

KAZAKHSTAN TODAY: POLITICAL RECONSTRUCTION OF RELIGIOUS TRENDS IN A SECULAR STATE

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ABSTRACT

Since the early 1990s, the political role and purpose of religion in Kazakhstani society has changed considerably. Freed from constitutional limitations that imposed a certain ideology, it plunged into an ocean of pluralism of worldviews. It turned out that in the context of limited influence of all socialization institutions (the family, education and the media), religion as a

means of socialization has moved to the fore even though the common trends of religiosity turned out to be highly contradictory and their political role highly ambiguous, to say the least.

The problems of the state and the functioning of religiosity and new religious trends remain in the center of public discussion. The authorities and society are equally con-

cerned with the proliferation of non-traditional religious institutions and practices that are not only alien to the mental culture of Kazakhstanis—they operate according to patterns of Islamization, evangelization and neo-Orientalism.

The number of people who think that Kazakhstan should develop as a religious state is steadily increasing. The state, for its part, is trying to avoid the politicization of the religious factor and seeking the optimal model of secularization and a consensus between the country's highly diverse religious institutions and their followers and those who remain outside any religion. The state is testing all sorts of ideological patterns and their impact on religious trends, eradicating the preceding ideas and stereotypes of interpretations of religion. This paper focuses on political reconstruction of the impacts of religiosity on decision-making in

Kazakhstan as a secular state, analyzes the channels through which religiosity extends its influence and the options that a secular state has for its neutralization and autonomization.

Scholars rely on various methods of qualitative and quantitative sociological and interdisciplinary theoretical reconstruction to outline the religious situation, discover the trends, create adequate models and supply the relevant structures with their forecasts. The latter are reified and substantiated by a range of methods ranging from prolongation to foresight.

Experts, researchers and the state need practical recommendations based on the results of comprehensive studies of religiosity. Some of our results were discussed in scholarly articles and monographs. This research study presents integral results and conclusions on the above-mentioned topics.

KEYWORDS: *political reconstruction, secular nature, conversion, religious trends, Islamization, evangelization, neo-Orientalism, religiosity.*

Introduction

This article offers a concise survey of the phenomenon of religiosity and its role in political decision-making in Kazakhstan based on sociological measurements. The institution of religion is resurrected in post-totalitarian Kazakhstan, it acquires new chances, influences internal and external policy, socialization of the younger generation and is present throughout everyday life. Along with the positive chances of institutionalization, there appear risks of losing its identity due to quasi-religiosity fraught with radicalization and rejection of the state's secular nature.

In Kazakhstan, the institution of religion and outcrops of religiosity have moved to the frontline of studies that rely on interdisciplinary methods and strategies. Sociology of religiosity offers the chance to identify the condition and study the trends of new philosophy of life in Kazakhstani society in the state of transformation, to analyze them within political science, which is indispensable for the elaboration of the state policy of interaction with religious organizations.

In full accordance with the constitutional principle of freedom of conscience, there is no statistical information about the numbers of believers and non-believers. The scopes and trends of religiosity can be verified only through sociological measurements. Since the mid-2000s, the Institute of Philosophy, Political Science and Religious Studies under the Committee for Science, Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan, has been engaged in sociological assessment in the context of studies of common Kazakhstan identity, the phenomenon of "new religiosity" and

activism of new religious organizations; religious conversion;¹ and interaction between secularity and religiosity in everyday life. Due to this, we have studied

- (1) assessments of the institution of religion by various reference groups, its influence and importance in social and private life;
- (2) attitude to traditional and new religions;
- (3) perception and assessment of religious identities of the respondents' closest circle;
- (4) philosophical self-identification;
- (5) perception of the processes and results of religious conversion;
- (6) radicalization risks created by quasi-religions;
- (7) preferences for the secular or religious vectors of state development and other related issues.

Some of the results can be found in previous expert discussions and publications.²

Methods and Materials

Our studies and our methodology can be described as comprehensive, both in regard to the subjects (philosophy, sociology, religious studies, political science) and the methods used. The methodological trends and the methods employed include all general and specific scientific methods, approaches and strategies used at different stages and levels.

