

## REPUBLIC OF KAZAKHSTAN: ETHNORELIGIOUS IDENTITY AS AN INTEGRATION FACTOR

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### ABSTRACT

**T**he authors have analyzed the ways in which the country was consolidating its independence and sovereignty by strengthening and improving its national statehood, identifying the cultural and religious values of the Kazakhs and assessing their spiritual potential. In some twenty years, that is in a historically short period of time, the republic became easily recognizable in the world thanks to its geopolitical principles, clear ideas about its development path, a well-defined awareness of the spe-

cifics of its national culture and ethnoreligious identity as the society's subjective idea about itself and the world. This brought to the forefront not merely the problem of revival of its historical roots and spiritual value, which has gained ideological significance amid the world crisis in all spheres of social life. It has also become existentially important to revive, enrich and further develop the national culture and ethnic and religious customs and traditions and align them with the current realities.

**KEYWORDS:** *ethnicity, ethnic identity, religious identity, tradition, integration, nation.*

## 1. Introduction

Plunged into global transformations, the world is suffering an identity crisis. The enormous and fast social changes do not give society a chance to adjust to the rapidly changing social practices. Changes in the very foundations of social-cultural orders and methods of living combined with the variety of ongoing conflicts deprived individuals of their idea about the traditionally sustainable homogeneity of the human world. This added particular importance to identification processes.

Each ethnicity is unique. It has an identity of its own, which makes it similar to an individual personality. Confronted with challenges of historic dimensions, any nation seeks answers to the questions: Who are we? What sort of nation do we want to become or remain? A wrong choice is fraught with loss of identity. It is concentrated in the nation's history and is the result of its self-preservation. Any member of any nation has a certain basic set of images that forms his social identity structured at the individual and social levels. In the rapidly unfolding globalization, amidst the increasing variety of social contacts and new forms of socialization of national and ethnic divergences, identity betrays itself as an unstable or even virtual phenomenon that merely imitates variety by clothing type or behavior style. It is not conditioned by the context of the discursive tradition. Self-identification that defines historical individuality has become an indispensable condition of survival and functioning of society and each of its members.

The Soviet Union's disintegration and social upheavals that accompanied it plunged the former Soviet republics into instability with dim prospects of survival. This situation was even more complicated: the economic, social, political, national, and state crisis was aggravated by the spiritual and ideological crisis caused by the long period of communist ideology that had reshaped and reproduced the identities of all Soviet peoples during a period devoid of spiritual and national self-awareness.

Development of independence and sovereignty made the consolidation and improvement of the national statehood of Kazakhstan absolutely indispensable. The same fully applies to the identification of cultural and religious values of the Kazakhs and their spiritual potential. In twenty years, an amazingly short historical period, the world community learned about the republic's geopolitical principles, obtained clear ideas about its ways and aims, as well as about the specifics of its national culture and ethno-religious identity (subjective ideas of Kazakhs about themselves and the world around them). This means that Kazakhstan has found a place of its own among other states and ethnicities. Today, it has become extremely important to rediscover historical roots and spiritual values (especially important amid the worldwide crisis that has spread far and wide into all spheres of social life). It is equally or even more important to revive, enrich and improve national culture and ethno-religious customs and traditions, aligning them with the new realities. Kazakhstan, which for approximately 300 years remained within the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, had few chances to address these problems on its own. As an independent state it has obtained a chance to deal with the problems as it sees it fit. It is impossible to imitate any of its neighbors, since practically all newly independent post-Soviet states are coping with their own problems, as well as they can, Russia being no exception. In these conditions, the new cultural ethno-religious values were planted and multiplied through the consistent promotion of the idea of inter-ethnic and inter-confessional unity, harmony, and religious tolerance as state ideology among the believers and the younger generations in the first place.

Here we will discuss religious identity, which is gaining importance in view of the process of ethnic and civil identification unfolding in Kazakhstan.

## 2. Methods and Materials

We have relied on hermeneutical and linguistic analyses, induction and deduction methods, books and articles written by prominent scholars and paid particular attention to those related to the idea of integration of peoples and cultures.

## 3. Results

Tolerance, one of the most important philosophical categories, is the first step towards mutual understanding and agreement. Religions have to work hard to find a common language among themselves. This should be done if conflicts and mutual reproaches are to be avoided. According to the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, the desire to understand begins with a confrontation with something alien, challenging and disorienting.<sup>1</sup> To achieve understanding, we should arrive at a context of a common meaning. In our case, understanding can be achieved through the efforts of the state and society to identify the conflict situation as a whole.

The examples and the conclusions offered below reflect individual sides of the positive changes that are going on in our country. These suggest that the culture of the religious tolerance has become an important factor of ensuring inter-ethnic agreement, inter-confessional cooperation, social and political stability and sustainable social development in Kazakhstan.

### 3.1. "Ethnic" as a Category

Ethnic distinctions cannot be reduced to values per se; they are rooted in the system of assessments and the unconscious, which betrays itself through ethnicity (the moral foundation of a community of people) that constitutes the ethnic structure of personality. Friedrich Nietzsche at one time pointed out that no people could survive without assessing what is good and what is evil.<sup>2</sup> Without an ethnicity as the core of a system of assessing imperatives, it is much harder to assess axiological parameters. Meanwhile, the socio-historical development of an ethnicity reassesses the values, thus changing the fundamental, the constructive and the creative, which leads to the accidental yet mandatory idea of an ethnicity; its new interpretation, as was shown by Lev Gumilev at one time, creates a possibility of an emergence of a different people. According to Gumilev, ethnic system is an emotional, psychic and behavioral entity that has all potentials of and demonstrates trends towards growth horizontally and vertically both as a territorial and philosophical unit through transformation of culture, religion, ideology, art, and traditions. He identified the transcendental core of the ethnicity which consists of local behavior patterns, that is, culture. His theory, however, relies on passionarity as the most important element and the basic concept described as "a characteristic dominant, an irreversible inner urge (conscious and unconscious) to purposeful activity."<sup>3</sup>

The axiological aspect of ethnicity is expressed in material, cultural and spiritual (ethnic, aesthetic, religious, etc.) values created by an ethnicity to survive as a community and consolidate humanism in the individual by expressing these values in ethnic culture and preserving them in memory.

