

RELIGION AND SOCIETY

**NEW FORM OF
RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM
IN KAZAKHSTAN:
DESTRUCTIVE SECTS AND CULTS**

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I n t r o d u c t i o n

The current religious situation in Kazakhstan is characterized by the emergence and strengthening of radical religious communities, an expansion in the scope of activity of non-traditional beliefs, an increase in the influence of the foreign missionary movement, and an enlargement in the social base of sectarian organizations, particularly by means of young people. All of

these changes should be qualified as the most obvious development trends in the current religious situation in Kazakhstan.

An analysis of this situation in Kazakhstan points in particular to the growing activity of a new generation of destructive sects and cults, which is arousing the greatest concern. This trend is especially dangerous since the Kazakh youth,

for whom religion is increasingly becoming a value system that regulates social behavior, the psychology of communication, and a philosophical attitude toward life, has a very vague idea about the difference between traditional religion and pseudo-religious views and outlooks.

Main Characteristics of Destructive Sects and Cults. Destructive sects and cults all share the fact that they are opposed to traditional religion since they are all based on an artificial world outlook that is not backed by any real religious theological substance. As a rule, destructive sects and cults are emerging during the leveling out of religious traditions as a result of the spiritual crisis in society today,¹ as well as due to the exploitation and commercialization of religion. The characteristics of sectarian and cult organizations are very similar, since they are all based on the same criteria: extreme heterogeneity and contradictoriness with respect to ideology and doctrine, a spirit of dissension and separatism, totalitarian teaching, and severe "criticism of traditional religions for deviating from original beliefs and practice."² Their structural organization, methods of influence, and striving for dynamic spiritual expansion among the population, particularly among the youth, are also similar.

During their development they have reexamined or greatly distorted the general system of world values of traditional religion and religious mysticism. Claiming the extra-ordinary nature of their belief, they continuously elaborate new applied methods, focusing attention on psychological and emotional aspects and often supplementing their teaching with unusual practices. Whereby this trend has become so obvious that over the past few decades essentially all of these sects and cults have undergone immense transformations and changes in appearance.

They have managed to become extremely widespread in Kazakhstan, particularly among

the Kazakh youth, due to their success in adapting to the competition in present-day society. The results of the studies we carried out based on the testimonies of former adepts show that the doctrinal principles of these cults boil down to an eclectic mixture of various occult, magic, spiritualistic, theosophical, anthroposophical, and other anti-systemic views diluted with hypnosis and other mediumistic revelations of the spirit world. Man is viewed as the bearer of secret spiritual forces. These forces supposedly help him to alienate himself from traditional religious experience and overcome it as supposedly not meeting the mystical requirements and intellectual capabilities of modern man. Quasi-religious and quasi-mystical experiences are a special feature of these trends, whereby active experiments are carried out on the human psyche, for example, brainwashing an individual or group, engaging in deep penetration into the conscience and subconscious of adepts, having an overbearing influence on the personality, preaching the possibility of developing supernatural abilities in a person with the emphasis on group practices as a means of unity, and so on.

In the ideological respect, destructive sects and cults claim to form world value systems and introduce new spiritual and moral references at the national level to replace the traditional views.

We should pay particular attention to those sects and cults that aim to create paradise on earth, strive for universal happiness, and satisfy people's momentary desires. These sects declare that paradise can be created on Earth, a paradise where everyone will be happy. Such missionaries are convinced that the country they have come to needs to be saved, for the sake of which its society must pool all of its spiritual, political, and economic forces. Preventing an environmental disaster, resolving a spiritual and social crisis in the universe, and other global problems constitute an incomplete, but representative list of the good intentions of all kinds of sectarians. No matter what country or culture they find themselves in, their main mission they believe is to help that country and its people in every possible way they can. This assistance basically boils

¹ See: N. Volodina, "Gosudarstvenno-pravovoi aspekt svobody sovesti i veroispovedaniia v sovremennoi Rossii," in: *Chelovek. Priroda. Obshchestvo. Aktual'nye problemy*, St. Petersburg University Publishers, St. Petersburg, 2000.