The methods are suggested by the problems and subjects based on theoretical interpretations of information acquired at the empirical stage of sociological studies and rely on explications, comparisons, generalizations and conceptualization.

At the stage of empirical analysis followed by theoretical reconstruction we relied on a comparative approach, visualization, abstracting, phenomenological reconstruction, hermeneutical analysis, the method of narrative, conceptualization, modelling and forecasting. The methodology, techniques and research approaches allowed us to empirically register, verify and conceptualize the fairly complex processes of paradigmatic development and interpret their trends.

Changes in the paradigmatic foundations of socio-humanitarian cognition require a new class of social theories that stem from the specifics of social studies of contemporary societies and their fluctuations.

It should be specifically noted that the concepts formulated by Zygmunt Bauman about the non-linear nature of identity and the impossibility of guaranteeing a unilaterally fixed identity in contemporary conditions proved to be efficient.³

The materials used in the paper are based on the data provided by sociological studies carried out by the Institute of Philosophy, Political Science and Religious Studies over the years.⁴

¹ See: *Religioznye konversii v postsekuliarnom obshchestve (opyt fenomenologicheskoy rekonstruktsii)*, Collective monograph, ed. By A.Kh. Bizhanov, Institute of Philosophy, Political Science and Religious Studies KN MON RK, Almaty, 2017, 431 pp.

² See: A. Bizhanov, A. Amrebayev, E. Burova, N. Seitakhmetova, "Kazakhstan: Secular and Religious Politics," *Central Asia and the Caucasus, English Edition*, Vol. 20, Issue 4, 2019, pp. 135-146.

³ See: Z. Bauman, *The Individualized Society*, John Wiley & Sons, 2013, 272 pp.

⁴ Data of the analysis of the large-scale sociological studies of public opinion carried out in 2011-2018 in 16 regions; in 2019, in 17 regions and in Astana (Nur-Sultan since 2019), Almaty and Shymkent. The studies in 2011-2019 relied on a representative national sampling; the sampled population consisted of adult citizens of Kazakhstan (18+). The respondents represented all most important demographic groups, including gender, age, educational level, social and professional status,

Social surveys created a foundation of representative data, while the use of the latest methods of information gathering and statistical processing has made it possible to identify correlational dependencies and their empirical and theoretical interpretations. Quantification measurements make it possible to identify the volume and scope and outline the typical features of philosophical identity, components of its religiosity, describe their qualities represented in the gender, age, ethnic, educational, social, professional, type of settlement, property and regional markers. The latter allows to compare them by the above-mentioned features.

Hypotheses

1. In the absence of statistics on the number of believers and non-believers in Kazakhstan, a myth has emerged that religion is capable of creating an efficient contemporary axiological context of social life, fill the void left by foregoing values, development aims and ideals. Since the 1990s, publicists, journalists and researchers have been insisting that religious people comprise 80% or even 90% of the country's population. This myth requires verification.
2. The monitoring of religiosity has revealed its scope, dynamics, trends and regional specifics. The identified religiosity model allows us to examine how religiosity develops, offers objective ideas about the scope of influence and potential of religion as a social institution.
3. Self-identification of the country's population by religion and religious way of life reveals the model and structure of religiosity. Kazakhstani mentality as a hybrid of intertwined secular and religious values and norms. It can be surmised that the religious traditions, norms and ideals are not considered very important by many social groups, but are of the highest importance for the believers. It means that in order to be efficient, cultural policy should be adequately differentiated.
4. Studies of the capabilities and limitations of religion as an institution require the sociological information generated by studies of religious identity and its influence on the philosophy of life as compared with other institutions, such as the family, public education, state ideology, the impact of the media, the Internet and social networks.
5. The discovered functions and analyzed impacts of religion on the life-world of the local population point to highly varied (both positive and negative) trends of its development and potentials.
6. Differentiation of religions into *traditional* (Hanafi Islam and Orthodox Christianity) and *new* in the sociocultural environment in Kazakhstan allows us to identify the trends of religious conversion and study the attitude to state religious policies (premises).

ethnicity, level of incomes, types of settlement, etc. Data was taken from statistics and strictly adhered to during the selection process. Representation in the sampling structure was ensured by the multistage sampling stratified at the stage of selecting the points of the poll; interval at the stage of household selection and simple randomized selection of respondents in households.

