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# EXPLORING THE PHENOMENON OF RELIGIOUS CONVERSION AMONG KAZAKH YOUTH IN THE GLOBALIZED SOCIETY

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## Abstract

This study explores the dynamics of secularism, democracy, and the spread of foreign religious trends in post-Soviet Kazakhstan, focusing on the emerging religious pluralism among the youth. Traditional adherence to parental beliefs is increasingly giving way to individual religious choices, influenced by globalization. This phenomenon, known as 'religious conversion', is examined through qualitative research involving in-depth interviews with 40 Kazakh youths who have experienced religious conversion. Additionally, insights from 30 experts in religious studies enrich the analysis. The study aims to identify and understand the key factors driving religious conversion among Kazakh youth, set against the backdrop of global societal changes.

**Keywords:** Religious conversion, Kazakh youth, Globalization, Kazakh society, Christianity

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## 1. Introduction

The currents of globalization have ushered in transformative changes across the global landscape. Initially, with the ascendancy of secularism within the globalization discourse, esteemed scholars such as Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, and Max Weber postulated a diminishing influence of religion in societal structures. However, as the 21<sup>st</sup> century dawned, a pronounced reversal of this narrative became apparent, challenging the previously held assumptions. Contrary to the initial prognosis, the role of religion in society began to exhibit a notable resurgence.

Peter Berger, a notable critic of the perspective forecasting a decline in religious power amidst globalization, contends that humanity, in the process of global integration, increasingly turns to religion as a source for existential meaning and personal guidance [1]. Conversely, Beyer posits that within the globalized context, individuals wearied by technological saturation and urban expansion are embracing religion, experiencing a notable surge in religiosity [2].

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This assertion underscores the enduring influence of the globalization process on societal and religious dynamics, with implications extending into the future.

Within the overarching paradigm of globalization, the expeditious dissemination of information, technological advancements, and widespread internet accessibility have collectively facilitated unprecedented opportunities for academic pursuits, professional engagements, and residency transitions. This has enabled individuals to pursue educational and professional endeavours within a given country, while concurrently fostering an environment conducive to international relocation and residence. The Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan called the world a 'global village' during globalisation. They say that the whole world has shrunk like a village. You still do not have to travel to Japan to eat Japanese food, you can eat sushi in your own country or even at home. In the same way, with globalisation, it is very easy to get to know not only the food but also the religion of another country. During this process, religious information and religions are spread very quickly to all corners of the world. In the process of globalisation, the speed of spreading religions has also developed very fast with the development of technology. Therefore, among the people who turn to religion, most of them are young people. In a secular societal framework, the youth are afforded the autonomy to exercise agency in selecting their religious affiliations. It is imperative to underscore that the presence of active missionaries contributes to the dynamics of this process.

Just as American scientists equated their religious situation with a 'supermarket', Kazakh society could choose religion from this 'supermarket', just as it chose Japanese sushi. In this way, Kazakh society began to familiarise itself with religions from abroad and to choose the religion that was offered to it. In the course of globalisation, religious movements from American and European countries in particular have opened their 'religious supermarkets' in Kazakhstan. There used to be only Islam and (Orthodox) Christianity in Kazakhstan, but today there are 18 denominations. In other words, there are 18 different religious denominations. In recent years, Kazakhs who have converted to foreign religions have appeared in society. This phenomenon is known in science as 'religious conversion'. This term is derived from the English word 'conversion'. This term can also be used to describe conversion to the religion of a culture other than the religion of one's own parents. But this term, used in a broad sense, is also applied to those who have become irreligious and religious, or to those who have become religious and atheistic. In general, we mean the change in people's attitude and life towards religion [3]. It is observed that there are many young people among those who have converted to religion.

The scholarly exploration of religious conversion initiated earlier in the contexts of America and Europe, propelled by the early onset of globalization within these societies. Consequently, the phenomenon of religious conversion, having commenced in tandem with the early stages of the globalization process, persists as an ongoing area of investigation. Insights gleaned from international studies indicate that a substantial proportion of young individuals in America undergo one or more instances of religious conversion during their lifetimes. This

discernible pattern underscores the prevalence of the phenomenon of religious conversion, particularly among the youth demographic.

