

RELIGIOUS IDENTITY: THE EXPERIENCE OF INDEPENDENT KAZAKHSTAN

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ABSTRACT

The article focuses on studying of the religious landscape of Kazakhstan as an important factor in shaping national identity and cultural memory. The authors examine the dynamics of the development of religious denominations in the country since independence, emphasizing the relationship between religion, citizens' self-identification, and nation-building processes. The analysis is based on numerous sociological studies conducted over the years, as well as statistical data from governmental bodies.

The novelty of the work lies in its attempt to consider religion as a foundation for studying national identity in Kazakhstan's multi-ethnic and multi-confessional society. The research shows that since the collapse of the USSR, the number of believers in the country has significantly increased, as evidenced by the growth in the number of religious organizations and places of worship, along with changes in demographic composition. The article highlights the influence of migration processes and the return of ethnic Kazakhs, which contributed to the increase in the proportion of Muslims.

The study also addresses issues related to religious extremism, stressing the importance of state policy in ensuring tolerance and neutrality. Despite being a secular state, Kazakhstan has become an example of interreligious dialogue. The authors conclude that religion continues to play a key role in shaping national identity, particularly within the context of Islamic traditions.

Key words: Memory, Historical Memory, Cultural Memory, Memory Research, Memory Trauma, Nation-Building, National Identity, National Idea, National Code, National Spirit, National/Kazakh Culture, National Traditions and Customs.

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Діни бірегейлік: тәуелсіз Қазақстанның тәжірибесі

Аңдатпа. Мақала ұлттық бірегейлік пен мәдени жадыны қалыптастырудың маңызды факторы ретінде Қазақстанның діни ландшафтын зерттеуге арналған. Авторлар тәуелсіздік алғаннан бері елдегі діни конфессиялардың даму динамикасын зерттеп, діннің азаматтардың өзін-өзі сәйкестендіруімен және ұлт-құрылыс процестерімен байланысына назар аударды. Талдау әр жылдары жүргізілген көптеген әлеуметтанулық зерттеулердің нәтижелеріне, сондай-ақ мемлекеттік органдардың статистикасына негізделген.

Жұмыстың жаңалығы дінді Қазақстанның көпұлтты және көпконфессиялы қоғамындағы ұлттық бірегейлікті зерделеу үшін негіз ретінде қарастыруға тырысады. Зерттеу көрсеткендей, КСРО ыдырағаннан бері елдегі сенушілердің саны едәуір өсті, бұл діни ұйымдар мен храмдар санының өсуімен де, демографиялық құрамның өзгеруімен де расталады. Мақалада этникалық қазақтардың көші-қон процестері мен оралуының мұсылмандар үлесінің артуына әсері атап өтілді.

Жұмыс сонымен қатар діни экстремизмге қатысты мәселелерді қозғайды, толеранттылық пен бейтараптықты қамтамасыз етудегі мемлекеттік саясаттың маңыздылығын көрсетеді. Авторлар дін ұлттық бірегейлікті қалыптастыруда, әсіресе ислам дәстүрі аясында шешуші рөл атқара береді деген қорытындыға келеді.

Түйін сөздер: жады, тарихи жады, мәдени жады, жадты зерттеу, есте сақтау жарақаты, ұлт құру, ұлттық болмыс, ұлттық идея, ұлттық код, ұлттық рух, ұлттық/қазақ мәдениеті, ұлттық салт-дәстүрлер мен әдет-ғұрыптар.

Религиозная идентичность: опыт независимого Казахстана

Аннотация. Статья посвящена изучению религиозного ландшафта Казахстана как важного фактора формирования национальной идентичности и культурной памяти. Авторы исследуют динамику развития религиозных конфессий в стране с момента обретения независимости, акцентируя внимание на взаимосвязи религии с самоидентификацией граждан и процессами нации-строительства. В основе анализа лежат результаты социологических исследований, проведенных в различные годы, а также статистические данные государственных органов.

Новизна работы заключается в попытке рассмотреть религию как основу для изучения национальной идентичности в многонациональном и многоконфессиональном обществе Казахстана. Исследование показывает, что с момента распада СССР количество верующих в стране значительно увеличилось, что подтверждается как ростом числа религиозных организаций и храмов, так и изменениями в демографическом составе. В статье отмечено влияние миграционных процессов и возвращения этнических казахов на увеличение доли мусульман.