The methodology of sociological studies was elaborated by the authors; the field stage and empirical processing were performed by professional sociological structures. In 2011-2017, this was done by a public organization The Scientific-Research Association "Institution of Democracy" (Astana); in 2018-2019, the Center for Business Information, Sociological and Marketing Studies "BISAM—Central Asia." We used the method of personal formalized interviews in the flats of the respondents, applying the CAPI/RAPI method. The answers were processed by IBM SPSS. In 2019, the sampling comprised 1,800 respondents who differed in the territorial and settlement structure types.

Results

1. *Freedom of conscience*—one of the constitutional principles that stipulates the freedom of the citizens of Kazakhstan to choose a religious, secular or mixed system of values which conceptualizes the axiological and meaningful attitudes in the sphere of religion and the general relations between the state and confessions.
2. *Perception of religious identity*. The adult population demonstrates that it successfully identifies itself in the sphere of religiosity. In most cases, people identify themselves according to their ethnic and cultural roots, consolidating the traditional ethnic-cultural identities (Hanafi madhab, Russian Orthodoxy or other faiths directly determined by the culture of peoples who live in Kazakhstan).

Ethnicity is the main factor of religious self-identification (82.0% of the Kazakhs consider themselves Muslim, while 75.9% of Russians identify as Orthodox Christians). On the whole, 79% of the population insist that they belong to the religion of their ethnicity. In Kazakhstan religion is generally perceived as part of the culture of an ethnicity that determines the choice of confession.

Religious identity is one of the accessible socialization channels at both the individual and group levels. The number of those who identify with the believers is steadily increasing because of those who orientate themselves towards the external factors of religiosity.

The factor and situational analysis of the changing religiosity has revealed the fact that the phenomenon of the faith is inadequately perceived. Respondents refer to external features of religiosity and reject the importance of spiritual authority. A large number of the respondents identify themselves as believers without studying doctrines and practices or the religious way of life in general.

Religiosity of the Kazakhstani society is highly mosaic: there are “nominal believers” among the country’s population; “believers who do not read sacred texts,” “non-believers who follow religious rites,” “atheists who celebrate religious holydays,” “believers who do not believe in God,” “those who believe in God, yet do not profess any religion.” The absence of knowledge or a vague idea of religion as a system of convictions based on spiritual experience, cultural matrix, spiritual guidance, etc. are fraught with the danger of extensive propagation of quasi-religiosity.

3. *Model of religiosity*. People in Kazakhstan are convinced that religious faith per se is better than its absence; normally people positively assess the shift from lack of faith to its presence and, on the other hand, are very negative about the shift in the reverse direction.

There are several sub-groups among those who consider themselves religious people: true believers, passive believers and pseudo-believers. The traditional scale of religious self-identification is as follows: convinced believer-believer rather than non-believer-undecided-non-believer rather than believer-convinced non-believer. Projected onto the realities of Kazakhstan, this scale shows that there is a maximum of 15-17% of convinced believers in the country; mostly believers comprise approximately 35-40%; those who waver in their beliefs—about 18%; mostly non-believers, 12%, and convinced non-believers, 13%.

Religious identity is a product of both internal and external factors; it takes shape under the impact of the state’s secular policy and global cultural policies. Certain features of religious identification are comparable with international and regional trends; they are highly varied phenomena with complex structures and with numerous meanings that crop up as confessional and extra-confessional

religiosity. Religious identity is formed in the context of the secular nature of the state and society, hence the phenomenon of extra-confessional identity (see Table 1).⁵

Table 1

**Matrix of Religious Self-Identification
(2014, N = 2,500; 2019, N = 1,800, % of the polled)**

	2014	2019
Believer, member of a religious community, follow all religious norms	10.3	14.5
Believer, not involved in religious life	56.2	65.5
Non-believer, follow religious rites	7.2	5.0
Non-believer, respect the believers	10.6	1.4
Indifferent to religion	7.6	4.7
Non-believer, negative attitude to religion	4.1	0.4
Believer, do not belong to any religious confession	—	5.4
Undecided	4.0	3.2

