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## PECULIARITIES OF RELIGIOUS IDENTITY FORMATION IN THE HISTORY OF KAZAKHSTAN

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### Abstract

This paper highlights problems of religious identity formation in Kazakhstan. The authors call attention to the genesis of religious tolerance as one of the main factors of the structure of religious identity in Kazakhstan. Pre-Islamic cultural layer in combination with different religious traditions has made the basis of the worldview with some elements of eclecticism and syncretism. Being most viable, Old Turkic religious faiths having joined Islam later created a tolerance basis of a religious worldview. On the whole, religious identity is a symbiosis of spiritual values in a polyconfessional society, where historically, Islam and Christianity played an important role. Religious identity in Kazakhstan is considered from the point of view of different forms of studies. The authors in their research raise the following issues: What is religious identity? What is its origin? What is the role of religious identity during different historical periods? Has its significance changed in the modern society and what are the perspectives in the context of ambivalent relations of a state and religion?

*Keywords:* inter-confessional, relations, tolerance, Islam, Christianity

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### 1. Introduction

The analysis of major researches of religious identity shows, that nowadays religion in Kazakhstan is a critical outline of the identification process. We can mark elements of diversified identity, where in the course of life activities new identities are gained, and old main ideas of the Soviet past are lost; or we can mark elements of renaissance and nostalgia for the lost. At the same time, globalization has unclosed borderlines for new axiological orienting points in Kazakhstani society, especially concerning new forms of 'Islamic', 'Christian' and other identities. Modern identification processes show us that adherence to one or other religion does not determine the position of a person in this world and any society in geographic and ethnic aspects as identical relations

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between religious (confessional) and ethnical belongings can be in different spheres. Authors are interested in the current condition of dynamics of religious processes and transformations of religious identity in Kazakhstani society. The development of the origins of declared inter-confessional consent and religious tolerance is considered upon holistic and comprehensive analysis. Authors declare that the basis of stable coexistence of ethnoses living in the territory of Kazakhstan nowadays is in the following factors. Firstly, religious tolerance of Kazakh people over a period of the existence of the whole history has been formed in conditions of geographical position of a transit state and a long period of Nomadic way of life as well as positive influence of Great Silk Way. Secondly, Kazakhstan is a polyethnic society, where other nationalities apart from Kazakh people live. They bring values of Christianity, such as non-violence, love for a neighbour, work ethics and others. The third factor is the chosen strategy of the state that is directed to support peace and consent in conditions of inter-ethnic and inter-confessional diversity.

## **2. Religious identity**

Religious identity can be defined as “individuals subjective self-identification within the context of people’s religious lives. Religious identity is the answer to the question ‘Who am I (as a religion person)?’ In identifying oneself, one usually does so with reference to others by answering the question ‘Who are they?’ in the process” [1].

Peek’s study shows how religious identity appears in the social-historical context and that its development is variable but not statically. For example, the 11<sup>th</sup> September shows that a crisis can impel a particular thing, to become even more central to an individual’s self-concept. Through asserting the primacy of their religious identity over other forms of social identity, religion became a powerful base of personal identification and collective association for young Muslims [2].

Identity finding in a person via perception of an individual as a whole, like a certain continuity of an individual’s worries, as lasting inner equality with self, on the one hand, allows getting a certain idea about self-identification process. On the other hand, leads to contradictions between notions of individual and social identities. A person needs a group, a society for self-reflection. But a problem of religious identity establishes an identity of an individual in the sense of subjective understanding of personal involvement to some or other religious community, to external, social and communicative belonging. It is interpreted in the context of involvement of an individual in a religious community and understanding by this individual of his/her place in it. We can talk about multiplicity of identities in the modern world, such as Islamic, Christian, Buddhist, Jewish, Hindu and others.

In connection with conceptual foundation for an empirical measure of religious identity Bell first studies the current researches in the interaction between religion and identity, and then goes to carefully laying out a foundation

for religious identity salience and a reinterpretation of Marcia's four identity statuses specific to religious identity functioning [3].

Attention to the problem of religious identity formation is paid in secondary schools [4-6]. Researches are concentrated on the process of religious education, and possible effects on the society are investigated.

The notion of religious identity means the process of religious identity formation in a person and a definite form of confessional identity. Minchenko represents religious identity like "the way of perception of your orientation in its relatedness with other form of spirituality" [7]. Religious identity, its origin and the role in the historical period has changed and has its own transformations in a modern society. "The political life of Kazakhstan has exhibited a different and worrisome trend of the securitization of Islam, which refers to a discursive process of the creation of a new understanding of certain forms of Islam as existential threats to the state, community and people." [8] In this respect, we mark that efforts of the state are directed to the maintenance of 'traditional' Islam, which is understood as Islam, bringing tolerance and peaceful basis.