Работа также затрагивает проблемы, связанные с религиозным экстремизмом, подчеркивая важность государственной политики в обеспечении толерантности и нейтралитета. Казахстан, несмотря на светский характер государства, стал примером межрелигиозного диалога. Авторы приходят к выводу, что религия продолжает играть ключевую роль в формировании национальной идентичности, особенно в контексте исламской традиции.

Ключевые слова: память, историческая память, культурная память, исследование памяти, травмы памяти, национальное строительство, национальная идентичность, национальная идея, национальный код, национальный дух, национальная/казахская культура, национальные традиции и обычаи.

Introduction

Scholars studying nation-building, national identity, and historical memory assert that these processes are directly influenced by the state of religion, language, national traditions and customs, and affiliation with specific ethnic groups. For Kazakhstan, the question of building national identity and shaping cultural memory is as relevant as the country's economic development. Religion may well serve as a fundamental pillar in the formation of national identity. During the years of independence, we have witnessed rapid development of both traditional and non-traditional religious denominations in Kazakhstan. Significant momentum was given to the construction of religious buildings, which was also supported by the government striving to maintain interreligious harmony among Kazakhstani citizens. The clear growth in the number of believers is evident across the country in various religious groups. Therefore, the relevance of this article is obvious, and Kazakhstani scholars need to continue studying this topic.

To date, a significant number of academic articles have been published, both in Kazakhstani journal databases and international platforms such as SCOPUS and other peer-reviewed scientific journals with impact factors according to JSR data. The conclusions drawn by domestic and foreign researchers are reflected in this article. However, the authors clarify that not all previous works are represented in this article.

This article is an attempt to analyze the experience of independent Kazakhstan in terms of the development of religious

denominations and to identify trends in our society. The article uses secondary data analysis based on the results of various sociological studies conducted earlier. The goal is to identify patterns and trends in the religious landscape regarding religious identity.

The novelty of this article lies in the authors' attempt to examine the state of religion from the perspective of national identity in Kazakhstani society. At the same time, the authors acknowledge that this issue requires further comprehensive and in-depth study.

The article consists of the following sections: research methodology, where the goals and hypotheses of the article, as well as limitations and opportunities, are outlined; the method used for analyzing the collected data; and the discussion section, where the data is presented and analyzed, and conclusions are drawn. This section also includes the results of previous research by Kazakhstani and foreign scholars.

Methodology

This article uses the results of sociological studies conducted at various times during the 2000s among Kazakhstani citizens living in all regions of the country. The sociological surveys were carried out by different organizations, including government agencies, private companies, and non-governmental organizations. In addition to these studies, statistical data sources from government databases were also used.

The chosen method involves the secondary use of previously collected research data. This

method is optimally suited to the purpose of this article, allowing for additional conclusions to be drawn under resource constraints when studying long-term trends.

The aim of this research is to identify trends among the population that subsequently define the religious identity of Kazakhstan by examining Kazakhstan's experience in the development of religious conditions during the years of independence. We hypothesize that the number of believers in Kazakhstan is increasing, based on the visible growth in the construction of religious buildings.

At the first stage, the results of sociological studies from various sources were collected. The next step involved evaluating and selecting the research that met the objectives of the article, followed by finalizing the list of selected studies.

In analyzing and writing the article, the authors took into account potential limitations, such as biases in the specialists conducting the studies and the possible influence of the study's sponsor or commissioner on the results. To maintain objectivity, census results from 2009 and 2021 were used.

On the other hand, the advantage of this method lies in the ability to conduct a secondary analysis of data collected over an extended period. The data obtained was analyzed using statistical methods, where the authors attempted to identify new patterns and confirm existing hypotheses. The results were interpreted considering possible limitations, as well as social and economic changes that occurred during the period of the sociological measurements. Ethical standards, the confidentiality of the original study participants, and the accuracy of source citation were also considered during the writing process.

Discussion

Religion is one of the key factors in an individual's self-identification, along with nationality, language, and culture, determining a person's status in society. For example, scholars assert that identity is linked to a person's association with a particular language, nationality, culture, religion, or race [1, p. 16-17]. Moreover, religious identity is considered the earliest form of individual identification in human history, forming the foundation of social and national consciousness [2, p. 54 - 55].