4. *More likely than not those who live in Kazakhstan have a combined value system—one that includes both religious and secular values, the borders between which are rather vague. This characteristic perfectly describes the real religiosity, which is diffused, fragmentary and contradictory. Believers, non-believers and atheists demonstrate mind-boggling combinations of axiological principles. Their value systems are hybrids, where the values of pragmatism and liberalism suppress the moral and spiritual values shared by mankind; society is moving away from the old axiological paradigm to a new system of values that is taking shape (see Table 2).*

Table 2

**Values and Norms that Different Groups are Ready to Accept
(2019, N = 1,800, % of the polled)**

	For the Respondents	For the Family	For Colleagues	For Neighbors
Secular norms	39.5	31.7	27.4	22.4
Religious norms	9.8	14.7	9.3	9.2
Religious and secular norms	36.1	39.5	31.2	27.6
Undecided	14.6	14.1	32.1	40.8

⁵ Here and elsewhere we quote the results of large-scale questionnaire polls of adult population (18+) according to the multistage representative sampling that reflects the territorial, gender-and-age and ethnic structure of population of Kazakhstan, which comprised 18,592,730 people as of 1 November 2019. The year and the volume of sampling are given in parenthesis.

5. *The functions of religion in Kazakhstani society* and their relative priority for the respondents are as follows:
- Existential: soothes, helps overcome difficulties and alleviates painful feelings and physical pain;
 - Philosophical and meaningful: enriches spiritually, helps acquire a meaning of life, purifies souls, calls to repent, shows the road towards salvation and everlasting life;
 - Regulatory: prescribes everyday norms of behavior;
 - Communicative: unites all co-religionists.

The amount of positive functions is much greater than the share of negative impacts, such as imparting passivity and humility, ascetic way of life, discouraging initiative, disuniting people who belong to different confessions, inviting destructive impacts on Kazakhstani society from abroad, limiting the impact of high communicative and information technologies, encouraging color revolutions. Religion and religiosity acquire new and, frequently, overly politicized connotations that can significantly affect the attainable statuses. This means that it is crucial to understand how the religious sphere develops in any society, register its scopes and intensity, prevent negative influences.

6. *Comparative analysis of positive effects of social institutions* has revealed that religion has not yet become the main institution that promotes unity and, in fact, occupies the last line in the Family-Education-State-Internet-Media-Religion hierarchy. The respondents spoke of the family as a more important institution that strongly affects the process of formation of the axiological consciousness. Religion occupies the last place (see Table 3).

Table 3

The Hierarchy of Positive Impacts of Social Institutions on the Development of Society, Consolidated Agreement, Unity and Prosperity (2019, N = 1,800, % of the polled)

Values/Institutions	Family	Education	State	Internet	Media	Religion (All Confessions)
Yes, certainly	89.6	77.2	70.1	47.8	44.9	43.6
Yes, partially	7.2	17.8	22.5	34.4	35.0	35.5
No, never	1.0	2.3	4.0	11.0	12.3	11.8
Undecided	2.2	2.7	3.5	6.8	7.8	9.1

7. *Assessment of popularity of religion and atheism in society.* Monitoring of religiosity revealed such trends as higher popularity of religion in the mass consciousness, admission that the variety of religious faiths and practices is increasing; more attention to atheism and atheists. The studies of people's attitude to these trends had revealed that Kazakhstanis mostly positively (84%) assess the growing popularity of religion; they are fairly reserved in their attitude to religious pluralism (44.1% for and 36.6% against) and are mainly negative when it comes to the increase in the number of atheists among their compatriots (42%, negative and 25.9% positive) (see Table 4).