The initial investigations into religious conversion were predominantly conducted by psychologists, but with the widespread dissemination of novel religious trends, the focus of scholarly inquiry shifted towards sociological examinations of this phenomenon. Subsequent to these sociological inquiries, scholars from diverse academic disciplines, including religious studies, cultural studies, anthropology, political science, and history, engaged in their own comprehensive investigations into religious conversion. Consequently, the intricate nature of this topic spans multiple scientific domains, rendering it notably complex. One seminal contribution to the sociological understanding of religious conversion comes from the work of John Lofland and Rodney Stark, whose research, particularly the influential study conducted in 1965, stands as one of the prominent sociological examinations in this field. Lofland and Stark delved into the dynamics of religious conversion, specifically focusing on new religious movements in the Western context. Their work, rooted in a psycho-social perspective, culminated in the development of sociological models elucidating the intricate processes of subordination inherent in religious conversion. Notably, individuals undergoing religious conversion reported that the decision-making process was protracted, involving months or even years of contemplation [4]. This underscores the multifaceted nature of religious conversion and its integration across diverse academic disciplines.

Religious psychologist Lewis R. Rambo, after dedicating several years to the study of religious conversion, has advanced various theories elucidating the factors influencing this phenomenon. Among these theories, the ‘Globalization’ theory posits a significant role in shaping religious conversion dynamics. In the epoch of globalization, missionary endeavours extend beyond the confines of a single nation, encompassing multiple countries. This expansion is mirrored by the heightened accessibility to diverse religious traditions facilitated by the pervasive reach of the Internet. Consequently, Rambo contends that the era of globalization presents an augmented array of opportunities for religious conversion compared to preceding periods, contributing to an observable rise in the number of converts [5].

The majority of scholarly investigations into religious conversion emanate from American academics, with Janine Hill Fletcher being one notable contributor to the discourse. Professor Fletcher posits that the era of globalization is cultivating a distinctive form of religious pluralism and religiosity [6]. The emergence of religious pluralism invariably gives rise to instances of religious conversion.

Furthermore, European scholars have undertaken extensive research on this subject, particularly in light of the heightened visibility of religious conversion in recent years in countries such as England, with its significant Pakistani and Indian populations, France, home to a large Arab demographic, and Germany, hosting a substantial Turkish community. A notable scholar in this regard is Jonker Gardien, who has conducted extensive research on “Religious Search and Religious Conversion to Islam in a Globalized Society” [7]. This underscores the global

relevance and cross-cultural dimensions of the phenomenon of religious conversion within the context of globalization.

Research on religious conversion is starting late in Kazakhstan compared to other countries. These issues are one of the new topics for Kazakh society. The following study can be described as one of these studies. “Religious conversion through the eyes of women using the example of the religious situation in Kazakhstan” [8]. Qualitative research on religious conversion in Central Asia is still scarce. All these studies show that the phenomenon of religious conversion is very relevant in society. Therefore, we can say that ‘religious conversion’ is a global phenomenon that occurs internationally.

The aim of this study was to explore and understand the phenomenon of religious conversion among Kazakh youth in the context of a globalized society, focusing on the various factors that influence their decision to convert to religions different from their familial or cultural backgrounds.

Objectives:

- To identify the key factors that drive religious conversion among Kazakh youth, including psychological, social, and cultural influences.
- To examine the role of globalization in facilitating religious conversion through the exposure to diverse religious practices and beliefs.
- To analyse the impact of urbanization and the prevalence of religious pluralism in large cities such as Astana and Almaty on the religious conversion of youth.
- To investigate the significance of personal relationships, such as friendships and marriages, in influencing the decision of Kazakh youth to convert to different religions.
- To assess the differences in religious conversion patterns between urban and rural populations in Kazakhstan, with a focus on youth demographics.

## **2. Method**

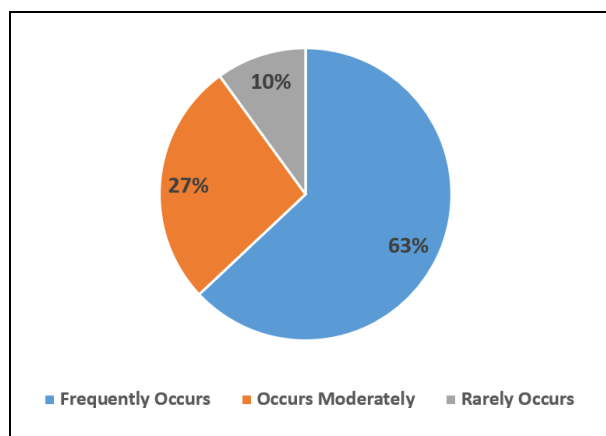
The research predominantly employed qualitative research methods, specifically utilizing in-depth interviews to garner insights from Kazakh youth who underwent religious conversion, constituting a sample size of 40 individuals. To ensure geographical representation and diverse perspectives, 20 respondents were selected from the city of Astana, while the remaining 20 were drawn from the city of Almaty. The rationale for selecting these specific cities stems from their status as the largest urban centres in Kazakhstan. Significantly, Almaty and Astana exhibit the highest population density and harbour a substantial concentration of religious communities within the country. This strategic selection aimed to capture a nuanced understanding of religious conversion experiences across diverse urban contexts.