² *Religiia, svoboda sovesti, gosudarstvenno-tserkovnye otnosheniia v Rossii*, Moscow, 1996, pp. 7-8.

down to providing the world with a new revelation, a new belief that will replace what the sectarians believe to be “outmoded” world religions and their religious denominations. Theological experts’ examinations and the studies carried out in this sphere show that “as a rule, this type of religious trend severely criticizes the situation that has developed in the world. This arouses distrust and even hostility among people who feel that such religious movements pose a threat to the status quo.”³

On the whole, a description of non-traditional religious views and outlooks which use a mixture of religious theology, mysticism, and occultism shows that today they all, although they emerged from the depths of the religious and mystical traditions of the Middle Ages, have turned into destructive sects and cults with very clear anti-religious doctrines and destructive consequences for mankind.

In today’s world, the activity of different types of sects is being severely criticized and condemned, since the contradictions between their doctrinal and conceptual views and religious and religious-mystical outlooks often brings them into conflict with the religious community, authorities, and society in many countries of the world.

The negative consequences of their activity today is a widely proven fact. In today’s world, the risk group associated with their activity is universal and widespread. The activity of Jehovah’s Witnesses, for example, creates a mass of problems for the authorities and society wherever traditional religion is still firmly rooted.

Destructive sects and cults are of particular psychological detriment to the immature minds of young people in that they modify their customary religious orientation and undermine the system of stable ethnic and religious values in the minds of the younger generation. The matter essentially concerns activity leading to destabilization of the religious situation and consequences that are dangerous for any state and its indigenous population.

³ S. Ivanenko, *O liudiakh, nikogda ne rasstaiushchikhsia s Bibliiei*, Art-Biznes-Tsentr, Moscow, 1999, p. 157.

The Spread of Destructive Sects and Cults in Kazakhstan. Among the destructive sectarian and cult organizations that have undergone the greatest development in Kazakhstan special mention should be made of the Family sect. This sect remains confined to rented apartments and does not make contact with the outside world without recommendations. Active contacts have been noted with foreigners, who often supervise this sect. In Kazakhstan’s major cities, colorful leaflets are openly distributed bearing religious texts and pictures of Christ embracing joyous children who are ascending to heaven.

A sect’s activity usually begins with carrying out charity campaigns in the form of concerts and making donations to various organizations, which results in the collection of documents testifying to the supposedly enlightening and charitable nature of this organization. In this way, the sect acquires positive credentials for registering its local cells.

The Jehovah’s Witnesses also feel at home in Kazakhstan. Their main distinguishing feature is that they “regularly hold regional congresses, whereby in some cases in violation of the current legislation of the Republic of Kazakhstan and contrary to the prohibitions of the local power structures. The sectarians reject all earthly governments and everything associated with them: service in the army, taking oaths of allegiance, state holidays, honoring the flag and state symbols, nor do they endorse any secular education. Whereby members of the Jehovah’s Witnesses are to pay full and sincere tribute to their leader. The most dangerous thing in the activity of the Jehovah’s Witnesses is their refusal to allow blood transfusions, since they believe that this is a violation of the Old Testament prohibition on ingesting blood.”⁴

In Kazakhstan the Jehovah’s Witnesses have registered more than one hundred communities and have members in almost every city. They hold a particularly strong position in the south of the

⁴ A. Guriev, N. Nurabenov, “Sumrachnaia ten’ storozhevoi bashni,” *Megapolis*, No. 14 (379), 14 April, 2008, available at [http://www.megapolis.kz/show_article.php?art_id=8683].

country. For example, they have active communities in Shymkent, Turkestan, Kentau, Lenger, Sara-Agash, Zhetysai, and other population settlements where ethnic Kazakhs and Uzbeks mainly live.⁵ According to the numerous testimonies and newspaper reports from Kazakhstan's southern regions, the activity of the members of this sect has long become a local problem.