Table 4

**Assessment of Religion and Atheism in Kazakhstan Today
(2019, N = 1,800, % of the polled)**

Statements	Values	%
Religion is gaining popularity among the Kazakhstanis	Positive	84.0
	Negative	7.0
	Undecided	9.0
The number of followers of different religions and religious trends is growing in Kazakhstan	Positive	44.1
	Negative	36.6
	Undecided	19.3
Atheism is gaining popularity in Kazakhstan	Positive	25.9
	Negative	42.8
	Undecided	31.4

8. *Assessment of the impact of religion on everyday life.* In t Soviet times (the 1920s-1990s) much was said about the desirability of atheism, while religion had mainly negative connotations in people’s minds. Starting in the 1990s, the de-ideologization of the Soviet image of religion created new attitudes. The period of religious variety began, during which religion was perceived by the masses mainly as a positive institution. The value of religion and its impact are differently assessed; positive assessments predominate (see Table 5).

Table 5

**Assessment of the Degree of Influence of Religions (of All Religious Trends)
on Social Life in Kazakhstan (2019, N = 1,800, % of the polled)**

Connotations	%
Positive	53.3
Rather positive	24.2
Rather negative	2.6
Negative	1.0
No influence at all	11.6
Undecided	7.3

9. *The hierarchy of factors and subjects that influence the philosophy of life* during twenty years of independence has demonstrated that the most important factors are directly correlated with the functions of the most important social institutions. The family and the

closest circle are the main factors that determine the philosophy of life (78.1%). Family socialization is more important than the institution of education (37.2%). The sum-total of spiritual requirements, religious institutions and subjects occupies the third place (21.6%). One out of six respondents (15.0%) pointed to their life circumstances; 12.4%, to public sentiments. Special literature (9.3%) plays a more important role than an independent search for answers (8.1%) and Internet resources (7.9%).

10. *Trends in life philosophy formation.* Amid the changing institutions responsible for the values accepted by society, the family and the education system are losing their former monopoly. The media, the Internet and social networks, new religious organizations are spreading their influence as institutions of reified socialization of the younger generation. The methods of transfer and the methods of reproduction of values and norms are also changing. There are new risks caused by the disrupted transmission of traditions between generations; education has lost its function of upbringing; commercialized and increasingly technocratic educational practices are less accessible to the majority of the young generation.

New religious organizations, including the unregistered ones and those opposed to the traditional religions and the state offer young people all sorts of axiological and labor socialization. Socialization of the younger generation according to the patterns of pseudo-Islam that draw young Kazakhstanis and their families into banned terrorist organizations causes great concern.

SWOT-analysis of the trends in life philosophy formation generalizes the tendencies and identifies the spaces of risks and threats (see Table 6).

Table 6

SWOT-Analysis of Trends in Life Philosophy Formation in Kazakhstan

<p><i>Strengths</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — philosophical pluralism — continued domination of the institution of family in society 	<p><i>Weaknesses</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — lower role of education in upbringing — no adequate family socialization — greater role of religious institutions — absence of respected spiritual teachers outside the family — philosophy of life depends on ad hoc external factors — ambiguous role of information resources (media and Internet) and a greater role of negative content
<p><i>Possibilities</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — reassessment of the role of religion and religious institutions — growing number of believers — deteriorating intellectual culture — loss of ideological impact on mentality 	<p><i>Threats</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — replacement of secular values and corresponding aims with religious ones — dissensus among philosophical orientations — loss of secularity as a statehood vector — use of means of information and communication to stir up protest feelings and manipulate them

11. *Messages about the religious priorities of the state policy in Kazakhstan* became important instruments of forming paradigmatic concepts translated into legal acts, programs and conceptions (see Table 7).

Table 7

Acceptance of the Ideology of State Confessional Policy
 (“Yes, I agree” in % of the polled, by each response; several choices possible)

Ideology of State-Confessional Policy	2011	2013	2014	2018
Due to the demographic prevalence of Muslims, Kazakhstan can be regarded as part of the Muslim World	39.1	60.5	68.3	50.4
Kazakhstan is a poly-confessional country that treats all confessions equally	64.3	72.0	77.5	76.6
Islam and Orthodoxy are religions of primary importance in Kazakhstan	53.6	68.3	63.4	67.1

12. *The idea of traditional and new religions* took root in mass consciousness: there is a clear perception, delimitation and assessment of the traditional and new religions, differentiated interpretation of their roles in and impacts on society.