To investigate the phenomenon of religious conversion, expert interviews were conducted with 30 professionals working in the field of this religion. This method is a type of scientific research method and is considered the most commonly used type of interview. This is because this method is often used in large projects to obtain high- quality information from experts. All interviews

were conducted offline and online in Kazakh or Russian, depending on the interviewee's choice. The interview was recorded on tape and then transcribed. In order to comply with the ethical principles of research, the personal data of the experts were not disclosed. Most of the experts are leaders of religious associations and priests who work directly with religious converts (21 interviewees, 70%). In particular, priests of other denominations such as Islamic priests, Russian Orthodox Church, Roman Catholic Church, Jehovah's Witnesses, Lutheran Church and Seventh-day Adventists were also interviewed. The remaining 30% were completed by interviews with professionals working in the Department of Religious Affairs or in religious research centres, i.e. state institutions dealing with religion in general.

### **3. Results**

Our experts were asked a question on the 'prevalence of religious conversion events' to obtain information on how widespread religious conversion events are in Kazakhstan. The answers of our experts can be found in Figure 1 below.



**Figure 1.** Prevalence of religious conversion events.

As delineated in Figure 1, it is discerned that 63% of our panel of experts routinely encounter the subject of religious conversion in the course of their professional engagements. An additional 27% posit that instances of religious conversion transpire at an intermediate frequency, notwithstanding their not occurring on a daily basis. Conversely, a minority of 10% affirm that such incidents are infrequent, signifying a lower frequency or occurrence.

If we look at the answers of the experts mentioned above, we know that in most cases there is a conversion of religion. It has even been said that some churches and mosques accept a new disciple every month. It is known that after the independence of Kazakh society, there is a tendency to turn to religion. For this reason, it has been noted that such events as turning to religion, switching to atheism or switching from one church to another, converting to Islam, are

common. In recent years, it has been reported that the number of Kazakhs in Protestant religious associations has increased. There are also Kazakh youth in the religious denomination of the Society for Krishna Consciousness. Due to the very small number of Indian peoples in Kazakh society, it can be seen that Kazakhs dominate the Krishna religious community. There are quite a few representatives of other nationalities who convert to Salafism in Islam. So, we can say that the issue of religious conversion is a phenomenon that is very common in big cities.

Of course, it is difficult to say that it is the same in all regions. Just as it is difficult to convert to Christianity where there is no church, there are few converts in an area where there are few buildings of religious associations. Therefore, our experts who live in small towns respond that there are few cases of religious conversion there (10%). Religious conversions are often rare in small towns. It is observed that there are more incidents of religious conversions in large cities where globalization processes are taking place. There is therefore a connection between globalization and religious conversion.

There are 18 legal denominations in the Republic of Kazakhstan. One of the interesting questions is which of these 18 denominations has the most conversions. Questions were also asked on this topic.

**Question:** *Among which religions is conversion most widespread in Kazakhstan?*

**Expert-2 (Priest):** *In fact, most religious converts are followers of Christianity and Islam. For example, there are Christians who have converted to Islam and Kazakhs who have converted to Jehovah's Witnesses. Therefore, conversions in our country often take place between the new religious movements of Islam and Christianity*

**Expert-11 (government employee):** *Mainly Islam and Christianity. Kazakhs can be seen in the direction of Jehovah's Witnesses of Christianity. But now the number of Kazakhs among Jehovah's Witnesses is increasing. And especially Orthodox people are coming to Islam.*

**Expert-12 (government employee):** *Well, in this city of Shymkent, which I see myself, there are new converts to Christianity and young men who have converted to Islam. In the beginning, when they were talking, they followed Islam, and later, within this Islam, most of them go in the Protestant direction, I do not say Orthodox Catholic, because we have most of the citizens who belong to this particular Protestant-oriented religious association of the Islamic religion.*