The historical dimension of religious identity was considered as the formation and realization of a certain type of identity at chosen historical periods. Pre-Islamic period, colonial, Soviet and post-Soviet periods are illustrative in this case. The post-Soviet period reflects the process of dynamic transformation of religious consciousness, the so-called renaissance or 'revivalism', which was the factor of strengthening of identification criteria in collective consciousness of the population during transit period [9].

Marginalism of collective consciousness incurs the process of the upraise of people's natural necessity of living in 'spiritual protection', it makes them turn to religion like to the basis of moral values.

### **3. Religions in the history of Kazakhstan**

Religion as basic component of social life in traditional culture of Kazakh society played an important role over a period of its history. Immanent forms of spirituality, which stand for the content of the Kazakh culture, absorbed different components of religious systems and are marked by the influence of Tengrianity, Zoroastrianism, Shamanism, Buddhism, Christianity, Manichaeism and Islam. Modern age requires searching the way for peaceful interaction of countries and continents, where we can see escalation of tension, particularly at the Middle East, connected with religious extremism. One of the main reasons of arising contradictions is the conflict of paradigms: "war of paradigms is the battle for the right to see the world well" [10].

Researchers mark that Kazakh traditional culture represents a stable immobile system, which is not exposed to any changes. This system has been formed by means of different vital functions, external factors (natural, climatic, economic, military and others). Furthermore, immobility of traditional culture of nomadic people, more specifically its basic part, i.e., environmental, was provided by generally static climatic and natural conditions of the Central Asia

[11]. According to Yudin, “it can be assumed hypothetically that many features of household and social organization, the way of life and maybe the mentality of the steppe nomads were determined by specific ecology of habitation of travelling stock-breeders in arid areas and basically have not changed a lot ever since hoary antiquity till the endpoint of new time” [12].

Immanent forms of spirituality, that are the main parts of the Kazakh national culture, are marked with unchangeable influence of Tengrianity and Zoroastrianism that can be also traced nowadays [13].

Islamisation of the Central Asia began in the seventh century, but the steppe territory populated with nomadic tribes did not provide a fertile ground for the spread of canonical Islam which is more prevalent among sedentary populations. The latter is a religion of settled people. It requires developed urban infrastructure for disseminating scriptural knowledge through madrasas. The nomadic culture was resistant to any form of theocracy or strict practices of canonical Islam [8].

Expansive polemic in the issue of spiritual-cultural grounds, religious identity of Kazakh people (broader, the Turkic world), particularly in the sphere of religion, arouses a complex of problems, and alternative decisions are put forward depending on the worldview line, philosophical direction and spiritual-intellectual efforts of Kazakh researchers [14].

Shamanism was of considerable importance in religious traditions of Kazakh people. “All shaman ceremonies, notions and legends, which are so closely connected with nomadic life, are all kept safe by Kyrgyz people”, noted Ualikhanov in his works [15]. Orynbekov believes that the analysis of ancient faiths in Kazakhstan has opened their continuity. Beginning with Tengrianity and Shamanism, from Mithra worship to Zoroastrianism, they are like an expression of unique entity – religious ideology of a nomadic society, which continue remain unchanged in all its aspects. In religious structure of the Kazakh worldview, relicts and rudiments of Tengrianity and Shamanism (Mithraism and Zoroastrianism to a lesser degree), continue functioning in ceremonies and traditions, values and social conventions. Tengri, Zher-Su, Umai appear in social conscience of Kazakh people to the present time, which deals with Zoroastrianism as the proof of steppe inhabitants’ optimism [13, p. 185]. The succession of the culture of this ethnos is demonstrated in retaining of some elements of spiritual and unspiritual inheritance of *Saka* tribes. *Sakas* (translation from Old Persian *Sakā*, from Classical Greek *Σάκαι*, Latin *Sacae*) is the collective name of Iranian languages of nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes in I century BC in ancient sources [16-18]. The famous empress of *massagets* Tomiris, as Herodotus tells about her, was addressed to as “the Sun, Lord of *massagets*” [19]. This fact proves that there existed a cult of high divine in bright solar colours. “It was possibly Ahura-Mazda or Mithra or Mithra-Ahura, different hypostasis of the divine dominated at different tribes.” [20]