On the whole, people positively assess the impacts of the traditional religious trends (72.1%). There is a clearly negative attitude to new religious organizations (41.6%); people do not trust and are even apprehensive of them. New religions are mostly orientated towards adaptation to the highly dynamic social, cultural and political contexts, hence their compensatory functions. New religions and cults rely on the latest forms and methods of proactive efforts to push the traditional religions aside; they exploit the need for the functions that are absent, for a variety of reasons, from the secular and traditional religious institutions (see Table 8).

Table 8

Assessment of the Impacts of Traditional and New Religions, Trends and Denominations on the Whole and by Confessional/Extra-Confessional Affiliation
 (2019, N = 1,800, % of the polled)

Confessions, Trends, Denominations	Assessment of Impacts	Total among the Polled, %	Confessional Identification of the Respondents, %		
			Islam	Orthodoxy	No Confessional Self-Identity
Islam (traditional)	Positive	73.8	81.9	62.2	25.0
	Rather positive	12.0	8.9	18.5	26.8
	Rather negative	1.3	1.0	1.5	3.6
	Negative	0.9	0.7	1.5	1.8
	No impact	7.2	5.1	8.1	23.2
	Undecided	4.9	2.4	8.1	19.6
Orthodoxy	Positive	45.5	43.7	60.0	28.6
	Rather positive	19.2	17.9	21.5	26.8
	Rather negative	1.8	2.1	1.5	0.0
	Negative	3.8	4.7	1.5	1.8
	No impact	13.8	13.6	8.9	26.8
	Undecided	15.9	17.9	6.7	16.1

Table 8 (continued)

Confessions, Trends, Denominations	Assessment of Impacts	Total among the Polled, %	Confessional Identification of the Respondents, %		
			Islam	Orthodoxy	No Confessional Self-Identity
Catholicism	Positive	15.5	13.4	25.9	3.6
	Rather positive	13.8	13.2	14.8	21.4
	Rather negative	4.5	5.2	3.0	1.8
	Negative	7.0	7.7	5.9	3.6
	No impact	22.6	23.7	12.6	37.5
	Undecided	36.6	36.8	37.8	32.1
Judaism	Positive	5.9	5.4	8.9	1.8
	Rather positive	8.4	7.7	7.4	21.4
	Rather negative	5.9	6.6	4.4	3.6
	Negative	11.5	12.0	13.3	3.6
	No impact	26.3	26.7	21.5	35.7
	Undecided	41.9	41.6	44.4	33.9
Protestantism	Positive	4.2	3.7	7.4	1.8
	Rather positive	5.6	5.6	2.2	14.3
	Rather negative	6.9	8.2	4.4	1.8
	Negative	12.7	14.3	10.4	3.6
	No impact	24.2	24.2	20.0	33.9
	Undecided	46.4	44.1	55.6	44.6
Salafism	Positive	3.5	3.7	3.7	0.0
	Rather positive	3.3	3.8	0.0	5.4
	Rather negative	7.0	7.3	7.4	5.4
	Negative	29.0	32.6	21.5	17.9
	No impact	13.8	12.5	13.3	25.0
	Undecided	43.4	40.1	54.1	46.4
Krishnaites	Positive	2.2	2.4	1.5	1.8
	Rather positive	4.0	4.0	1.5	10.7
	Rather negative	6.8	6.4	8.9	5.4
	Negative	16.4	17.6	17.0	5.4
	No impact	21.7	21.4	20.7	28.6
	Undecided	49.0	48,1	50.4	48.2

Table 8 (continued)

Confessions, Trends, Denominations	Assessment of Impacts	Total among the Polled, %	Confessional Identification of the Respondents, %		
			Islam	Orthodoxy	No Confessional Self-Identity
Scientologists	Positive	2.2	2.6	1.5	0.0
	Rather positive	3.1	3.0	0.7	7.1
	Rather negative	6.3	6.1	8.9	3.6
	Negative	24.7	26.5	22.2	17.9
	No impact	16.2	15.7	14.8	23.2
	Undecided	47.6	46.2	51.9	48.2
Jehovah's Witnesses	Positive	1.9	2.3	1.5	0.0
	Rather positive	3.5	3.8	0.7	5.4
	Rather negative	7.9	8.0	9.6	5.4
	Negative	34.0	34.8	31.9	33.9
	No impact	16.0	15.0	17.0	21.4
	Undecided	36.7	36.1	39.3	33.9