<sup>1</sup> See: H.-H. Gadamer, *Aktualnost prekrasnogo*, Iskusstvo Publishers, Moscow, 1991. P. 43-59 (H.-G. Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, Cambridge University Press, 1986).

<sup>2</sup> See: F. Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Macmillan, New York, 1911.

<sup>3</sup> L.N. Gumilev, *Etnogenez i biosfera zemli*, Gidrometeoizdat, Moscow, 1990. P. 325 (L.N. Gumilev, *Ethnogenesis and the Biosphere*, 1978).

### **3.2. Religious Identity of Kazakhs as a Symbiosis of Settled and Nomadic Cultures**

The historical evolution of religious tolerance of Turkic-speaking peoples who lived in the territory of Kazakhstan was strongly affected by the fairly complex symbiosis of settled and nomadic cultures that flourished among ancient Turks, a patchwork of many ethnicities that borrowed cultural elements from each other. The emergence of the Great Silk Route played a great role in this. Mukhammadiar Orynbekov, a prominent scholar who studied Kazakh philosophy, wrote in his last monograph *Genezis religioznosti v Kazakhstane* (The Genesis of Religious Feelings in Kazakhstan): “The Early Middle Ages were marked by the mind-boggling synchronous coexistence on the territory of Kazakhstan of different confessions. The smaller religious cosmos concentrated in Semirechie (Southern Kazakhstan) was, in fact, a detailed picture of all main confessions that positively affected the spiritual life of those who lived in the steppe under the favorable influence of moral rules and commandments. Religious tolerance in Kazakhstan has survived from that time as one of the most typical features of the steppe population.”<sup>4</sup>

### **3.3. The Role of Religion in Shaping Ethnic Identity**

Religion as a form of social consciousness betrayed itself through consistent efforts to create socio-philosophical and invariably existent interactions between religion and art, religion and morals, religion and science, religion and law, religion and culture of an ethnicity to exert huge psychological, moral, esthetical and emotional pressure on the conscience, thinking and way of life of a religious as well as an ethnic community. The interaction between the religious and the ethnic may exist in many ways. This is especially obvious in the spiritual world of the Kazakhs; first and foremost, in the form of philosophical foundations of thinking and mentality, the national way of life, folk art, ethnic history, memory and self-identity.

### **3.4. Tolerance as the Cornerstone of Stability**

Syncretism of religious ideas of the proto-Kazakhs is an amazing blend of religious notions, mainly caused by the openness of those who lived in the Steppe. Later, this openness transformed into tolerance towards all other peoples. Indeed, the fact that today Kazakhstan is home to over 140 ethnicities who live peacefully side by side without clashes and contradictions is, to a great extent, due to the tolerance of the Kazakhs. Kazakhs are an exceptionally welcoming and kind people; they welcomed those who were driven to their land by the cruel totalitarian regime. Kazakhstan, which, very much like all other post-Soviet states, lost a certain share of its population through emigration, has preserved its image of a friendly state where numerous ethnicities actively cooperate. Abdimalik Nysanbaev, Academician of the National Academy of Sciences of the RK, has written in his monograph *Globalizatsia i problemy mezhkulturnogo dialoga* (Globalization and the Problems of Intercultural Dialog) that “the experience of preserving the culture of agreement and intercultural communication has emerged and is still functioning in the Republic of Kazakhstan. It is the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan. This experience has been highly assessed by other post-Soviet states and can serve as a model of inter-ethnic harmony and coexistence of ethnicities in the countries far abroad.”<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> M.S. Orynbekov, *Genezis religioznosti v Kazakhstane*, Dayk-Press, Almaty, 2005, p. 288.

<sup>5</sup> A.N. Nysanbaev, *Globalizatsia i problemy mezhkulturnogo dialoga*, Vol. 1, Almaty, 2004, p. 262.

### **3.5. Post-Soviet “Return of Religion”**

The country is gradually returning to its traditional religiosity, with religious Kazakhs highly valuing Islam, its ideas and practices. These people attend classes on Islam, study Arabic, buy leaflets explaining the rules and practices of the namaz and observe posts (uraza), hence their interest in different interpretations of Islam and different paths leading to religious experience. An increasingly larger number of people are choosing religion as the road to individual salvation. This explains the steadily widening range of religious trends—from puritan jamaats of the Salafis to urban groups of Sufis, not to mention the Islamic forums and blogs in the Internet.

### **3.6. Motherland or God?**

For certain historical and cultural reasons, the highly contradictory process of searching for national/civil consolidation is still going on in Kazakhstan. As could be expected, an upsurge of religious feelings increased the role of religion in Kazakhstan, yet the majority remains convinced that for many reasons (one of them being the constitutional principle of the secular nature of the state) this role should remain within the limits of private life. In this context, acquisition of religious identity, very typical of the post-Soviet development stage, proves that people are free in their ethnocultural quest and their ideas about the world. Any attempt to make religion the main instrument of national/civil consolidation might bring negative results.