Orynbekov specifies that Zoroastrianism was nomads’ ideology, which formed the basis of freedom and independence that became an essential part of their mentality. It came through the norms and traditions, values and forms of

behaviour and the culture of nomads in general, and in a certain manner affected the spiritual life of the inhabitants of steppes. “Spiritual mindsets of Zoroastrianism with its ideas of endogeneity and acute feeling of the motherland and patriotism became a religion of monks of Kazakhstan.” [13, p. 81] It enables to judge and imagine all the history of Kazakh society as a unique civilization with mutual far and close roots, to make a dialogue of cultures of different times and space with the same people, explore succession between past and present in the life of Kazakh people. It becomes possible to parallel histories and notions of the cultures of different epochs, separate the quality definiteness that is the basis of ethnos.

Great Silk Way was of paramount importance, it connected Byzantium and China, having such a various palette of religious confessions that co-existed peacefully for many centuries. They are Buddhist monasteries and Zoroastrian communities, and Christian sect of Nestorianist interpretation, Muslim mosques and Sufi sects, combining their preaching with traditional Turkomen’s conception – Tengrianity (Sky and nature worship). Later on, all that syncretically influenced the worldview of Kazakh people and their tolerance formation. According to the Kazakh historian Bisenbayev, the problem of religious preferences was very serious at different stages of the history. Tengrianity, Buddhism, Christianity and Judaism were found side by side at different periods in Central Asia [A.K. Bisenbaev, *Drugaya Tsentral'naya Asia (Different Central Asia)*, 2003, <http://www.kyrgyz.ru/?page=161>, accessed 5 September 2015].

However, this *ethnoconfessional* entirety of the Tengri culture was not ruined with the advent of Buddhism that brought additional meaning, keeping its structural entity and original cultic semantics. “The advent of Shaman-Buddhist syncretism with its structure and functions became the result of interaction of traditional faiths.” [21]

The Eurasian steppe was the place where different faiths came in touch – Tengrianity, Shamanism, Zoroastrianism, then Buddhism, Christianity, Manichaeism and Islam appeared. Ethnographic researches show that pre-Muslim faiths played the leading role in the formation of the worldview of nomads in the Central Asia. Other confessions, except Islam, according to Orynbekov, did not influence religious atmosphere of the region much. It is important to note that we can see the interaction of religions and their coexistence at this very region, in other words, syncretism appeared in the territory of Kazakhstan in ancient times [13, p. 100].

Omarov confirms the fact that Islam was spreading unevenly in Kazakhstan, and it influenced the traditional way of life of Kazakh people in different regions of Kazakhstan. “Islamism appeared in south regions of Kazakhstan first. By the end of the X<sup>th</sup> century Islam gained a footing among settled population in Semirechie and Syrdarya. In the X<sup>th</sup> century single groups of nomads saw the light of Islam, but on the whole, inhabitants of steppes remained committed to pre-Islamic traditions. Islam won its positions in the northern regions of Kazakhstan only in the XIX<sup>th</sup> century.” [22]

Today's Kazakhstan is polyethnic by its structure; it caused spiritual changes in the basis of the Kazakh identity. It is connected with colonization of the territory of Kazakhstan by Russia. In 1911, 67.2 % of the population of the region were Kazakh people and 28.5% were Russian and Ukrainian. The XX<sup>th</sup> century showed the rundown of Kazakh people, and in 1999, there were 53.4 % of Kazakh people and 33.6% of Russian and Ukrainian, 13% of other peoples [23].

Representatives of Christianity are represented to the full extent in Kazakhstan, influencing religious processes and identity. Christianity in Kazakhstan is represented by three basic kinds: Orthodoxy, Catholicism and Protestantism. Apart from that there is the religious community 'Surb Hach' ('Holly Cross') of the Armenian Apostolic Church (refers to the so-called Old Eastern or non-Chalcedonian Churches, which did not accept the confession of faith, sanctioned at Chalcedonian Council in 451 – the IV<sup>th</sup> Ecumenical). Although, non-Chalcedonian Churches are sometimes called Old-Orthodox, they do not have Eucharistic interaction (the symbol of unity principle) with Orthodox Churches.

The present Kazakhstani reality in its core holds some historical realities, which have been formed not only during the last two centuries. The first appearance of Christians on the territory of the Central Asia in Merve, according to medieval historian Biruni, dates from the III century AD [24]. According to the historical data, there are buildings of the III-IV centuries, especially for Christian religion.

