

# RELIGION AND RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM

## POLITICAL SCIENCE AND SOCIOLOGY ON THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN THE AXIOLOGICAL AND MEANINGFUL SPACE OF KAZAKHSTAN SOCIETY

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## ABSTRACT

**T**he article is based on the latest sociological data and deals with the problem of axiological comprehension of the phenomenon of religiosity in Kazakhstan as part of a political science discourse.

The authors have traced down the evolution of the content and volumes of religiosity in Kazakhstan. They studied varied meaningful contents and the way they affect political decision-making in the sphere of spiritual development of society in the conditions of social, economic and political transformations in Kazakhstan. They have assessed the importance of global trends of civilizational development in the time of international turbulence and their importance for socialization at the individual and collective levels. Interpretation of sociological data by political science identifies constructive and destructive roles of religion in the public

consciousness of the Kazakhstan citizens. The authors have studied the correlation between religiosity, quasi-religiosity and secularity in the makeup of Kazakhstan society as we know it today. They have classified the trends obvious in the development of religiosity in Kazakhstan and addressed the problem of an adequate state policy in the religious sphere. The attitude of the Kazakhstan citizens to religious radicalization and the ways and means of its suppression, as well as the issue of applied importance have been discussed.

On the whole, the present article is a comprehensive discussion in terms of sociology and political science of the problem of great social importance for Kazakhstan and its Central Asian neighbors coping with more or less similar problems of interaction between the state and religion.

**KEYWORDS:** *religiosity, secularity, quasi-religiosity, religious policy of the state, religious radicalization, sham religiosity, religious conversion, modernization of mentality, ethno-confessional identity, political risks.*

## Introduction

Any expert wishing to assess the development of Kazakhstan from the first day of its independence will invariably pay attention to political and economic aspects of sovereignty and will not miss the axiological matrix of the consciousness of Kazakhstan citizens. The country is struggling through fairly complicated social transformations: having liberated itself from the burden of axiological, meaningful and extremely ideologized patterns of the Soviet past, Kazakhstan is drawn into a new spiritual reality, another combination of advantages and disadvantages. Public consciousness is modernizing. President Nursultan Nazarbayev has written about this in his widely read article “A Glance into the Future: Modernization of Public Consciousness” published on 12 April, 2018.<sup>1</sup>

In the 1990s, destatization, different social stratification, new vectors of social mobility and loss of the old ideological stereotypes confronted a fairly large number of Kazakhstanis with the need to make an existential choice and revise what seemed like meaningful strategies in the past. Many of

<sup>1</sup> See: N. Nazarbayev, “Vzgliad v budushchee: modernizatsia obshchestvennogo soznania,” available at [[http://www.akorda.kz/ru/events/akorda\\_news/press\\_conferences/statya-glavy-gosudarstva-vzglyad-v-budushchee-modernizaciya-obshchestvennogo-soznaniya](http://www.akorda.kz/ru/events/akorda_news/press_conferences/statya-glavy-gosudarstva-vzglyad-v-budushchee-modernizaciya-obshchestvennogo-soznaniya)].

them found themselves at a crossroads: they had to look for different occupations; they changed their lifestyle and abandoned the old axiological system. The realization of the sovereign “path of Kazakhstan” and the efforts to outline its trajectory meant that identities (including cultural) and the ideas about the world required changes.

A new generation was born in an independent state; they matured amid new globalization trends and the transformed axiological context of life as a whole. Socialization of the younger generation and re-socialization of the middle-aged and senior Kazakhstanis coincided with the period of ideological turbulence of sorts. Later, de-ideologization was pushed aside for the sake of a paradigm that would unite traditions and ideas as axiologically important meanings. Today, Kazakhstan, and the entire post-Soviet space for that matter, is living through a new stage of efforts to finally formulate a new model of national identity, to identify the national idea and realize it, to fully tap historical memory and revive spirituality. Today, societies with the Soviet experience of state atheism behind them revived their interest in religious canons and socialization potentials. As a form of public consciousness, religion is moving towards a very important place in the new system of social relationships. Under the pressure of mercantilism of liberal economics people start searching for lofty spiritual principles. That is precisely what a religious tradition can offer. Amid global rivalry, however, Kazakhstan has found itself in the center of strong external pressure in the political and economic spheres, as well as in the field of ideological preferences and the nation’s new spiritual image.

Having formulated the ambitious task of joining the world’s most developed countries, Kazakhstan intends to move beyond economy towards a spiritual immunity of its citizens, the nation’s intellectual level and security, which is especially important today, when terrorism, religiously motivated terrorism included, has become a real threat that requires prompt and adequate responses. This is a challenging task in the new and much more varied realities created by the changed lifestyle and the fundamentally new social, group and individual identities.