## **4. Discussion**

### **4.1. What is “Ethnic Identity” and What are the Main Philosophical, Sociological and Psychological Methods of its Interpretation?**

This is a social-philosophical, biological, psychological, culturological and intellectual construct in its ontological, epistemological and axiological dimensions up to and including such concepts as “ethnicity,” “ethnogenesis,” “ethnic memory,” and “ethnic identification” discussed in this article. Philosophers of the past offered very different interpretations of ethnicity and ethnic life. Plato spoke about the unity of clan and tribe, common languages, laws and rights that tied these social communities together.<sup>6</sup> Charles Montesquieu looked at the spirit of the people as a sum-total of socio-psychological (mind, emotions, customs and habits), cultural (language and religion), political (laws and principles of guidance) and geographic (climate and territory) phenomena.<sup>7</sup> Pitirim Sorokin, world-famous thinker and sociologist, pointed to the priority of the tongue, religion, natural and biological features as the foundation for the emergence of an ethnicity. He concluded that the language, religious and racial groups that emerge on this foundation were primary groups, and that a socially uniform society was being formed, while all national distinctions were bound to gradually disappear.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> See: Plato, *Sochinenia v trekh tomakh*, Vol. 3, Part 1, Mysl Publishers, Moscow, 1971. P. 91

<sup>7</sup> See: Ch. Montesquieu, *The Spirit of Laws*, Batoche Books, Kitchener, 2001.

<sup>8</sup> See: P.A. Sorokin, *Sistema sotsiologii*, in two vols., Vol. 2: Sotsialnaia analitika. Uchenie o stroenii slozhnykh sotsialnykh agregatov, Nauka Publishers, Moscow, 1993. P. 99-105.

Hegel was among those who wrote that the sociopolitical interpretation of an ethnic nature pointed to the presence of a state. For him, the national was a partial realization of the Absolute Spirit in the form of a national state.<sup>9</sup> Max Weber spoke about a nation as a community moving towards a state of its own.<sup>10</sup> Nikolay Berdyaev was convinced that the state was a form of existence of any nation, the loss of which was the greatest misfortune that crippled the soul of the nation.<sup>11</sup> These different approaches are conditioned by the firm conviction that the nature of ethnic phenomena is subjective and spiritual. Some thinkers associate it with the Divine; others—with psychology, while still others link it to culture. A theological approach identifies the essence of the ethnic as God; the main principle of any people as homogeneity of forms of life guided by the Divine decree, while people as a sum-total of individuals who live their common life according to the law of the development of the Divine and who reproduce themselves physically and spiritually. Vladimir Solovyev looked at the nations as organic and eternal parts of humanity, each of which fulfilled its Divine predestination: “The idea of a nation is not what it thinks of itself in time, but instead what God thinks of it in eternity.”<sup>12</sup>

Today ethnic processes are driven by the desire of each ethnicity to preserve its specifics; to achieve intra-ethnic consolidation and to stay apart from all other ethnicities. This is gradually developing into a pattern of an ethnic context that is growing global by spreading to different societies with very different social and economic characteristics.

The idea that nature plays the main role in forming an ethnicity is the dominant one in the concept of geographical determinism of Ludwig Woltmann (the racial temperament theory) and Ernest Renan’s national idea. While by its objective characteristics ethnicity is viewed as a natural phenomenon, its methods of self-organization make it a socio-cultural phenomenon in which culture is the criterion and a constant of ethnic sustainability. Changes in internal cultural determination alter the ethnicity: ethnic self-awareness reflects the concerted activities of the human society that determine its lifestyle, the specifics and uniqueness of ideas about the world and cognizing the world by a people. In ethnogenesis, religious psychology united and represented a very special world of the believer as an individual, and the world of religious tradition—as an intrinsic link between the past and present, while the collective religious-psychological experience of the past was one of the organizing principles. One of the historical reasons for the continued existence of religion is its mission of transmission from one generation to another, throughout millennia, of secular and theological information in the form of linguistic heritage, symbolic and realistic representation of life in paintings, graphics, ornaments, sculpture, music, ritual behavior (traditions, rites and customs), in cultic systems, and in the sanctification of the images of saints. All of the above reflects the epistemological, ontological, axiological, and anthropological aspects of the ideas about the world, and “the more refined, cohesive and adapted to the specifics of the spiritual quest of an ethnicity a religion is, the firmer it is as the foundation of an ethnicity’s identification and the more obviously ethnic are any of its active manifestations.”<sup>13</sup>

Phenomenological analysis of the problem of definition of ethnicity, along with other approaches, gives us a chance to arrive at a final definition: ethnicity is a social community based on and functioning within a common system of values, moral positions that are reflected in national culture and life style both rationally and through images and symbols. This means that ethnicity is, primarily, a cultural unity accepted by all members of any group that identifies itself as a single whole that has never been divided in the past and present and that has certain objective characteristics of its belonging, i.e., territory, language, religion, world outlook, culture, psychology, and life style.

<sup>9</sup> See: G.W.F. Hegel, *Works of Different Years*, Vol. 1, Moscow, 1970, P. 285-385 (in Russian).

<sup>10</sup> See: M. Weber, *The Nation, Nationalism*, Oxford University Press, 1994. P. 25.

<sup>11</sup> See: N.A. Berdyaev, *Filosofia neravenstva*, IMA-Press Publishing House, Moscow, 1990, p. 85.

<sup>12</sup> V.S. Solovyev, *Sochinenia*, in two volumes, Vol. 2, Pravda Publishers, Moscow, 1989. P. 220.

<sup>13</sup> N.M. Sadykov, “Etnos i religia kak identifikatsionnye faktory,” *Saiasat*, No. 5, 1998, p.39.

