of numerous religious and pseudo-religious communities and organisations (Lukpanov, 2012). Some of them work illegally (Lukpanov, 2013), as part of a secret community, but many of them engage in the propagation of their faith by promoting an early treatment of the republic population in non-traditional religion for them, distant and alien to the traditional culture and mentality of Kazakhstan.

To achieve its goals (Kosichenko, 2013), the foreign missionaries have financial incentives to convert: finding them jobs and contributing to the employment of their relatives and friends that has found a wide response among people with low educational and cultural levels and low financial status. The mechanism of expansion of the social base of foreign missionaries debugged as evidenced by an increased contingent convert the population. In this case, the emphasis is on the training of local personnel. For example, most of the alien religious communities, such as 'Grace', 'Agape', 'New Life', 'Bahá'í', 'Jehovah's Witnesses' and several others, are headed by ethnic Kazakhs.

3. Discussion

In the last decades, the religious situation in Kazakhstan has changed: the growth of believers, construction of religious building, increase in the number of discussions about religious education and growth in the number of fasting people. Data of sociological researches show that if in 2003 the number of people who have called themselves 'religious people' were 38.7%, the results of study in 2013 showed an increase in 'religious people' (73.9%). As we have seen in last 10 years, the percentage of religiousness in youth has doubled (Kurganskay, Dunaev & Podoprighora, 2006; Nurmambetova et al., 2009; Shcherbakov, 2008).

The Institute of Philosophy, Political Science and Religious Studies of Kazakhstan provided monitoring studies (Nurmambetova et al., 2009). The sample consisted of 3,000 adult respondents from 14 regions of Kazakhstan, and from Astana and Almaty (in 2012–2013) with a coverage of 1,000 respondents (in 2014). Participants were students, undergraduates of pedagogical and technical specialties, and civil servants, former adherents of religious movements, pensioners, etc.

One of the first questions in the study was: ‘How did you choose your worldview?’ The majority of respondents (37.8%) answered that the choice of the world outlook has been formed since childhood, this fact confirms the existing theories of duality of religion in Kazakhstan and the strong influence of folk traditions inculcated since childhood. More than 25% have formed a current worldview over the past 10 years. Unfortunately, the researchers do not comment on this fact, and we do not know which religion the respondents chose. However, the fact that most of the respondents were students; and the fact of the growth of religious self-awareness in the last 25 years, may become possible answers to this question.

The study shows that the religious choice of participants is largely predetermined by the closest environment: relatives, friends and neighbours (46.9%). The second most important motivational factor is the mood in the society (15.4%). The third place in the motivational structure of each 10th respondent associated with the impact of special literature and Internet resources (10.3%). Missionaries (8.0%) are in the fourth place in terms of influence on the religious choice of the individual, and in the fifth is the influence of fashion trends on religiousness in society (5.1%).

Researchers have noted the fact that in comparison with earlier studies (2000, 2005), sociological monitoring of 2014 shows the essential growth of respondents who project the future of Kazakhstan as a religious country (dynamics, according to the measurements taken in similar methodological tradition and a methodical paradigm increases from 4.1% at the beginning of 2000 up to 7.8% in 2005 to 13.6% in 2014).

The data analysis of participant’s expectation towards future of their children investigated with a question ‘How do you think what kind of relationship with Religion would have your children?’ showed a strong family influence on a choice of religion. For one-third of the respondents (32.6%), the future of their children have strong ties with religion and 66.7% would like to see them respecting religion. 12.1% would prefer that children be indifferent to religion and 9.3% hope they would be atheist.

Another interesting result was shown in a recent study (Telebayev, 2013). Participants answered to question ‘Did you hear about volunteers from Kazakhstan who are involved in Syria conflict?’ Over 40% of the youth gave a positive response.

One-third of the participants claimed that ‘volunteers’ were ‘representatives of the radical, fundamentalist direction’, ‘representatives of criminal groups, bandits and criminals’ (32.6%).

The large group of youth tried to understand them and showed ‘sympathising’, believing that it were ‘ordinary people who have no work, of money, prospects’, ‘the people who have got under influence of criminal groups and people’ (39.3%).

It should be noted that some participants shared their opinion that terrorist activity in Syria conducted by ‘true Muslims’ in defence of Islam (5%).