**Expert-16 (Priest):** *I do not know, we also have Muslims, Christians and atheists coming to us. It's difficult to say exactly. People come with problems. When they are in trouble, people come to the mosque and the church to get help.*

**Expert-17 (priest):** *Now you should know him well. You are doing research. When we talk about the project, there are many people who accept Muslims. Then there are those who come to us as Christians and at the Society for Krishna Consciousness.*

**Expert-21 (Priest):** *In my opinion, the most common religions are Islam and Christianity.*

Upon scrutinizing the responses provided by the experts, a notable consensus emerges, indicating that a predominant number of religious conversion

occurrences are observed between Islam and Christianity. This tendency aligns with the religious demographics of Kazakhstan, where the majority of the populace adheres to these two faiths. The historical acknowledgment of the pivotal role played by Hanafi Islam and Orthodox Christianity in the cultural and spiritual development of the Kazakh society further rationalizes this prevalence. Interestingly, within the realm of Christianity, the experts posit that religious conversion events are more prevalent in Protestant Christianity compared to Orthodox Christianity, with specific mention of active involvement by Jehovah's Witnesses. This inclination suggests a robust engagement by this religious direction within Kazakh society. Notably, some experts acknowledged that within the converts to Islam, there is a subset who gravitate towards Salafism. Given the unregistered and clandestine nature of Salafism's activities, there arises a concern about potential inter-ethnic or intra-ethnic tensions in the absence of vigilant monitoring. Considering the limited tolerance exhibited by Salafists towards other religions, complexities may emerge in relations between the Russian community adhering to Salafism and other ethnic groups following the Christian faith. The intricate issue of nationality is brought to the fore, prompting an inquiry into the specific ethnicities undergoing religious conversion. This multifaceted matter underscores the intricate dynamics associated with religious conversion events and their potential implications on inter-ethnic relations.

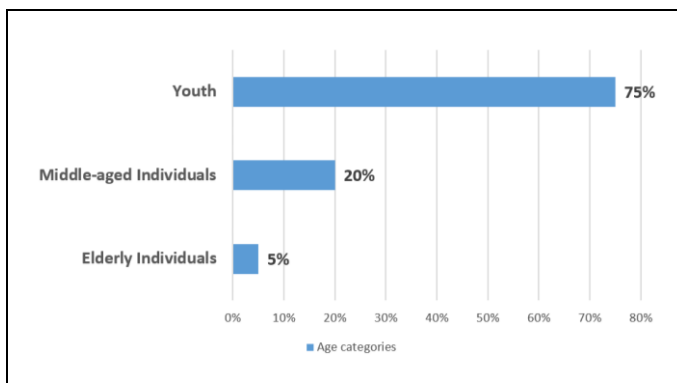
As per the insights provided by experts, it is discerned that approximately 75% of individuals undergoing religious conversion belong to the youth demographic (Figure 2.). Conversely, only 20% of respondents in the middle-aged cohort acknowledge engaging in religious conversion. Remarkably, the phenomenon of religious conversion exhibits a subdued manifestation among retired or elderly individuals. This observation aligns with broader research on religiosity, which indicates that a predominant proportion of adherents in Kazakh society are concentrated within the youthful age group. Furthermore, the concentration of missionary efforts predominantly targets the youth, elucidating a discernible focus on this demographic over their older counterparts. A central determinant influencing the religious conversion of individuals aged 22-35 lies in alterations to their social status, encompassing pivotal life events such as marriage, divorce, widowhood, and separation from parental figures. These transitional life stages emerge as salient factors in shaping the proclivity towards religious conversion among young adults.

**Expert-5 (Cleric man):** *Young people are mostly converting to religion.*

**Expert-12 (Government employee):** *And there are a lot of people who are older than 30, we go for monitoring, we go for interviews, or on October 18 we will organize spiritual reconciliation sports. There are some women, but now young people follow Islam.*

**Expert-13 (Priest):** *I know that it happened from every age. But most of the meetings were attended by young people. There were also people of middle and above average age. Those young people are probably middle-aged now.*