## **4.2. How Do Ethnicity and Religion Correlate in Kazakhstan?**

An ethnoconfessional community is a special type of community of people with a specific lifestyle with religion at its core, and whose ethnic self-awareness serves as religious self-awareness; in specific sociocultural conditions it becomes an ethnic denominator. This community rests on a dual foundation of confessional and secular organizations, each with its unique as well as common connections with its own confessional group. The main trends in tying a religious-cultic entity and an ethnic community together are related to the common interactions between religion and ethnicity which played an important role in forming any given ethnicity. On the other hand, having blended with folk beliefs (that are highly ethno-genic), certain components of the religious-cultic complex (its rituals, religious rites and traditions, in the first place) penetrate the national forms of social life and become ethnic phenomena.

These are the two main trends that lead to interconnections between religion and an ethnicity, as a result of which the ties between the confession and certain specific features of an ethnicity (traditional forms of economic activities and lifestyle, the cultural and everyday specifics, tongue, ethnic self-awareness, etc.) invariably cause a fusion of religion and social experience. This means that religion performs a certain role in the process of ethnic formation, which becomes especially apparent in a mono-confessional context. In his monograph *Predfilosofia protokazakhov* (Pre-Philosophy of the Proto-Kazakhs) Mukhanmadiar Orynbekov wrote: “The deepest layer of human memory is closely connected with an awareness of belonging to a certain ethnicity, its traditions and ideas about the world, of which individuals are not always fully aware. National religious feelings are related to man’s biological nature in the closest way possible, which explains the outbursts of basic instincts and impulses in human minds when their thoughts and actions slide into the ethnoconfessional sphere under the pressure of large-scale social shocks and shifts. It makes ethnicity and religion the last shelter.”<sup>14</sup>

## **4.3. What is Tolerance in the Context of Inter-Cultural Integration and How is it Manifested in Kazakhstan?**

Today, tolerance has become indispensable; it can be seen in different spheres of human activities and is achieved through dialogs. It is not a retreat from, connivance with or indulgence of any ideological system or a political position. The philosophy of tolerance is not indifferent to any ideas and actions; it is not a retreat under the pressure of public evil or its everyday manifestations. Maria Mchedlova was absolutely right when she wrote that “there can be no harmony between the truth and lies, between what is good and what is evil.”<sup>15</sup>

As a Russian philosopher Vladislav Lektorsky has written, “tolerance is respect for the position of others combined with the readiness to readjust one’s own positions; in some cases this means re-adjustment of individual and cultural identity as a result of a critical dialog.”<sup>16</sup>

The problem of tolerance has come to the fore in scholarly writings of the last decade, yet the meaning and usage remain fairly vague, because the term “identity” is related not only to the highly

<sup>14</sup> M. Orynbekov, *Predfilosofia protokazakhov*, Olke Publishing House, Almaty, 1994, p.114.

<sup>15</sup> M.M. Mchedlova, “Religioznaia identichnost,” in: *Politichskaia identichnost i politika identichnosti*, in 2 vols., ed. by I.S. Semenenko, Vol. 1, *Identichnost kak katergoria politicheskoy nauki: slovar terminov i poniatii*, Moscow, 2012, p. 123.

<sup>16</sup> V.A. Lektorsky, “O tolerantnosti, pluralizme i krititsizme,” *Voprosy filosofii*, No. 11, 1997, p. 54.

varied, but also to the highly contradictory philosophical-psychological phenomenology. In his *Identity: Youth and Crisis* Erik Erikson identified social solidarity, individuality and equivalence as certain aspects of the analysis of identity.<sup>17</sup>

Erik Erikson and Erich Fromm considered identity not only a result of socialization, but also a product of personality individualization.<sup>18</sup>

Religion is the content and an instrument of the identification process. Maria Mchedlova has defined religious identity as the result of self-identification of an individual or a reference community with a certain religious teaching or its part.<sup>19</sup>

In all cases and variants religious identity presupposes that an individual identifies himself as a social creature in any specific historical period; objectively religious identity invariably includes a real presupposed (but not necessarily stated and pronounced) social position, identification with the structures of society and, therefore, a social (as a product of identification) identity as an indispensable component of the identity of an individual, the never ending efforts to try on and to discuss one's unique "I" in the social sphere of its functioning.<sup>20</sup>

Tolerance, a devotion to humanitarian values and a long history of close contacts served as a firm foundation for the interaction of different religions. Christianity had come to the land of our ancestors in the 3rd century AD; small churches appeared much later, in the mid-19th century. The Turkestan Eparchy was established in 1871; in the following year, Archbishop Zephaniah, the first hierarch in Kazakhstan, was appointed head of the Verny and Semirechie eparchies.

Soviet power that came to these parts in 1917 launched a wide-scale atheistic campaign that continued for seventy years. Churches and cathedrals were pulled down, church property confiscated. In the 1920s-1930s, priests were either liquidated or sent to prison for many years.

Kazakhstan, very much like all other Soviet republics, had its share of these processes. Starting in the 1930s, it became a territory of exile for priests and laity alike. Collectivization was unfolding approximately at the same time; it destroyed the nomadic lifestyle of the Kazakhs and their auls (villages), as well as the households of Russian settlers causing hunger on the scale previously unknown with millions dying of starvation across the country.

Today, the authorities used the religious-cultural heritage to prevent the politicization of Islam; certain religious symbols were legitimized as part of social life. The process was unfolding at the level of mass cultural consciousness bordering on cultural identity. In Kazakhstan, religious holidays Uraza Bayram and Qurban Bayram are official days off. Christmas, one of the main Christian holidays, likewise, is a day off.

The objective conditions in which revival of religious and ethnic identities in post-Soviet time became possible were created by the political elites, their positive ideas about Islam, their desire to capitalize on them to consolidate their own positions and revive the identity of the local peoples. This created the extremely favorable conditions in which local communities were very positive about the religious factor that was steadily widening and gaining influence.