The Church of Scientology is particularly active in Kazakhstan. This society is officially registered in Almaty and Pavlodar, but it has also been seen in the Karaganda and Kostanai regions, as well as in Semei. There are also about a dozen of other organizations operating in the republic that are associated with the Scientologists, which, according to specialists, carry out their activity under the guise of various public associations, such as Dianetics, Narconon, and Criminon. For example, in Astana the sect's activity is carried out under the cover of various Dianetic centers which receive visitors, carry out various tests, and hold seminars, presentations, and paid psychological séances.⁶

The International Society for Krishna Consciousness is one of the most widespread Oriental sects that are very active in Kazakhstan. The first official Krishnaites appeared here in 1989. Since then their ranks have swelled manifold, particularly with young people from the vulnerable groups of the population.

There is no information on the number of followers of the Society for Krishna Consciousness in Kazakhstan since the Krishnaites themselves usually do not publicize this data. It is only known that the "society of Krishnaites in Kazakhstan is the largest in Central Asia."⁷ According to the statistics on the Kazakhstan government's website, the number of International Society for Krishna Consciousness organizations in

⁵ See: A. Abubakirov, "Missiia vpolnima?" *Megapolis*, No. 1 (265), 9 January, 2006, available at [http://www.megapolis.kz/show_article.php?art_id=1056].

⁶ See: D. Datov, "Saientologicheskaiia indulgentsiia," *Megapolis*, No. 7 (372), 25 February, 2008, available at [http://www.megapolis.kz/show_article.php?art_id=8093].

⁷ A. Grishin, "Goneniia na krishnaitov v Kazakhstane: religiozniy konflikt ili bor'ba za sobstvennost'?" 27 April, 2006, *Fergana.ru* [http://www.vlasti.net/news/10235].

the republic has grown between 1990 and 2006 from several to fifty-five.⁸

The Krishnaites became publicly known at the end of 2006 when their illegal buildings were pulled down in dacha settlements in the Karasai district of the Almaty Region. This event, which prompted the international Krishna society to launch a mass information campaign against Kazakhstan using political, media, and public resources, was significant for the Kazakhstan authorities since it made clear the influence and connections the Krishnaites have all over the world. It was obvious that the strong information and propaganda support aimed at discrediting Kazakhstan in the global information space could not have been gleaned without the Kazakhstan branch of the Krishna Society's close ties not only with its head office but also with well-known world information agencies, including the governments of several foreign countries.

Krishnaism is particularly distinguished by the division of the cult doctrine into several parts, which is characteristic of totalitarian organizations. One of them is a façade designed for public opinion and potential followers. It has little in common with the true contents of the teaching and is used as bait. Another is for people who have already been "brainwashed" during the constant mantras and rituals and consequently lost their capacity for rationally assessing what is good and what is bad from a human perspective and not from the viewpoint of their "god." And still another is for people who clearly know what they are doing and why, and what objectives are being attained, for those who hold the strings of the organization's management in their hands. Krishnaites say that if Krishna chooses to deceive a person, no one can surpass Him in His deceit.⁹

On the whole, despite its outwardly peace-loving position, the Krishnaites sect is actually de-

⁸ See: M. Sokolov, "V mire sekt. Kak shla "ideologicheskaiia bombardirovka" Kazakhstana," 29 May, 2008, available at *Vlasti.net* [http://www.ferghana.ru/article.php?id=4369].

⁹ See: *Bhagavad-Gita As It Is*, Transl. by A.C. Prabhupada, Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, New York, 1970, p. 704 (see also [http://www.asitis.com/10/36.html]).

scribed as a totalitarian Oriental cult that promulgates anti-patriotic and anti-national views among its adepts, as well as a disdainful attitude toward anyone who is not a member of the cult. The sect has different names around the world, but everywhere its followers are called Krishnaites. Judging by everything and contrary to the numerous statements about universal love, Krishnaites only accept the caste system as the basis of interpersonal relations.

The Satanist sect and cults associated with it are the most closed organizations and operate secretly in Kazakhstan. This is one of the most destructive and dangerous sects, since it gained notorious publicity in connection with numerous instances of deaths, both among the sect's adepts and among outsiders who became victims of the derision and terrorism of sectarian Satanists.