An interest in religion caused a spiritual renaissance, an important feature of the post-Soviet period. The old ideological constructs disappeared leaving society in a search of new ideas and fresh approaches. Religious and quasi-religious organizations play a significant role in self-identification practices. This explains why religious identification has come to the fore when other identities required cardinal revision.

Today, the situation is highly ambiguous since the state does not know what to expect from the institute of religion: there is religious variety inherited from the past, intentionally created variety, intervention of quasi-religious interests and groups that may turn religion into a political instrument. This means that the state needs an optimal religious policy since the separation of religion from the state is too primitive to be treated as the only means and methods of tuning up the relations between the individual and society, state institutions, religious canons and associations. Max Weber pointed out in his time that the state “claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of violence.”<sup>2</sup> This means that it cannot remain indifferent to the widening influence of religious values on society; their growing political influence on the masses, their interpretation of meanings of human life and of the model of social fairness.

The Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan defines it as a secular state that guarantees its citizens freedom of conscience. In a secular state, believers and unbelievers have equal rights irrespective of their confessional preferences. Today, however, it has become clear that the concept of a secular state should be further clarified, while the dividing line between it and the sphere of the religious should be fine-tuned. In recent years, many countries have already become aware of the need to separate the secular from the religious in human minds and human behavior. Indeed, balance and a *contrat social* of sorts in this highly sensitive sphere have come to the fore when it became abso-

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<sup>2</sup> From Max Weber: *Essays in Sociology*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1946.

lutely necessary to formulate the concept of the secular and draw the line between it and the religious sphere.

Sustainable development of any state and reproduction of social stability is possible only if the religious situation is taken into account; if it is studied, analyzed and its trends identified. Inadequate knowledge of religious trends and tendencies makes religiosity a factor of social and political risks, cripples manageability of social processes; unpredictable developments cannot be ruled out if the religious factor is used as an instrument of political influence.

Today, religious identity in any society (Kazakhstan society being no exception) means not only and not so much a spiritual quest; it has more specific motivations suggested by the lifestyle, the channels and means of socialization preferred by any given society (upbringing, education, professional training, labor activity) and reproduction of the feeling of belonging.

Quasi-religious institutions are actively involved in socialization: they promote religious life style, education and organization of labor; they help build up families and recruit people for protest actions. Globalization affects, to a certain extent, the civil identity of Kazakhstanis by drawing them into communities with no roots in our ethno-confessional sub-culture.

Natural resources and cultural, territorial and other specifics have pushed Kazakhstan into the very center of global interests. Globalization affects the religious identity of the country's population and promotes religious ideologies. This means that Kazakhstan cannot escape quasi-religions that spread far and wide and destroy traditional, that is, inherited from the past, ethno-confessional identities.

The challenge is growing since Kazakhstan has not yet arrived at a scientifically substantiated model of a secular state. The decisions related to legal regulation of religious communities are criticized from abroad, while the sociology of religiosity has not yet been completely institutionalized. This interferes with efficient cooperation between the state and religious organizations, creates a no-man's-land where quasi-religious identification of at least part of the country's population and religiously motivated extremism are flourishing. The state should tune in to the feelings of the believers and demonstrate efficiency when it comes to the form and content of national public consciousness and create a positive, optimistic and constructive picture of the world in people's minds.

## **What is Behind the Worldview Pluralism in Kazakhstan?**

Very much like elsewhere in post-Soviet space, consolidation of sovereignty in Kazakhstan was accompanied by an intensified religious life and a greater role of the religious factor. Political motivations, rather than revived religiosity, were behind the religious revival and an interest in religion. Today, religion looks more like a political instrument and a geopolitical resource than anything else. Kazakhstan is no exception in this respect. There are conditions and factors practically unrelated to the religious renaissance; much has been done to plant quasi-religious practices on the Kazakh soil, practices that borrow religious makeup to exploit its positive image. Their main aim is social destabilization and destruction.

As a Soviet republic, Kazakhstan was a poly-confessional and poly-ethnic territory, hence the religious variety we observe today. From the 1990s onward, religious migrants attracted by the liberal legislation flocked to Kazakhstan in considerable numbers. As of April 2017 (the latest statistical information supplied by the Committee for Religious Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan), there were 3,679 registered religious associations in the country that represented 18 confessions; about 500

foreign missionaries worked in Kazakhstan.<sup>3</sup> Given an open cultural space, a worldview variety of Kazakhstan offers a wide range of religious self-identities.

Today, religion is gradually appropriating some of the social (or even obviously political) statuses and functions found in the sphere of secular institutions—not only worldviews, but also labor socialization. Religious and quasi-religious organizations (pyramids and neo-cults) offer professional training and jobs; they set up small work collectives and enclaves in the form of vast markets trading in construction materials, spare parts, halal products and services that employ and thus unite co-religionists.