Cultural, national, and religious identities are fundamental characteristics of a state, as discussed in the works of C. Lévi-Strauss [3], P. Ricoeur [4], M. Foucault [5]. Identification

through national cultural tradition is embedded in the discourse of ethno-national and religious identity [6, p. 134-135].

In general, scholars agree that religion is one of the key aspects of an individual's self-identification and connection to a specific society. In this context, religion plays an important role in shaping societies and individuals, with Kazakhstani society developing multilayered discourses on religion that encompass international, regional, and national contexts [7].

Researchers are also convinced that religious identity is a type of social identity, viewed as a multilevel socio-psychological phenomenon [8]. Religion contributes to the formation of national identity, community, and society. The institutionalization of religious studies, rooted in Western academic traditions, emphasizes the importance of religion for societal survival, creating social order and sacralizing social ties [9]. Religion, as an ancient and important social phenomenon, is considered to possess two key characteristics: spirituality and organization [10]. Spirituality refers to how religions deeply shape people's values, beliefs, and views, while organization illustrates how religions play a key role in group identification within a particular society [11]. Religion is also a sociocultural factor that can influence language use [12]. Studying religiosity in Kazakhstan is important for understanding the dynamics of religious changes in the post-secular era [13].

The great Kazakh scholar of the 18th century, Shokan Walikhanov, the first to study the ethnogenesis of the Kazakh people, concluded that the history of any nation should be studied through the lens of its religion and beliefs [14]. The collapse of the Soviet Union, along with its restrictions on religion and religious practices, marked the beginning of nation-building in Kazakhstan on a confessional basis. Islam became one of the key factors in national revival during the development of society in all spheres – social, economic, and political [15].

The transition from socialism to a market economy contributed to the process of de-ideologization, where, along with achieving ideological pluralism, there was a growing desire to understand new meaningful strategies and to search for diverse identities, including worldview-based ones [16]. Modern socio-humanitarian studies of the Kazakh mentality indicate that religion/non-religion and religious identity significantly influence the lifestyle choices of an increasing number of Kazakhstanis [17].

Despite independent Kazakhstan being

a secular state, the government has not restricted religious freedom. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, religious pluralism flourished in Kazakh society. Representatives of other ethnic groups, such as Russians, Ukrainians, Germans, and Koreans, further increased the country's religious diversity. The growth of other religions in Kazakhstan can be attributed to factors such as the country's diverse ethnic and confessional makeup, the resurgence of interest in religion after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the relatively liberal and secular governance model adopted in the country [18].

However, leaders of the newly independent post-Soviet countries have refrained from making radical decisions regarding religion, as under the atheist Soviet regime, religion was relegated to the periphery and became part of culture. As a result, during the Soviet era, certain stereotypes and worldviews regarding religion developed within the population. Therefore, people were not ready for religious freedom amid the socio-economic crisis [19].

Nevertheless, Kazakhstan's government policy on religion has been cautious and balanced. Three key principles of the government's religious policy stand out: neutrality, tolerance, and parity [20]. Thus, in Kazakh society, one can observe the rapid development of Islam, even though members of different religions are provided with the conditions necessary to follow their own faith [21].

Many researchers believe that a religious crisis is occurring in Western countries with Christian civilizations, as religious disbelief is one of the fastest-growing worldviews, especially in the West. Many people deny the existence of God, and non-believers have become the fourth largest group globally after Christians, Muslims, and Hindus, likely due to higher levels of social and individual security [22]. Kazakhstan, in turn, demonstrates a «religious revival», encompassing both traditional religions (Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism) and non-traditional religious movements [23].

In the multi-confessional and multicultural Kazakhstan, which is located at the crossroads of different civilizational worlds and is both potentially and actually involved in the process of globalization, it is important not only to find but also to affirm and preserve a unique identity. Over the years of sovereignty, the process of self-identification has unfolded in the understanding of the place and role of religious traditions in general and Islamic tradition in particular [24].

A review of studies shows that religion

plays a key role in personal self-identification, nation-building, and the development of national spirit. This is a crucial factor for countries that gained independence after the collapse of the USSR, where atheism had previously dominated state policy. Specifically, in Kazakhstan, since the declaration of independence, despite the challenging situation for the young country and the government's cautious approach to religion, there has been a rapid growth in religious organizations.