According to unofficial data, there are five Satanic communities in Kazakhstan. But it is impossible to establish the exact size of these com-

munities. Their numbers fluctuate from several hundred to more than two thousand people. In the mid-1990s, in Saran, a small town in the Karaganda Region, Satanists even tried to obtain the status of a legal entity and to this end repeatedly and unsuccessfully submitted a registration application to the local power structures. "According to the documents submitted for registration, the total size of the Karaganda community at that time amounted to 83 people. According to some data, the Saran Church of Satan has now ceased its existence. But no one can testify to precisely how true this is. Most likely the sectarians simply went far underground."¹⁰ At the same time, judging by the publications of the Kazakh mass media, the Satanists and groups associated with them are most active in the Almaty, East Kazakhstan, South Kazakhstan, and Karaganda regions.

¹⁰ O. Morozova, "Sektantstvo i zakon," 16 August, 2004, *Gazeta.kz* [<http://www.gazeta.kz/art.asp?aid=48596>].

Main Reasons for the Spread in Activity of Destructive Sects and Cults in Kazakhstan

The main reason for the increase in the influence of destructive sectarian and cult organizations in Kazakhstan is the weak regulation of society's religious life at the state level. The active external interference of foreign religious charity organizations in the country's religious sphere is also playing its part. The Spiritual Administration of Muslims of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Russian Orthodox Church have repeatedly expressed their concern about this. Imams and priests often note that an insistent need has arisen for amending the RK Law on Freedom of Confession and Religious Associations and the RK Law on Making Amendments and Addenda to Some RK Legislative Acts Regarding Freedom of Confession with respect to placing restrictions on the activity of sects and non-traditional religious organizations in Kazakhstan. "In France, Germany, and Northern Europe, precise and strict legislative regulations are in effect regarding totalitarian sects. Therefore, strong anti-sectarian legislation must be adopted in Kazakhstan,"¹¹ notes press secretary of the Astana and Almaty dioceses Archpriest Alexander Ievlev. Many ordinary believers also think that Islam and Russian Orthodoxy should be given a privileged status in Kazakhstan's religious legislation.¹²

¹¹ Zh. Amerberkova, "Sekty massovogo zarazheniia," *Megapolis*, No. 50 (314), 18 December, 2006, p. 3.

¹² *Ibidem*.

In addition, state policy does not contain a clear conception of the place of religion in society and the state or with respect to the regulation of the activity of religious organizations. Since attempts to designate the state's priorities in religious policy are giving rise to heated discussions, the question of drawing up and adopting a corresponding conception remains open. For example, in 2002, the Kazakhstan authorities attempted to legislatively restrict the activity of nontraditional confessions by making amendments to the Law on Religions, but this generated a flood of admonitions from non-governmental human rights organizations and some members of the liberal community. As a result, most of the amendments were recognized by the RK Constitutional Council as unconstitutional and rejected.

Another reason for the fortification of destructive sects and cults is partly due to the growing economic and political presence of foreign countries which is, on the whole, reinforcing nontraditional religious-mystical views in Kazakhstan. A good case in point is the experience of the South Korean Sun Myung Moon sect and their advocates who have firmly occupied a certain niche in Kazakhstani spiritual life, particularly among ethnic Koreans. So it can be seen that one of the realities of contemporary geopolitics is that foreign countries can have a certain influence on the domestic situation of another state. This is an important factor promoting a gradual change in the religious situation in any country regardless of how religious the population is.

In this way, the situation that has developed in the struggle against destructive sects and cults in Kazakhstan today is unique. Whereas the activity of religious-extremist sects and organizations that position themselves as Muslim is prohibited in Kazakhstan by the law, the activity of religious missionaries in the form of various Christian and Eastern preachers who represent religious institutions and sectarian organizations and movements that are nontraditional for the republic's population is still going on legally. Whereas radicals from Hizb ut-Tahrir, Tabligi jamaat, and Eastern Turkestan have gone underground, Scientologists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, as well as various Oriental and Satanic cults are actively swelling their ranks with new adepts from among the indigenous population. The situation is such that the mass influx of foreign missionary movements from among the nontraditional religious-mystic and mystic-occult teachings and traditions into the republic is continuing.