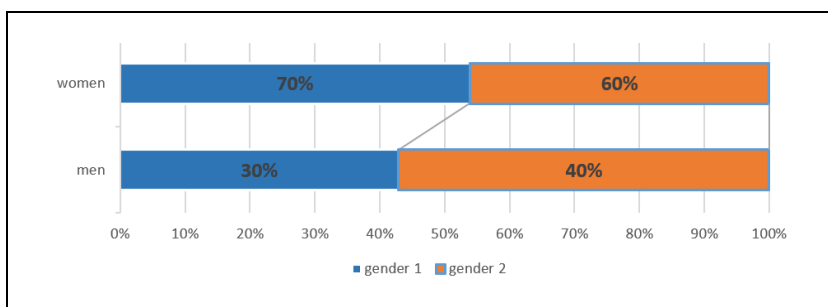
**Expert-22 (Priest):** *Youth 18-30 years old.*



**Figure 2.** Age categories.

There are no converts among those who have reached old age. Of course, this may have something to do with the fact that he spent his youth in the atheistic system of the Soviet Union. Also, older people like stability and don't want things to change because they have little experience. He wants to make his own decisions on matters of faith and remain steadfast in that faith. In general, conversion of religion among the elderly is a rare phenomenon.

There are also researchers who ask the question whether women convert more or men convert more. Below are the answers to the questions our experts were asked about the gender characteristics of religious converts. We have made a comparison between the gender of the respondents who participated in our survey and the experts' answers. According to the experts' answers, the information in the chart is labelled Gender 1, and the information related to the gender of the respondents who participated in our study is Gender 2 (Figure 3.).



**Figure 3.** Gender categories.

As evidenced above, there exists a discernible proclivity for religious conversion among women. A substantial consensus among expert responses affirms that the majority of converts are of the female gender. Notably, approximately 70% of female respondents express a pronounced affinity towards religion. In contrast, about 30% of the expert panel opines that a larger proportion of male individuals have undergone religious conversion. It is noteworthy that the distribution of gender within the pool of respondents in our study closely mirrors the trends elucidated in expert responses, with 60% female and 40% male



participants. This convergence underscores a congruence between expert perspectives and the demographic composition of the study participants regarding the prevalence of religious conversion among women.

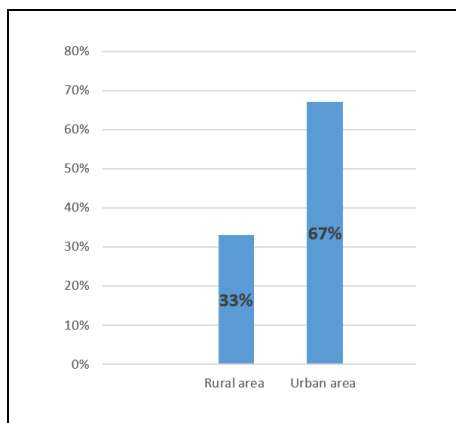
### ***3.1. Converted Kazakh youth (field research)***

Our research targeted young individuals who underwent religious conversions in the capital cities of Kazakhstan, namely Astana and Almaty. The rationale behind selecting these urban centers lies in their status as the largest megalopolises in Kazakhstan, hosting a substantial population of students. For instance, Astana accommodates 440,598 young residents, while Almaty boasts a population of 662,980 young individuals [Bureau of National Statistics, Agency for strategic planning and reforms of the republic of Kazakhstan, <https://stat.gov.kz/>, year 2024]. An intriguing aspect pertains to the abundance of religious institutions in these cities. Despite over 70% of the population identifying as Muslims in Kazakhstan, Astana features 16 mosques and 38 churches, indicating a prevalence of Christian places of worship, even if of smaller scale. In Almaty, 131 Christian religious associations are active, as reported by The Committee on Religious Affairs in 2024 (from Ministry of Culture and Information of the Republic of Kazakhstan, [www.gov.kz/memleket/entities/mam?lang=en](http://www.gov.kz/memleket/entities/mam?lang=en)).

Furthermore, urbanization, recognized as a facet of the globalization process, emerges as a pivotal factor influencing religious conversion phenomena. Psychological factors stemming from the rapid urban growth, such as psychological fatigue, stress, and trauma, directly impact and contribute to the occurrence of religious conversion. Numerous studies corroborate these psychological aspects as influential factors in religious conversion events. Consequently, the prevalence of conversion events tends to be more pronounced in urban settings compared to rural areas.