13. *Religious conversion—main trends.* When reconstructed, religious conversion reveals the main motives that lead the citizens of Kazakhstan to religion. The most common is a search for a solution to an existential dead end, followed by less common motives: socialization and re-socialization, search for spiritual support, trend for religiosity, as well as the method of resolution of psychological collisions at the person-group level (marital conflicts or misunderstandings between generations).

The weakening of the socializing impact of the family, the absence of an access to education and jobs, as well as a lack of philosophical maturity, independence and critical perception made religious conversion an obvious rational choice within the identification matrix (see Table 9).

Table 9

Changes of Religious Convictions of Members of Different Social Circles (2019, N = 1,800, % of the polled)

Connotations/Subjects	Relatives and Close Friends	Colleagues, Classmates	Neighbors, Acquaintances
Attitude to faith and religion did not change, they are faithful	62.1	36.8	33.1
Changed their views in regard to religious issues, became believers	7.7	14.3	7.9
Switched religions and joined another religious community	2.2	6.8	8.1

Table 9 (continued)

Connotations/Subjects	Relatives and Close Friends	Colleagues, Classmates	Neighbors, Acquaintances
Lost their religious convictions, became atheists	2.9	3.5	5.0
Did not change their convictions, were and remain atheists	3.7	3.7	3.7
Are neither believers nor atheists	3.9	4.2	7.7
Undecided	17.5	30.7	34.4

Conversion to traditional Islam and Orthodoxy predominate, yet other types of conversions are sustained: not only do they promote a religious mentality, but are also responsible for its important transformation.

Religious identity strongly affects the choice of life style of a gradually growing number of Kazakhstanis. There are major and easily recognizable trends related to religious conversion: Islamization of the potentially Muslim and the traditionally non-Muslim population; Evangelization of the potentially Muslim population and attraction of different population groups (with the potentially prescribed ethnosocial and cultural, including traditional, confessional statuses) to neo-Orientalist cults and practices (spiritual healing, psychological training) (see Table 10).

Table 10

Changes Caused by the Attitude to Religion or Religious Preferences in the Closest Circle (Relatives, Friends, Colleagues), as well as in Kazakhstani Society as a Whole (2019, N = 1,800, % of the polled)

Vectors of Conversion/Subjects of Conversion	In the Family and among Relatives	Among Friends, Neighbors, Colleagues	In Kazakhstani Society
Conversion of non-believers into traditional Islam	25.4	19.7	23.7
Switch from traditional to non-traditional Islam	4.6	9.0	13.8
Conversion into Orthodoxy of those who professed another or did not profess any religion	4.8	10.3	4.4
Conversion into Protestantism of those who professed another or did not profess any religion	2.0	3.9	4.6
Conversion into neo-Orientalist cults	2.4	1.3	3.7
Involvement into pseudo-religious organizations	2.4	2.9	5.5
Involvement into all sorts of corporations with quasi-religious ideologies	2.4	0.9	3.7
Switch from religion to atheism	1.8	2.4	1.8
No changes	38.6	28.3	14.7
Undecided	15.6	21.3	24.1

Discussion

In Kazakhstan, inter-confessional harmony and social unity are treated as absolute priorities. The religious factor that influences the emergence of an integrated identity (one of the aims of state religious policy) has produced fairly ambiguous results since socialization occurs through life philosophy. Religious ideas about the world produce different or even contradictory impacts that wipe out traditional cultural landscapes and challenge the stability and integrity of the state and society.

Religiosity of the country's population and religion (used as a political instrument) have become the frontline of attacks on the authentic model of ethnocultural, confessional, civil and political identity rooted in the country's past that relies on stability and agreement.