Results

Since gaining independence, the proportion of the population identifying as believers has increased, as shown by various sociological studies conducted at different times. This trend is attributed to several factors. For instance, during Kazakhstan's time as part of the Soviet Union, religion was practically banned, expressing one's religious affiliation was not encouraged, religious buildings were not constructed, and religious literature was barely published. Overall, all religious denominations experienced a «stagnation». After independence, religious buildings began to be actively constructed, including those supported by the government, and foreign religious missionaries from various denominations flooded into Kazakhstan. The ethnic composition also changed after independence. Slavic and other ethnic groups migrated from the country, while ethnic Kazakhs returned to Kazakhstan. This fact subsequently influenced the religious composition of the country.

Several sociological studies were conducted at different times by various research organizations. The results of all the studies presented below indicate that, starting from the 2000s, the proportion of those considering themselves religious has increased.

For example, the World Values Survey conducted two sociological surveys in Kazakhstan in 2011 and 2018 [25]. The sociological research, conducted 7 years apart, showed the following: 21.5% of respondents in 2011 considered religion very important, and by 2018, 28.7% of respondents felt the same. In 2011, 33.5% answered «rather important», compared to 35.5% in 2018. Conversely, the responses indicating that «religion is not important» decreased in 2018 compared to 2011. In 2018, 24.3% of Kazakhstanis said religion was not important, down from 33.6% in 2011. Responses stating «religion is completely unimportant» decreased from 11.4% in 2011 to 8.9% in 2018.

Other interesting results came from sociological studies conducted in 2003, 2007, and 2009 [26]. The results showed that 38.7%, 77.3%, and 83.3% of respondents considered themselves religious in 2003, 2007, and 2009, respectively, indicating that the proportion of believers increased by 44.6%, or 2.2 times, in 6 years. This study also established that Kazakhs and Uzbeks are the most religious. Among the respondents, active believers were 32.2% and 38% among Uzbeks in 2007 and 2009, respectively, and 11.8% and 28% among Kazakhs in 2007 and 2009, respectively.

The U.S. Embassy in Kazakhstan mentioned in its report on the religious situation in the country that in 2019, the share of non-believers and atheists was 18.8% of the population (data derived from a sociological study) [27].

Sociological studies commissioned by the authorized body in the field of religious activity regulation in 2019 showed that 92.8% of the population considered themselves believers, with the majority adhering to Islam (70.2%) and 26% to Orthodoxy. However, these figures vary across different regions, with some areas showing a decrease in the proportion of believers. For example, in North Kazakhstan, 59.8% identified as believers, 52.5% in East Kazakhstan, and 44.5% in Pavlodar region [28].

In addition to sociological research indicating a growing number of believers, census data from Kazakhstan in 2009 and 2021 showed that the number of believers is decreasing slightly, but not significantly. In 2009, 70.2% of the population were believers, compared to 69.3% in 2021. At the same time, there were 11.2 million Muslims in 2009 and 13.2 million in 2021, representing a growth of 2 million. Christians numbered 4.1 million in 2009 and 3.2 million in 2021, a decrease of 1 million. It is interesting to note that the 2009 and 2021 censuses revealed that Muslims are more prevalent among rural residents, while Christians are more common among urban residents [29].

The census also showed that the majority of Muslims follow the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam, with fewer adherents to Shia Islam, Sufism, and the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community.

These data clearly show an increase in the proportion of the population identifying as religious. Another factor influencing this trend is the construction of religious buildings, the arrival of missionaries—mainly Christian—from abroad, and the overall spread of different global religious movements.

Statistics clearly illustrate how quickly the number of religious associations and places

of worship increased. In 1989, there were 671 religious associations representing 30 denominations in the country. By 1996, this number had grown to 1,503, and by 2003, there were more than 5,000 associations representing 62 denominations. In 2009, there were 3,129 places of worship, including 2,229 mosques, 258 Orthodox churches, 93 Catholic churches, 6 synagogues, and over 500 Protestant churches and prayer houses. By 2013, the number of places of worship had reached 3,244, with 2,320 mosques [30].