Religious revival is directly associated with ethnic self-awareness: religion as a social phenomenon and one of the important elements of sub-ethnic culture loaded with eternal moral values became the reckoning point for hundreds of thousands of people. Having found themselves in ideological *anomie* (the term coined by Émile Durkheim<sup>21</sup>), the post-Soviet mass consciousness pushed atheism

<sup>17</sup> See: E. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, W.W. Norton Company, New York, 1968.

<sup>18</sup> See: E. Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, McDougal, 1941; E. Erikson, op. cit.

<sup>19</sup> See: M.M. Mchedlova, op. cit.

<sup>20</sup> See: S.Zh. Dosanova, A.A. Agabek, "Konstrukt religioznoy identichnosti s pozitsiy sinergeticheskoy kontseptsii sotsializatsii," *Vestnik KazNU. Seria Filosofia. Seria kulturologia. Seria Politologia*, No. 1 (34), 2010, pp. 129-130.

<sup>21</sup> See: É. Durkheim, "Kollektivnyi ritual," in: *Religia i obshchestvo: Khrestomatia po sotsiologii religii*, compiled by V.I. Garadzha, E.D. Rutkevich, Aspekt Press, Moscow, 1996. P. 438-441.



away and embraced religion.<sup>22</sup> It became one of the defining elements of culture indirectly connected with the nation's ethnohistorical traditions and spiritual heritage. Since the first days of independence, the leaders of the post-Soviet Kazakhstan have been treating greater inter-ethnic and inter-confessional harmony as one of their priorities. In the early 1990s, when the Soviet Union was falling apart there was a fear of massive clashes between members of different religions and confessions, but nothing of the sort has ever happened.

Today, Kazakhstan is one of the biggest poly-ethnic and poly-confessional states that occupies vast territories in Eurasia. The presence of different religious faiths, customs and traditions in its territory is one of its system-forming elements. In fact, none of its Central Asian neighbors can boast an equally multinational and poly-confessional population. On the whole, 98% of their populations is Muslim.

At present, the Kazakhstan society can be described as a unique example of inter-ethnic and inter-confessional pluralism and tolerance: its population consists of representatives of 140 ethnicities and of over 18 confessions. Peace and civil harmony, religious tolerance and equal participation of members of different cultures in social life form the foundation of our national policy as an independent state and serve as a distinctive feature by which Kazakhstan is known all over the world. The world is aware of Kazakhstan as the country on the crossroads of the Great Silk Route and the meeting place of the Eastern and Western civilizations.

New religions changed the attitude of the state to religion: it no longer interferes in the spiritual quest of its citizens; today, the level of religiosity in Kazakhstan is much higher than it used to be. This process was connected with the liberal-democratic reforms that removed the pinching ideological limits of Soviet times and helped revive traditional religious values and immanent forms of spirituality as the main content of culture of the country's population.

In Soviet times, when all spheres of life were radically secularized and hostility to religion was nothing out of the ordinary, a religious community's awareness did not contradict civil identity. To be born as a Kazakh or Uyghur did mean that this person was a Muslim, but it did not contradict an awareness of a Soviet citizen. Islam was seen not so much as a religious doctrine, but, rather, as an ethnic cultural tradition inherited from the ancestors. One could consider himself as a Communist and a Muslim. Historically, the relationships between religious identity and ethnic and civil loyalties were fairly harmonious and did not contradict one another.

In the post-Soviet years, the republic was persistently reviving the spiritual values of the past and shaping tolerance of the highest level between different peoples and confessions. The 1995 Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Law on the Freedom of Religion and Religious Associations adopted on 15 January 1992 confirmed the right of all and everyone to profess any religion or not to profess any of them. These documents are conducive to further improving the experience accumulated in the sphere of ensuring inter-ethnic and inter-confessional pluralism and tolerance. The law guarantees religious freedom formulated by the Constitution and international acts and agreements on human rights (Art 1); equality of all citizens of the Republic of Kazakhstan regardless of their attitude to religion (Art 3); under Art 4 the state is separated from religious organizations, which means that no religion should have advantages over the others; the state should not interfere in religious affairs; religious political parties are not allowed, etc. There are other documents related to religious organizations, their rights and duties.

The secular nature of the law created the legal basis and conditions for the realization of religious freedoms. It was for the first time after a long period of institutionalized neglect that the rights and freedoms of believers were guaranteed, while the state replaced total control of Soviet times with principles of cooperation.<sup>23</sup>

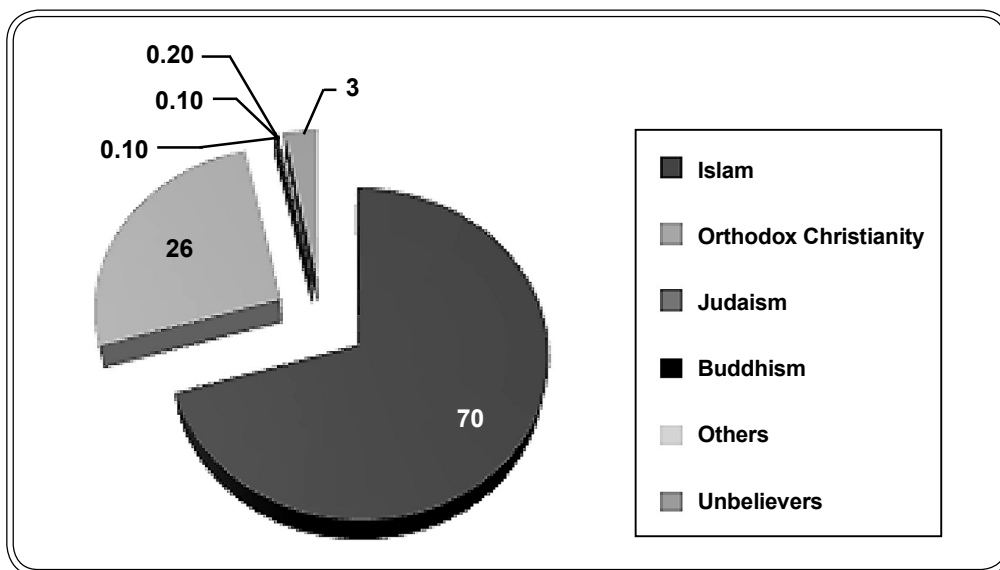
<sup>22</sup> See: L.G. Novikov, "Osnovnye kharakteristiki dinamiki religioznosti naselenia," *Sotsis*, No. 9, 1998, pp. 93-98.