Nestorianists were pursued in Byzantium and Syria, and they were actively moving to the Central Asia. In the VII–VIII centuries, Nestorianism widely spread in the cities of South of Kazakhstan and Semirechie. There were Christian churches in many cities. At the turn of the IX–X centuries a special karluk metropolity was founded, Christian churches functioned in Taraz and Merke and Christians lived in the cities of Syrdaria. Guillaume de Rubrouck tells about the Christians of Ily valley, which had a church in Kayalyk and their own village [25].

Orthodoxy in Kazakhstan is the second biggest confession after Islam. Orthodoxy appeared in the territory of Kazakhstan in the course of colonization of Russian settlers of Siberia and the Far East. In the XIX<sup>th</sup> century, a Kyrgyz spiritual mission was founded in Kazakhstan; it existed until 1971. As it is known, as Soviet system grew and widened, the propaganda of the atheistic worldview also strengthened. It had a tough character, and as a result, many priests were shot or sentenced to a long-term imprisonment.

Only in 1945 Alma-Ata and Kazakh eparchies were established in the region. In the 90s of the XX<sup>th</sup> century we can see the revival of Orthodox traditions in Kazakhstan upon acquiring independence of the country. On May 7, 2003 three eparchies of the Russian Orthodox Church were arranged in Kazakhstani metropolitan district. On October 6, 2010 three new eparchies were founded in Kazakhstan. On October 5, 6 2011 three more eparchies were created out of the previous six, and at the beginning of 2011 there were 304 Orthodox

religious communities. On October 17, 2012 the Republican religious community – metropolitan district was founded; it united 9 eparchies and 261 parishes. Armenian Apostolic Church and eight Old Believer churches were reregistered.

Speaking about Catholicism, one should note, that the Franciscan monks were the first Catholic missionars in Kazakhstan. By the order of the Roman pontiff, in 1245, the mission of Giovanni da Pian del Carpine [25, p. 263] was sent to ‘Great Khans’. It is known, that the heads of Catholic Church, Nikolas IV and John XXII, had correspondence with Turkic Khans [26].

The history of Catholicism in Kazakhstan continued in the XVIII – the second part of the XIX century, when Polish exiled, military men and special settlers appeared here. A Catholic church existed in Kostanay at the end of the XIX<sup>th</sup> century. At the beginning of the XX<sup>th</sup> century priests of Kostanay curacy also served in Akmola and Semipalatinsk regions, where communities of Catholic Polish and German settlers lived. There were 6.000 Catholics and 8 houses of prayer in 1917. There was a church of Sacred Heart of Jesus in Petropavlovsk (it is the only Catholic Church in Kazakhstan, which has survived since the pre-revolutionary times). In the 1920-1930s, almost all Catholic curacies were closed. In 1977, the Catholic community in Kazakhstan was officially registered and received permission to build a church. In 1979, a religious community in Tselinograd (the city of Astana) was registered. In the spring of 1991, Apostolic Administry of Kazakhstan and Central Asia was founded; it included Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan. Karaganda became its centre. Since August 1999, the Apostolic Administry of Kazakhstan was reorganized into Karaganda Eparchy (curacies of Karaganda and Eastern-Kazakhstan regions), where Jan Pawel Lenga became bishop and three Apostolic Administries were founded. In May 2003, current organizational structure of Catholic Church in Kazakhstan was validated. As per resolution of the Pope John Paul II all the territory of the country was included into the Catholic metropolis, including *archieparchy* with the headquarters in the city of Astana, two eparchies (the cities of Almaty and Karaganda) and the Apostolic Administry (the city of Atyrau) [27].

Protestant communities appeared on the territory of Kazakhstan after joining Russia. Systematic strengthening of the migration processes from the European part of Russia to Kazakhstan started in the 80s of the XIX<sup>th</sup> century, and later – as a result of Stolypin’s reform in 1906. A significant flow of Protestantism followers is connected with Stalinist repressions and forcible deportation of representatives of many nations to Kazakhstan in the 30-40s of the XX<sup>th</sup> century [28].

In summary, Christianity brought its values and worldviews in the process of interethnic relations, which influenced the transformations of religious identity. According to Weber’s work on ethic theory, it positively influenced the market economy of Kazakhstan [29].

Thus, interaction of different cultural traditions inevitably caused syncretism, indicative for all pre-Islamic cultural layers. Notably, Old Turkic faiths were found the most viable within this layer. Having joined Islam, they became a tolerant basis of religious worldview.