On the whole, the current religious situation in Kazakhstan can be described as potentially dangerous. It should primarily be noted that real risk factors have appeared in Kazakhstan society that threaten to upset the traditional religious balance of interests and interconfessional consent. It is obvious that Kazakhstan has become fertile ground for destructive sects and cults, organizations and associations, and the foreign missionary movement as a whole to put down firm roots. These circumstances could overturn the world outlook of ordinary Kazakhs, upset the interconfessional balance and equilibrium in the republic, aggravate the foundation of the population's cultural-historical consolidation, and pose a serious threat to the principles of tolerance and interconfessional consent among the representatives of different confessions. It is no accident that the Kazakhstani authorities today draw particular attention to the activity of the numerous religious communities, both those that have obtained official registration and those operating secretly.

At the same time, it should be noted that the interests of the world special services and foreign governments can be seen behind the energetic efforts of foreign religious organizations, including sects and cults, to carry out widespread preaching and missionary work in Kazakhstan. The series of espionage exposures among sectarians and the representatives of nontraditional cults that flared up at the end of 2007-beginning of 2008 in Kazakhstan and in the Central Asian countries shows that the dynamic and efficient activity of the foreign sectarian movement would have been impossible from the very beginning without the consent and approval of foreign special services and governments. For example, in the Kazakhstan media information periodically appears about criminal cases being instigated and sectarians being arrested, accusations regularly appear against missionary organizations and

movements that receive financial help and organization instructions from the outside for promulgating their goals. All of this shows that large financial resources, clear organizational structuring, and a streamlined system of ideological and propaganda work among the different strata of the population have made it possible for sectarians to significantly expand their presence in Kazakhstan in a short time. Moreover, the achievements in the active functioning of the sectarian movement are partly associated with the fact that new world values are primarily being introduced into those social groups of the population that comprise the most active and influential part of society, that is, among citizens living in large cities and engaged in politics, business, and science.

In order to attain their goals, sectarians are rendering material assistance to new adepts, teaching them English, finding them jobs, helping their relatives and close family members to find work, or providing shelter for the homeless or acquaintances that have found themselves in a temporarily difficult situation. Often sectarians engage in charity. This is done in order to show the organization's good intentions toward the local population by their own example. There are a multitude of cases where young boys and girls from rural regions come to the big city and find new patrons there who give them everything they need – free housing, food, and education. Such public acts by sectarians cannot help but arouse a positive response among the broad strata of uneducated people, particularly among young people and people with a low income level. For older and younger people, participation in a sectarian movement also means additional earnings and, to a certain extent, a way of attaining self-realization.

In other words, sectarians have rather effectively established a mechanism for expanding their social base, which is shown by the fact that more and more new adepts are being drawn to destructive sects and cults. In so doing, the main emphasis is placed on training local staff, since proselytism among the local population signifies the most effective and long-term use of resources and investments. After setting everything up at the local level, foreign sectarians set their adepts on the right path and introduce commercial forms of mutual payments, which boils down to siphoning off financial and other dividends from the local communities. By being physically located beyond the country, foreign pastors avoid publicity. The main work in the provinces is usually carried out by Kazakhstani citizens, for example ethnic Koreans, Kazakhs, and Russians. So the most destructive sects and cults, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, are headed by representatives of the indigenous population.

Today Kazakh society is actively discussing the possibility of adopting a whole series of new addenda to the country's religious legislation with respect to the abovementioned issues. The country's authorities have evidently understood that sectarian teachings are not only detrimental to society, but also discredit the very idea and essence of religion. For as practice shows, the sectarians are trying to alienate people from their families, society, and the cultural and social life of their country. There are many who deny and ignore the historical traditions, everyday customs, and morals of their people and pose a threat to the physical and mental health of people. In so doing they are not only undermining the fundamental principles of the traditional religions and confessions, but are also shaking the state foundations of society.

In this respect, in May of this year the RK Majilis adopted amendments to the draft law On Making Amendments and Addenda to Some Legislative Acts of the Republic of Kazakhstan Regarding Freedom of Confession and Religious Associations. These changes are aimed at placing certain restrictions on the activity of destructive sects and cults, as well as on nontraditional quasi-religious teachings and traditions in Kazakhstan. They are also called upon to toughen up the regulations with respect to foreign missionary activity.