<sup>23</sup> See: R.A. Podoprigora, "Istoria, itogi i perspektivy zakonodatestva o svobode veroispovedania i religioznykh ob'edineniy," *Pravovaiia reforma v Kazakhstane*, No. 3, 2002, pp. 10-11.

As we have written above, the number of religious associations in Kazakhstan was rapidly increasing from 661 in 1989 to 2,192 in 1998 and 3,658 as of 1 January, 2017. Traditionally, Hanafi Islam and Orthodox Christianity are the most numerous among such groups in Kazakhstan. There are Catholic and Protestant churches, Judaist, Buddhist and other communities.<sup>24</sup>

Figure 1

The Structure of Confessional Orientation of the Population of Kazakhstan (%)



The religious landscape of Kazakhstan is shaped by the correlation between 18 confessions. Islam, with 70% of the republic's believers, is the biggest of them followed by Christians (20%) and Judaism and Buddhism with 0.1% each of the total number of believers. All other religions comprise 0.2% each. Only 3% of the republic's population considers themselves unbelievers. It should be said that the country's religious potential is steadily growing and that traditional religions—Sunni Islam and the Russian Orthodox Church occupy an important place on the map of the country's confessions.<sup>25</sup>

Today, confessional institutions are legalized; the media publish numerous religious materials, while involvement in religious life no longer interferes with a successful career and does not preclude a high personal status. The number of missionary and religious educational centers is steadily growing together with religious charities and religious educational establishments; religious organizations can count on certain preferences. Every year the number of those who perform hajj in organized groups is growing; cultural exchange with the Muslim world is widening.

At present, people consider religion not only an element of spiritual life, but also a form of traditional ethnic culture: it is a symbol of ethnic affiliation and an ethno-integrating element. Islam as a traditional religious system with a centuries-old history confirms that its ethno-social, cultural-civilizational characteristics and those related to human lives are perpetual and very different from the political, social and economic realities that were in place in Kazakhstan at an early stage of nation-

<sup>24</sup> [<http://carmo-pvl.kz/ru/article/koncepciya-gosudarstvennoy-politiki-v-religioznoy-sfere-respubliki-kazahstan>].

<sup>25</sup> See: G.G. Solovieva, *Religia v Kazakhstane. Istoria i sovremennost*, Textbook, ed. by A.Kh. Bizhanov, Institute of Philosophy, Political and Religious Science, Committee of Science, Ministry of Education and Science, Almaty, 2018, 346 pp.

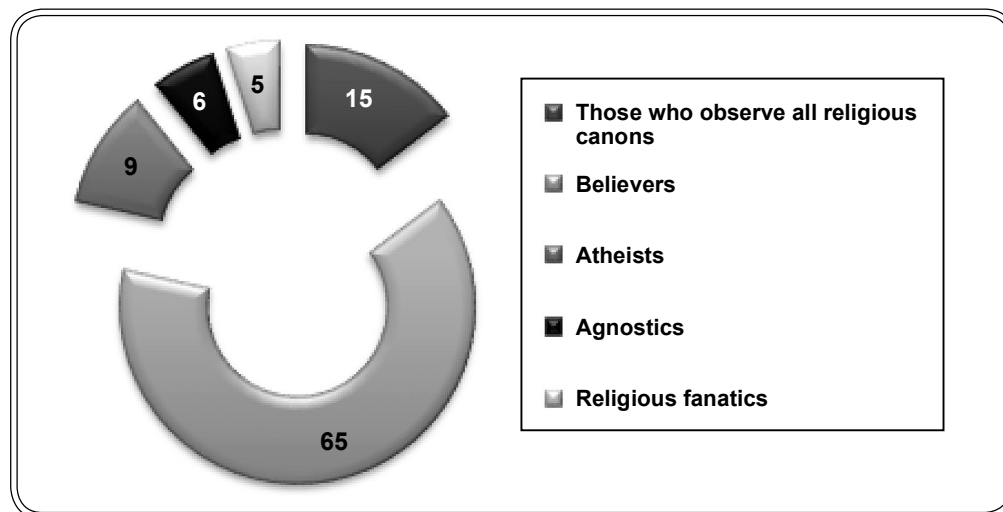
building. Sociologist Aygul Zabirowa has rightly noted that Kazakhs turned to Islam in particular because the old axiological-normative system had been destroyed; people became acutely aware of their vulnerability; they were worried and exhausted; in short, each and every one knew that they were helpless and that nothing could be done. Here the term *anomie* can be used to define the protest potential of society dressed in religious garbs.<sup>26</sup>

Religious potential is indispensable when it comes to social stability and agreement in inter-ethnic relations. This means that representatives of different confessions should be drawn into all sorts of political events and round-table discussions, Days of Spiritual Concord, the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan and small assemblies; joint charity actions that promoted better mutual understanding.