As we can see from the statistics, 67% of our Kazakh youth who have changed their religion grew up in the city. The proportion of those who grew up in the village is 33% (Figure 4.). This is due to the fact that there are not many religious, especially Christian, places of worship in rural areas. Missionary work also tends to take place in densely populated cities. Therefore, people living in rural areas are less likely to convert to religion than those living in cities. Most of those who were born and raised in the village have changed their religion after coming to the city. The young people from the village come to the city to study and thus have the opportunity to get to know other religions and other cultures. Even among young people who have moved to another country to study or work, changing religion is common [9]. The likelihood of changing religion seems to be higher in urban areas. This is because there is religious pluralism in cities. Several cultures come together in cities. In addition, social pressure is less pronounced in the city than in the countryside. People feel freer here and missionaries can operate more easily. Democracy and secularization are well developed in the city. In urban areas where these critical global trends are taking place, we see that religious

conversions occur more frequently. This indicator shows that there is a connection between the trends of globalization and religious conversion.



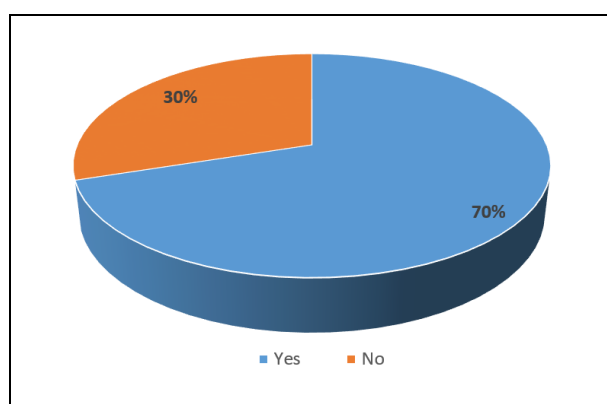
**Figure 4.** Geographical Origin: Birthplace and Upbringing.

The subject of religious conversion stands as one of the most intricate and multifaceted topics, susceptible to myriad influences stemming from societal changes and various factors. The dynamics of religious conversion in Kazakh society may markedly differ from those observed in Western societies, emphasizing the nuanced nature of this phenomenon. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that, despite disparities, certain similarities persist.

For instance, within the context of Kazakh youth who underwent religious conversion, a striking observation emerges: 92% of respondents asserted that they did not receive religious education from their families during childhood. In stark contrast, only 8% reported receiving such education from their familial upbringing. In a distinct study by Çayır on Turkish Christians, 74.4% reported receiving religious education from their families during childhood [10]. This substantial difference underscores the vast contrast in religious education between the two nations. Considering Kazakhstan's historical emergence from the Soviet era, marked by a communist government that discouraged religious education, this disparity is inherently rooted. On the other hand, Turkey's historical connection to the Ottoman state has led to a distinct religious education tradition. Hence, it is imperative to conduct research with due consideration for the unique societal characteristics of each region.

Similarly, studies on religious conversion in European countries unveil distinctive features. Notably, European countries witness instances of religious conversion among incarcerated individuals, encompassing those who adopt religion, become religiously unaffiliated, or renounce belief altogether post-religious adherence. In the specific context of Islam, a significant number of individuals in European prisons, incarcerated for acts related to terrorism, influence cases of religious conversion. The research conducted by Wilkinson, Irfan, Quraishi, and Schneuwly Purdie (2021) illuminates this phenomenon, underscoring the impact of Muslim inmates on religious conversion within European prison settings [11].

Arthur Kleinman (2001) wrote that globalization poses a certain threat to the mental health of people around the world. In global society, 11.5% of illnesses appear to be mental illnesses and 4% depression. Mental illness and mental health problems are on the rise [12]. In global society, economic difficulties, mental exhaustion, young people affected by the negative effects of the Internet on a person's education, and many problems such as the Covid-19 pandemic, one of the biggest problems in human history, have further increased the number of people who are nervous. Among the people facing these critical difficulties, there are those who have turned to religion or converted religiously to solve this problem through religion to ask the highest power for help. The impact of these psychological challenges in a globalized society can lead to religious conversion. Information about how many difficulties experienced by those who participated in our study is presented in the chart below (Figure 5).



**Figure 5.** Have you had psychological or traumatic problems in your life?

As we can see, 30% of Kazakh youth who are religious converts chose the 'no' response option, stating that there are no problems that affect their lives. The remaining 70% answered 'yes' to the question of whether they had psychological or traumatic problems that affected their lives. Below you will find the answers of our respondents who reported their difficulties.