#### **4. Discussion**

At the end of the XIX<sup>th</sup> century, northern regions of Kazakhstan were entirely in the sphere of influence of Islam. Kazakh people were acquainted with the basics of Muslim beliefs; they followed its prescripts, taught children at Muslim schools, and attended mosques. Kazakh people were indifferent to religious issues until they came to touch with another culture, civilization, in other words, until they were influenced by external circumstances. The Soviet period brought the atheistic worldview in a greater degree. After USSR's collapse the doors for missionary activity were opened, and that activity well developed upon the end of the spiritual vacuum. Open access to informational space brought different kinds of religions like Islam and Christianity.

The Kazakhstani government and the muftiate mimicked their Russian and Uzbek counterparts in legitimising the dichotomy of 'traditional' (i.e., home-grown, apolitical Islam) and 'untraditional' (foreign and radical Islam) [30, 31]. The reason for 'mimicked' is the influence of informational space in the Russian language, more familiar to Kazakh researchers. "The collapse of the Soviet Union led to the strengthening of the Islamic identity. Some of the important factors were: a) There was no more any external pressure on the internal form/essence or Muslim beliefs and traditions; b) Religious ideas were mainstreamed and given extensive support by many political actors pursuing their political interests; and c) The influence of good governance and post-modern development." [32]

Over recent years the Central Asia has been considered as the object of influence of different powers. A big game of the UK and Russia took place here, the Soviet Union used this area to influence the third world countries, interests of Turkey and Iran for secular and fundamental ways of development of the region came into collision here. A big chess paly is going on. But, can we forget about the fact, that the Central Asia has been an active participant in the global history. Roots of world religions originated from here, big migration occurred, big empires were born, prominent thinkers and warriors acted here. The region itself is not only the meeting point of civilizations, but the original civilization with its own history, traditions and future [<http://www.kyrgyz.ru/?page=161>].

With regard to Christianity in Central Asia, Peyrouse specifies, that religion for the representatives of not titular ethnos is the expression of their identity. "Thus, religion is the important element of Christian routine. Orthodox leaders aim to use national factor to get support from the Russians, who nowadays encounter the status of cultural and political minority. Russian people in Kazakhstan use the Church for strengthening the national identity in another way: Orthodox Church states that northern steppes of Kazakhstan are a Russian



home.” [33] You should understand that this point of view can have a subjective character, as objective reality is shown like this: the Act of 2011 on religious communities and organizations recognizes two religions historically existing in the republic, they are Islam of Madhhab Hanifah and Christian Orthodoxy. This testifies a somewhat equivalent relation to these religions. This equivalence is defined by Peyrouse as follows: “Orthodox Church strives to explain its superiority over other Christian movements in the Central Asia and confirm its presence equal to Islam. Spiritual leaders state that every Russian is inseparably connected with Eastern Christianity, with ‘Russian’, and ‘Orthodox’, used as virtual synonyms. Orthodox leaders consider all post-Soviet space their canonical territory that gives them the right of superiority over all other Churches. Missioners continued their work in the Central Asia, despite hostility of Orthodoxy and Islam. They tried to stop the organization of summer camps for Protestant movements.” [33]

## **5. Conclusions**

Problems of religious identity formation in Kazakhstan are based on three factors. The first one is the religious tolerance, formed in the religious structure of the Kazakh worldview, where Tengrianity. Manichaeism, Shamanism, Zoroastrianism, Mithraism exist till nowadays in social consciousness with a cult of idea of freedom and independence. The most important borrowed doctrines of world religions like Buddhism, Christianity and Islam influenced later in syncretic form the mentality of Kazakh ethnos and formation of religious tolerance. The second positive factor is the influence of Christian values, thus in the process of interethnic relations, Christianity brought its worldviews and value, which influenced the transformation of religious identity.

For example, there are Protestant confessions in Kazakhstan, which have been functioning for a long period. There are also religious movements which appeared in Kazakhstan during the post-Soviet period. The third factor is peace support and consent in the country despite all the difficulties. Active interference into religion should not be considered as authoritarianism criteria. We should understand that national development of democratic country within the period of more than 20 years required a lot of effort on the part of the government. The government with certain cautiousness makes decisions concerning the religion sphere, as there are several reasons for that. The first reason is the Soviet atheistic past, where religion was expelled and veiled as a sphere of culture. The second reason is the result of the first one: mentality and worldview stereotypes during the Soviet period among the population. Consequently, the population was not ready to such experience with freedom (beginning of the 90s of the XX<sup>th</sup> century) with regard to search of new religious values against the background of social-economic crisis.

Kazakh culture has changed together with the historical events of the country and to date is actively involved in the processes of inter-civilization dialogue.

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