In 2009 (for the first time after the population census of 1937), the respondents were asked about their attitude to religion. Census results revealed that the majority of Kazakhstan residents described themselves as followers of religions (97% of the total population); 11% of them spoke of themselves as faithful; they belonged to religious communities, obeyed all religious canons; 70.1% of the polled identified themselves as Muslims, 26.1% as Christians and a mere 3% said that they were unbelievers or refused to answer the question.<sup>27</sup>

Figure 2

The Shares of Followers of Different Confessions



We cannot ignore the fact that Muslims are not in the majority among the believers, which was and remains a typical feature of Kazakhstan as a poly-confessional state. The following figures illustrate the growth of the number of Muslims in the republic: 46 communities in 1989; 679, in 1996; over 1,000 in 1998; 1,653 in 2003; 1,766 in 2006.<sup>28</sup> As of 1 January, 2011 there were 2,811 Muslim religious organizations, by the end of state registration in 2012 their number rose to 2,229<sup>29</sup>.

<sup>26</sup> See: A.T. Zabirowa, "Formirovanie, legitimatsia i vosproizvodstvo identichnosti v postsovetskom Kazakhstane," *Sotsiologicheskie issledovania*, No. 12, 2003, pp. 118-126.

<sup>27</sup> See: "Itogi natsionalnoy perepisi naselenia 2009 goda. Natsionalny sostav, veroispovedanie i vladenie yazykami v Respublike Kazakhstan," [www.stat.kz/p\_perepis/Documents/010411\_нац состав пyc.doc].

<sup>28</sup> See: A.K. Sultangalieva, *Islam v Kazakhstane: istoria, etnichnost i obshchestvo*, KISI, Almaty, 1998, p. 60.

<sup>29</sup> [https://e-history.kz/ru/contents/view/485].

According to official figures, the volumes and structure of religiosity of the local population as assessed by experts, a fairly small number (about 10 to 15%) can be described as religious (that is, they follow all religious canons and obey prohibitions). The dominant share (about 65%) is best described as nominally faithful. About one quarter of the population (7-11%) speaks of themselves as atheists, 5-6% are agnostics; the share of religious fanatics is small, about 4-5%<sup>30</sup> (see Fig. 2).

#### **4.4. "Religion Returns" to Kazakhstan?**

The increasingly complicated religious life in the republic is moving away from the superficial perception of Islam, which was typical of the past. The relationships between religious, ethnic and civil identities acquire new hues, which complicates them further. For example, some people change their religious identities: a person born into a Russian Orthodox family might move to Islam or Buddhism. Society has not yet arrived at a commonly accepted opinion about what to think about this phenomenon, which still remains fairly rare. Some people consider converts traitors who betrayed their ethnic group, even if a Kazakh who became a Baptist thinks of himself as a Kazakh and remains loyal to his ethnic self-awareness. In some cases, people opt for a universal religious community and, in the majority of cases, consider their affiliation with it more important than loyalty to their ethnic group. This mostly happens among the newly converted Muslims who do not care whether the Kazakh women wear shawls of a Middle Eastern pattern to conceal their faces or not. These "new Muslims" are mostly concerned whether they fit the Islamic norms prescribed to all Muslims by the Koran and traditions of the prophets.

This means that a fairly big share of the republic's population treat their ethnic identity as highly important. Members of the majority of ethnic groups treat religious rites as part of ethnic culture rather than phenomena on their own right. Chechens, Uyghurs and Uzbeks differ greatly from the Kazakhs in this respect.

According to the 2009 population census, registered Muslims comprise 70.1% of the total population, which means that the majority of the Kazakhs identify with Islam. Here we are talking about ethnic Muslims (that is, people born Kazakhs, Uyghurs, Tatars or Uzbeks). This figure does not reflect the true degree of religiosity. Indeed, even if a person is born into a Muslim (or a Russian Orthodox) family he will not necessarily follow the dogmas and rituals of his faith.

In the twenty post-Soviet years, the share of Muslims who attend mosques more or less regularly increased by mere 3% (from 14.8% to 17.4%). About 43% of Kazakhs describe themselves as religious people, but do not follow religious commands. Only 5.4% of citizens of Kazakhstan who find themselves in a difficult predicament will seek advice in holy books or turn to mullahs and priests. The majority will rely on their own efforts (37.1%), the law (22.9%), social norms (19.6%) and advice of closest people (13.5%).

#### **4.5. Can We Say that Kazakhstanis Should Choose between Religion and Patriotism?**

Ethnic nationalism has found its place as an ideology of a new independent statehood with Islam being its component part. The Preamble to the new variant of the Law on Religious Associations of

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<sup>30</sup> See: *Religioznye konversii v postsekuliarnom obshchestve (opyt fenomenologicheskoi rekonstruktsii)*, Collective monograph, ed. by A.Kh. Bizhanov, Institute of Philosophy, Political and Religious Science, Committee of Science, Ministry of Education and Science, Almaty, 2017. P. 153.