**Mr. Ahmet:** Yes, my life was not like that. I'm out of work. Many places did not hire. Then I started drinking. I even drank a lot. Sometimes I could not reach home and lay in the field. Religion saved me from such difficulties. Jesus saved.

**Ms. Anna:** I've had a lot of problems. My husband turned out badly. He used to drink a lot. He would come and beat me. He used to go to other girls. I was very sad. Then I divorced and moved to another city. I had trouble finding money there as well. It was difficult in poverty. But my path was opened by following the path of religion.

**Ms. Anar:** Oh, what happened to my fate. I got married three times. I divorced three times. I had 5 abortions. My life was very difficult. I even tried to commit suicide. But thank God everything is fine now. Those days are over. Now I have God.

**Ms. Mika:** I was raped when I was 18 years old. I was in a very bad state. A guy you don't know. I don't wish that on anyone. I was in great pain at that time.

*It was difficult for me to start life again. I stopped going out because I was ashamed of people.*

**Ms. Asyl:** *I am very sick. Unhealable wounds appeared on my face. It's a tragedy for a girl. I was shy to go out. No medicine helped. I was locked in the house. I didn't hang out with anyone. But Jesus the healer, Jesus the saviour of all, saved me.*

It is known that most of the participants in our study had various problems in their lives. Above all, it is very sad that they are exposed to violence by men, as we have seen in the examples of Ms. Anna, Ms. Mika and Ms. Anar. You can see that they have chosen this path to ask a higher power for help to start a new life, to get back on their feet. Such difficulties, which particularly characterise their lives, can lead these people to convert to religion. In many studies, the fate of those who have taken the path of alcohol or drugs also ends with a religious conversion. It can therefore be concluded that there is a connection between psychological and traumatic problems and religious conversion. Problems in modern society such as economic difficulties, fatigue and unemployment can lead to such difficulties. 70% of Kazakh youth who have converted to the faith have experienced such difficulties. For example, in a study conducted by researchers such as Snook, D. W., it was found that as many as 80% of converts experienced crisis-like difficulties [13]. However, this does not mean that all those in crisis change their religion. It can only be said that the probability is high. Researchers who study the psychology of religious switchers say that it is impossible to name a single factor that causes religious switching.

The main question of our investigation is now the main factor for religious conversion, and we will try to find answers to the questions posed about the problem of decision making. In general, this question is about what is the main reason for the adoption of Christianity by Kazakh youth, and we will try to determine the factors that influenced the decision. One of the most important questions asked to the converted Kazakh youth and the answers to the question about the main factor that influenced their conversion are shown in the diagram below (Figure 6).

Evidently, when considering the primary catalysts for their religious conversion, a substantial majority of 56%, constituting the highest proportion, identified 'After getting acquainted with Christians' as the pivotal influence. Following closely, 27% of respondents indicated that their religious conversion was prompted by 'After reading the holy books.' A minority, comprising 17%, attributed their conversion to miscellaneous factors falling under the category of 'Other (dreams, visions, miracles).'

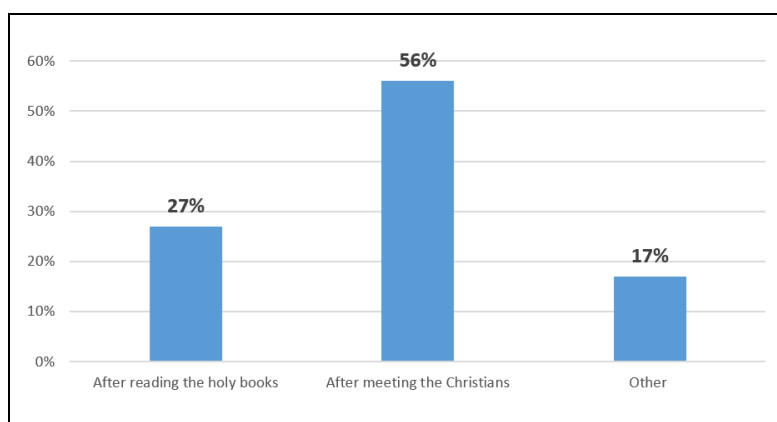
**Mr. Arman:** *When I was drinking vodka, I thought that no one needed me. One day when I was drunk, 'Who are you?' he asked. 'I'm a lonely person who doesn't need anyone,' I answered. He replied, 'No, God needs you.' I was very surprised. Then 'How?' I asked. I went to church with him. They washed me, fed me, and introduced me to Jesus. I understood many things. Then I stayed in the church for a while. I put all vodka.*