Another serious question is existence of real threat of religious terrorism in Republic of Kazakhstan; many experts declare a stable situation in a country. More likely, it is connected with the fact that most of them do not see distinction between traditional Islam and its radical form (Eldes, 2017; Kurganskaya et al., 2013; Telebaev, 2008; Telebayev, 2013).

But analysis of the media testifies to a different opinion: ‘In 2014 and the first quarter 2015 in the Centre of forensic medicine of the Ministry of Justice of RK 380 expertise on research of materials of religious contents have been carried out. It means that the number of the criminal offenses connected with religious extremism grows in Kazakhstan. According to the Prosecutor General’s Office of RK, the quantity of the crimes connected with extremism and terrorism in Kazakhstan has increased for 61.3% in the first quarter 2014 in comparison with the same period of 2013’ (Analysis of Trends in Legal Regulation of the Right to Free Conscience, Religion, and Belief in the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2015).

According to Almatbayeva (2016) the government did not work with young leaders in religious area of interests. She mentioned in her article the results of a research; first, it has a critically high level of religiousness (90%) among its participants – youth leaders. Over 86% practice Islam. Half of those who have ranked themselves as believers are actively practicing believers, i.e., these are people who go to mosque or church, regularly participate in a Friday prayer, distribute a sadaka (donations), etc.

Among the reasons promoting growth of ethnoreligious identifications of youth traditionally social and economic problems are specified:

- Unemployment;
- Marginalisation of rural labour migrants in the cities;
- Low education level;
- Susceptibility to religious promotion;
- Redundancy of destructive information on the Internet and social networks, absence of control of use of the Internet of teenagers, etc.

Based on a respondent's answers, the government institutions missed a situation and did not respond in time. For Kazakh authorities, their greater priority lies with monitoring the situation in Iraq and Syria, where some 250–400 ethnic Kazakhs are reported as fighting as part of an all-Kazakh ISIS brigade (Tucker, 2016).

On 5th June 2016, in Aktobe, terrorists attacked a military base and a weapon shop; 19 civilian died. The Ministry of Internal Affairs of Kazakhstan announced this attack as act of religious terrorism. The Ministry of Education and Science, the Ministry of Justice and Ministry of Religious Affairs and civil society of Kazakhstan declared that the civilians will not be allowed to wear religious clothing and headscarves in public places (Eldes, 2017). The Ministry of Education and Science of Kazakhstan on 14 January 2016 presented common rules for school uniforms, according to which paranja and niqaabs should be excluded from school dresses. The SAMK made an explanation about these rules and confirmed standards of uniform in schools. The SAMK noted that first duty for all children should be education. According to SAMK, parents should not ask their under-aged daughters to wear a headscarf or another religious attributes (Yergaliev, 2017).

4. Conclusion

As a conclusion, we should mention that since gaining independence, religious activity in Kazakhstan has increased significantly. The construction of mosques and religious schools accelerated in the 1990s, with financial help from Turkey, Egypt and, especially, Saudi Arabia.

However, Kazakhstan's Constitution (1995) stipulates that Kazakhstan is a secular state. Kazakhstan is the only Central Asian state whose constitution does not assign a special state as to religion. At the same time, our state preferred to cast Kazakhstan as a bridge between Muslim East and Christian West (Address of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan – Leader of the Nation N.A. Nazarbaev to the people of Kazakhstan, 2014).

The presented review of religious formations in independent Kazakhstan reveals its social, geographical and sociopolitical conditions. As mentioned above, sociopolitical events have influenced the fact that a certain religious balance of Islam and Orthodoxy has been formed in Kazakhstan, where each of the two religions has formed its own niche. Such a balance of interests for many years was due to the stability and tolerance of the entire religious life of Kazakh society. However, historical and geographical data testify to the works of the Kazakh ethnographer and educator Chokan Valikhanov, who paid great attention to the study of Shamanism as a kind of primitive religion of Kazakhs. However, modern Kazakhstan reflects sociopolitical features and international ties, where completely new directions are formed against the background of the main religions in certain cases, such religious

organisations can be dangerous to society, as an example with an act of terrorism in Aktobe 2016. The given sociological study indicates that the people receive sufficient information about the religious situation in the country, and this area is also well controlled by the authorities and representatives of the mass media and social activists.

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