2011 speaks of the historical role of Hanafi Islam and Orthodox Christianity in the cultural development and spiritual life of the people of Kazakhstan. Over the course of time, the ideology of nationalism has lost part of its attractiveness: people were disappointed with the economic and social effects of independence: the old system of state guarantees that protected people from the first to the last day of their lives (free health care and education, guaranteed employment and safeguarded old age) fell apart. The new generation that appeared in the twenty years of post-Soviet “Islamic revival” looks at re-Islamization as one of the gains of independence. Islam can be understood not only as part of culture, but also as an independent social force. In the late Soviet years, the faith in supra-natural power of witchcraft, healing, psychic abilities, yoga, astrology, runes, tarot cards, etc. became widespread. This explains why a fairly narrow circle of intellectuals of the older Soviet generation discuss the importance of Tengrism, belief in the *aruakhs*—the spirits of ancestors, shamanism and other ancient philosophical systems. Members of the new, post-Soviet generation more and more often speak of themselves as Muslims not because they inherited their religious affiliation from the ancestors, but because they chose it as their spiritual path. They do not look at their profound religiosity as something nontraditional. The majority, however, treats them with a lot of suspicion, which leads to marginalization and self-isolation of “true believers.” The majority of them occupy the lower steps of the social ladder: for them Islam is a religion and a method of socialization, in some cases the only one in the society with disintegrated social ties. For them it is not enough to be a Muslim: their faith means a very special lifestyle, obedience to religious norms and rituals in everything, including behavior, clothes and the choice of social milieu. This explains why the majority of Islamic publications deal with the ritual side of Islam and the correct ways of praying.<sup>31</sup> The discovery of the external Islamic world created the phenomenon of import of a special interpretation of Islam known among the Kazakhs as Arabic Islam. Such are, for example, public demonstrations of religiosity (girls in head scarfs or men praying in the street if the time of praying caught them there) typical of Egypt and Pakistan yet, until recently, absent from Kazakhstan. We can even say without the slightest exaggeration that in Kazakhstan, as well as in other post-Soviet republics, the return to Islam assumed neophyte forms: the ardor with which external signs of religiosity are embraced, while folk Kazakh music and pilgrimage to “holy places” are vigorously condemned as not fitting “true Islam”. This group of believers zealously verifies whether their rites are religiously correct, they supervise alcohol-free feasts at which mullahs replace toastmasters and where men and women are seated separately. The “new Muslims” cherish their belonging to the global Muslim community more than their belonging to any other group. This brings us to the problem of correlation between religious and civil identities: are you a Muslim (a follower of Krishna, a Protestant, etc.) or a citizen of Kazakhstan? There is no straightforward answer to this question, which became especially apparent when the Law on Religious Associations was discussed in 2011; some of the believers, for example, were highly displeased by the ban on prayer rooms in state organizations.

A choice between obligations of a believer and duties of a citizen, which has become possible, is not necessarily resolved in favor of the former. At the same time, we should not overestimate the role of religion and the degree of religiosity. In Kazakhstan, very much like in the other post-Soviet Central Asian republics, the majority of Muslims are more aware of their belonging to an ethnic group or state rather than the universal Islamic community (ummah) that has no borders.<sup>32</sup>

Judging by the results of sociological polls, they do not think that it is necessary to prove every day that they are Muslims: it is enough to be born into a Muslim family. There is a widespread opin-

<sup>31</sup> See: A.J. Frank, “Popular Islamic Literature in Kazakhstan. An Annotated Bibliography,” *Dunwoody Press*, No. 2, 2015, pp. 51-70.

<sup>32</sup> See: O. Roy, *Holy Ignorance: When Religion and Culture Part Ways*, 2010, p. 305; M. Atkin, “Religious, National and Other Identities in Central Asia,” in: *Muslims in Central Asia: Expressions of Identity and Change*, ed. by Jo-Ann Cross, 1992, pp. 46-72.

ion that an awareness of belonging to the ummah is not confirmed only by the observance of the five main Islamic precepts. It is enough to have faith in God.<sup>33</sup>

The principle of delimitation between religion and the state is registered in the political context as one of the Constitutional provisions. In Kazakhstan, the secular world-view prevails: the majority looks at religious identity as part of their ethnocultural identity. In the conditions of the post-Soviet religious upsurge, the trend towards putting one's religious identity above civil identity is gradually coming to the fore. Under certain conditions when, for example, certain groups (people in power in particular) decide to use the religious factor in their interests, this trend, superficial for now, might complicate the integration processes unfolding in the republic on the basis of civilian values. In some countries with Muslim majorities, state authorities have mastered the policy of "construction of Muslim identities" to achieve a political mobilization of society and seize the initiative from Islamist opposition. This slowed down the process of development of civil self-awareness and freedoms and speeded up the growth of the social role of Islam: according to sociological polls (2006), for Malaysians Islamic identity comes first, and ethnic and civil identities—second.<sup>34</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

A common past and present and a common future are powerful consolidating factors. The shared history of political repressions, hunger and the war, naturally amalgamated the ethnicities of Kazakhstan into a single people. Despite the difficult challenges, unity is the most important goal of any state. Different origins and equal opportunities—this formula means that each citizen of Kazakhstan has equal rights, duties and opportunities. Further democratization of society and prevention of ethnic, confessional and social tension are two key trends of the country's development.

It is highly important to consolidate tolerance, mutual understanding and mutual respect, quest for compromises, peace and harmony as the basic ideas confirmed as philosophical ideals and norms of everyday life. This will allow Kazakhstan to avoid possible upheavals and U-turns, to pursue well-balanced and realistic foreign policy and steer the country towards gradual and consistent liberal economic reforms and democratization.

It should be said that the foundation of inter-ethnic harmony will promote the internal development of Kazakhstan society, create a positive and attractive image of the country on the international arena and help it integrate at the global and regional levels. This is especially important today, when humanity survives in a crisis of spirituality, having lost its axiological milestones.

In these conditions, the mechanisms of agreement and tolerance that have been created in the Republic of Kazakhstan can positively affect the efforts to settle the systemic problems of the contemporary world order created by the crisis of multiculturalism and by what members of different peoples and cultures think about each other.

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<sup>33</sup> See: M.E. Louw, *Everyday Islam in Post-Soviet Central Asia*, Routledge, London, New York, 2007, 219 pp.

<sup>34</sup> See: C. Furlow, "Malaysian Modernities: Cultural Politics and the Construction of Muslim Technoscientific Identities," *Anthropological Quarterly*, Vol. 82, No. 1, 2009.