**Mr. Ernur:** *I had Christian friends. I would get along well with them. Then when I was suffering, they took me to the church. I found peace there.*

**Ms. Zhanna:** *I married a Christian nation. I learned and accepted my husband's religion.*

**Ms. Ayman:** *There was a church near my work. I would pass by that church every day. I tried it one day. There was a very polite man inside. I met that person and started asking about religion. He explained everything to me. Then I liked that person and got married to that person.*

**Ms. Anna:** *I told you that my husband was a bad person. Then I divorced and moved to another city. I had some trouble there. Then I visited a friend's house. I saw a very nice and polite family there. They were feeling very happy. I asked curiously. Then they told me about religion. I went to church with them out of curiosity. I got books. Then I felt like a family there. Then I decided to become a Christian.*



**Figure 6.** Reasons for conversion

From the answers of those who changed their religion after meeting Christians, it is clear that the influence of missionary work and marriage to a Christian influenced them. The example of Mr. Arman shows that he was very impressed when, in a difficult moment, he met a missionary who, when he felt lonely, told him a warm and necessary word: ‘You are not alone, God is with you.’ From this, one can see that Mr. Arman was ready to step in when a religious representative came and said these words. For Mr. Arman, who was suffering from loneliness and seeking spiritual help, this was the right decision because the church saved him from this problem. Mr. Ernur's story is similar. Finding friends nearby when you are in trouble. Factors such as being close to Christian acquaintances are important here. We see that the theory of ‘social influence’ also plays an important role here.

In the case of Zhanna and Ayman, we see that they converted to the religion by marrying a Christian. Marriage has significance and influence on religious conversion. People of different faiths want to have the same religious identity as their spouse after marriage. Some change their religion for marriage, others after marriage.

Several reasons and motives are mentioned in the experts' answers. Therefore, it is difficult and inaccurate to conclude that only one specific factor

influenced the development of religious conversion in Kazakhstan. Several reasons and motives can be cited. Based on the answers given by the experts, we would like to list some of the reasons that have influenced religious conversion in Kazakh society in the following table.

- Life difficulties and psychological damage
- Search for the meaning of life, search for truth
- Low religious education, spiritual hunger
- Missionary influence
- Starting a family, friendship with a person of a different religion or nationality
- Reading holy books

#### **4. Conclusions**

In conclusion, the religious conversion experiences of Kazakh youth reveal a multifaceted set of reasons and motives. Predominantly, the impetus for religious conversion among this demographic is intricately linked to life challenges, with the prevalent theme being psychological distress, depression, or trauma. A noteworthy 70% of respondents in our study disclosed encountering psychological or traumatic issues that significantly impacted their lives.

The second major factor contributing to religious conversion is the transformation of the world into a 'small village' within the framework of a globalized society. This globalized milieu fosters the formation of multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies within a single state, leading to the development of religious pluralism. The presence of diverse nationalities cohabiting, forming friendships, and even intermarrying in a globalized society is directly correlated with the phenomenon of religious conversion. Missionary activities, facilitated by globalization and the extensive opportunities to explore diverse religions through the Internet, have notably increased the prevalence of religious conversions in this era.

Marriage and family formation, particularly involving individuals from different nationalities, emerge as influential factors in religious conversion among Kazakh youth. The research reveals a notable trend where women, in particular, undergo religious conversion after marrying Christian men.

A significant barrier to religious literacy is identified as a contributing factor, as evidenced by the finding that 92% of Kazakh youth who underwent religious conversion lacked familial guidance or information on religious matters prior to their conversion. A prevailing trend is observed among Kazakhs converting to Christianity, wherein a majority lacked prior knowledge or understanding of Islam.

In summary, the process of religious conversion emerges as highly intricate, influenced by a spectrum of psycho-social, economic, and political factors. As the role of religion gains prominence in society, the number of religious converts concurrently rises. Sociologist Jose Casanova posits that religion actively shapes modern society and predicts a continued increase in its influence over time. The diverse array of events individuals encounter during their developmental process,

ranging from identity crises to existential questions and traumatic experiences, can catalyze religious conversion. Consequently, the manifestation of this phenomenon varies across nations, states, time periods, and societal contexts, adapting to the intricate interplay of positive and negative life events shaping individual perspectives on religion.

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