Currently, according to the Committee for Religious Affairs of the Ministry of Culture and Information of the Republic of Kazakhstan, there are 3,961 registered religious organizations representing 18 denominations in the country: 2,813 Islamic, 347 Orthodox, 93 Catholic, 593 Protestant, 61 Jehovah's Witnesses, 23 New Apostolic Churches, 13 Krishna Consciousness Society, 7 Jewish, 6 Bahá'í, 2 Buddhist, 2 Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and 1 Unification Church (Moonies). There are also 3,753 places of worship, including 2,824 mosques, 301 Orthodox temples, 115 Catholic churches, 421 Protestant prayer houses, 56 Jehovah's Witnesses prayer houses, 24 New Apostolic Church prayer houses, 6 synagogues, 2 Bahá'í prayer houses, 3 Krishna Consciousness Society prayer houses, and 1 Buddhist temple [31].

An important aspect of Kazakhstan's religious identity is the increase in the proportion of Muslim believers, which is closely related to changes in the country's demographic composition during independence. Since 1991, the proportion of the Kazakh ethnic group has increased, while the proportion of Slavic and other ethnic groups has decreased due to emigration. From 1991 to 2016, approximately 1 million ethnic Kazakhs migrated to Kazakhstan from abroad [32].

According to the 2019 census, Kazakhs made up 70.18% of the population [33], while in 1989, they made up 39.7% [34] and in 1999, 53.4% [35]. This data clearly shows that the proportion of Kazakhs in the population has steadily increased, as has the difference between religious denominations.

A 2016 sociological study by the Association of Sociologists and Political Scientists of Kazakhstan (ASP), supported by the Soros Foundation Kazakhstan, showed that 71% of respondents considered themselves religious, with the majority identifying with Islam (76.2%) and 19.2% with Orthodoxy [36].

Despite the high percentage of religious people, Kazakhstan remains a secular state, as outlined in the 1995 Constitution of the

Republic of Kazakhstan, which declares that Kazakhstan is a secular state where religion and the state are separated. Article 5 of the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan «On Freedom of Religion and Religious Associations» (1992) also affirms this principle [37]. Throughout the years of independence, the government has built a secular state, refraining from openly supporting any particular religious denomination. At the same time, the state has not restricted the activities of religious groups in constructing places of worship, disseminating religious literature, or allowing foreign missionaries to come to Kazakhstan.

Kazakhstan has also gained unique experience in building a dialogue platform for leaders of world and traditional religions. The Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions was first convened in 2003 on the initiative of former President Nursultan Nazarbayev. Official sources declare that the Congress's goal is to provide a platform for dialogue and to make coordinated decisions with the establishment of a permanent institution in this field [38]. This platform has not only improved Kazakhstan's image internationally but also positively influenced interfaith dialogue within the country.

However, Kazakhstan has also faced tragic moments related to the spread of extremist Islamic views. Some experts believe that the government failed to pay proper attention to these processes until 2011, which led to a series of terrorist attacks on law enforcement and civilians in Almaty, Taraz, and Aktobe in 2011 and 2012. After these events, the government revised its approach to regulating the activities of Islamic movements in Kazakhstan, leading to a decline in religious tensions and a re-evaluation of Islam as a religion historically opposed to extremist views, as such views contradict Kazakhstan's national traditions and customs, as well as the tenets of Islam [39].

Conclusions

Religion occupies a central place in the process of personal self-identification, serving as an important factor alongside language, culture, and nationality. It is one of the oldest forms of identity, which has historically contributed to the development of social and national consciousness. In the modern world, religion continues to play a significant role in maintaining social order, shaping values and beliefs, and fostering collective identity.

This is particularly evident in countries that gained independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union, such as Kazakhstan. Under

Soviet atheism, religion was marginalized in public life, but with the attainment of independence, a «religious revival» has taken place. Islam has become a key factor in shaping national spirit and identity, alongside the active development of other traditional and non-traditional religions. Kazakhstan's model of state religious policy, based on the principles of neutrality, tolerance, and parity, has contributed to preserving the multi-confessional and multicultural nature of society, ensuring harmonious relations among diverse ethnic and religious groups.

The study has led to several conclusions regarding religious identity in Kazakhstan:

During the period of independence, various religions (both traditional and new to Kazakhstan) developed rapidly, with most of the population considering themselves believers, and the percentage of non-believers remaining insignificant.

Due to demographic trends and Kazakh national culture, Islam predominates among the population compared to other traditional denominations.

The establishment of Kazakhstan as a secular state and the lack of proper government oversight regarding the spread of Islamic movements led to the emergence of extremist groups.

Overall, religious and national identity in Kazakhstan is increasingly centered around Islam, and this trend is likely to continue.

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