The new religious ideas (cults, movements, organizations, communities) frequently pose themselves as alternatives to the deeply rooted traditional mentality and, as such, create serious risks. They rely on political and institutional strategies that not only challenge the traditional religious institutions, but also consistently oppose the system of secular social relations and traditional ties, family connections in the first place. They use specific methods and technologies elaborated by psychology and psychiatry to manipulate consciousness and behavior; they do not hesitate to use drugs techniques of online influence and recruitment⁶ to warp consciousness and sub-consciousness, while the achieved changes radicalize and politicize the minds as a step towards social confrontation.

Traditional religions are loyal to the state and are open to dialog; they do not use totalitarian methods to control minds and behavior; they rely on traditional values, which makes their influence purely positive in a political sense. Conversion from the absence of religiosity to traditional religiosity, from a non-traditional to a traditional religion positively affects individuals, family groups and society as a whole. These vectors of conversion do not contradict the value system deeply rooted in the minds of Kazakhstanis; they are in full harmony with the aims, interests and strategies shared by all Kazakhstanis. This creates a context in which the state wants to consolidate its secular status confirmed by the authority of traditional religions and is ready to cooperate. The political process unfolding in the country clearly demonstrates that the state is determined to interact and cooperate for the sake of public harmony. From this point of view, political reconstruction of interaction between the secular and religious factors is highly important.

Conclusion

Society thinks of the institution of religion in ambivalent (positive as well as negative) terms. Religion is perceived in a wide range of statuses (moving from most to less important): as the traditional historical-cultural attribute; the space of ethno-cultural identification; the exclusive sphere of understanding the essence of human spirituality; means of personal salvation and a niche of communication with God; the truth and the meaning of life; the moral imperative and regulator of lifestyle; means of strengthening the spirit; obligatory rites; means of manipulating the mass consciousness; a delusion and self-delusion, and an outdated ideology.

When religion becomes a political institution and one of the means of socialization, it leads to an emphasis on the process of forming traditional ethnoconfessional identity; religious conversion expands its capabilities of becoming one of the obvious religious trends. In the minds of Kazakhstanis, the hierarchy of conversions is arranged along a vector from the most important to less important motives: social, cultural, religious, personal (mainly existential and psychological).

⁶ [<https://www.zakon.kz/4995645-polomannye-sudby-v-chem-opasnost-poiska.html>].

Today, religious conversion is gradually developing into the main channel of engaging the youth, socially fragile population and people seeking socialization, new collectivity and a meaning of life in quasi-religious structures. Joining such organizations changes the way of life of the converts—they become the vehicles of a new world outlook that often does not correlate with the values of Kazakhstani society and the task of unifying the people of Kazakhstan. Conversion into non-traditional religions, cults and movements aims to detach people from the historical and cultural tradition, change their consciousness and redefine their idea of a meaning of life.

Religious ideas about the world affect the social context, the attitude to the family and the state, which deprive society of its traditional impact on cultural and, subsequently, political processes. This means that the contradictions between the traditional religions of Kazakhstan and new religions (trends, alliances and movements) will be mounting. There are no open confrontations or conflicts, yet more and more people demonstrate tolerance to the religious choice of their relatives and close friends and total indifference to the loss of traditional axiological regulators. Society is facing the latent danger of proliferation of religious fanaticism and extremism in everyday life.

The studies of the trends of religious conversion have revealed that the world-view component of social consciousness is in bad shape; it cannot be remedied by secular means, in particular, by the family and education systems and by ideology. It remains to be seen when society reaches the threshold criteria and demonstrates the signs of unfolding philosophical identification. The volumes and vectors of religious conversion indicate that the Kazakhstani society has already reached the line beyond which it might lose its philosophical and axiological identity at the micro-level and in society as a whole.

The fact that an increasing number of Kazakhstanis (including women and young people) embraces quasi-religious practices and the corresponding lifestyles does not correlate with the task of developing a competitive, intellectual and progressive-minded society.

It is highly important to be aware of the unfolding religious conversion processes in order to orientate them in the desired directions of everyone's harmonious socialization, to engage all groups of citizens, young people in the first place, in a socially significant system of values and social unity. It is highly important to study religiosity as a process unfolding in Kazakhstan to formulate new approaches to social management and harmonization of the secular and religious trends of social development.