Religious organizations and groups of all sorts appeared in great numbers during the first years of independence: it was during that period that the country acquired religious movements based on Islam, evangelicalism, new religious movements (NRM), network marketing, etc. As could be expected, a much wider choice of confessions and faiths made religious conversion much more popular: people move from lack of faith to faith, they change faiths or retreat from faith to atheism. Inside the religious sphere, the dynamics is just as active.

There are less obvious or even latent processes related to functioning religiosity. In order to be detected, they require adequate indicators, scholarly studies and monitoring, expert and public assessments, etc.

In Kazakhstan, religiosity betrays itself in different types and projections: confessional and extra-confessional, traditional and new, obvious and latent; it can be constructive or destructive; it might contradict the Constitutional and the legal norms, it might undermine the axiological and meaningful content of social life; it can be authentic where its religious content is concerned or quasi-religious, exploiting the positive image of religion to shelter whatever is going behind the screen.

## Trends of Religiosity: An Expert Opinion

The worldview atmosphere in a sovereign country changes a lot, for instance, along *the secular/religiosity, traditional religiosity/new religiosity, genuine religiosity/quasi-religiosity* demarcation lines.

New trends have appeared:

- (a) a greater role of traditional religions in the context of which a religious sub-culture is being formed. It follows customs and traditions that help overcome religious ignorance;
- (b) blending of religious and folk culture;
- (c) stronger everyday religiosity;
- (d) increased quasi-religiosity;
- (e) functioning latent religiosity;
- (f) growing religiously motivated extremism;
- (g) replacement of secular institutions with religious organizations when it comes to certain functions of socialization, such as the treatment of alcoholism and drug dependence, employment, structuring the meaning of life, etc.

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<sup>3</sup> See: T. Nurseitova, “V Kazakhstane deystvuet bolee 3,600 religioznykh ob’edineniy, predstavliaiushchikh 18 konfessiy,” zakon.kz, available at [<https://www.zakon.kz/4871654-v-kazakhstane-deystvuet-bolee-3600.html>].

Expert assessments are dominated by the scale of positive measuring of the growing role of religion in society. It is said that frequently the process of return to religion takes vulgar forms, leads to conservation and even archaization of certain social groups. This happens because

- people find it easier to copy the lifestyle and interpret religion merely as an instruction for a “correct” lifestyle, even if it is rooted in hoary antiquity and does not, therefore, suit the realities of the 21st century;
- the volume of “sham” or even “false” religiosity typical of the so-called nominal groups of the faithful who are accepted at face value, but who are not carriers of religious consciousness is very large.

There are fears of possible effects of religious renaissance and Kazakhstanis’ growing interest in religion. On the one hand, it demonstrates that society as a whole and youth in particular are developing a steadily increasing interest in spiritual development, moral ideals, religious values and religious way of life. On the other, there are latent religiously motivated forms of religiosity, namely, terrorism and extremism. They negatively affect the political and religious context in certain regions bordering Kazakhstan and have already penetrated the country and increased the risks. Indeed, these forms of religiosity can exploit the authority of any religion for destructive purposes as an instrument of manipulating the minds of religiously ignorant people.

The following factors stir up concerns about the future of religion-related developments:

- Low religious awareness of the nation, the younger generation in particular;
- Vague and mostly devalued traditional values;
- Underestimation by common people of the threats of religiously motivated extremism;
- Weak immunity to destructive/extremist religious ideologies;
- The growing number of non-traditional religions and communities that try to pass for religious associations;
- Communities preaching religious extremist views and radical ideology thus threatening stability, inter-ethnic and inter-confessional harmony in Kazakhstan;
- Attempts of radical communities and non-traditional religious trends to instigate religious intolerance and xenophobia by playing confessions against one another;
- Global instability and much stronger influence of geopolitical instability closer to home, in Central Asia.

There is a more or less common opinion that the political, economic and social situation and the crisis of the age of transformations warped the ideological, moral and axiological content and deformed ideals.

New communication technologies changed the targets of ideological impact, the canals through which ideology was transferred and means and methods of brainwashing. This added weight to the efforts to identify spiritual landmarks, on the one hand, and challenged spiritual security of society and the state, on the other.

## **Religious Identifications: Sociological Measurement**

There are no statistics of religiosity in Kazakhstan, which adds special importance to its sociological measurement. As distinct from the sociology of religion with institutional traditions and de-

veloped disciplinary organization in American, European and post-Soviet (Russian, Belorussian) science, in Kazakhstan sociology of religion has not yet been firmly rooted.

Everything that we have offered to our readers in this article, namely, expert assessments, data of massive polls and focus-groups, was obtained through sociological measuring carried out by the Institute of Philosophy, Political Science and Religious Studies, Committee for Science at the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Two thousand and five hundred of the two-step quota sampling represents 14 regions and the megalopolises of Astana and Almaty. We used the conclusions supplied by experts from Kazakhstan who study the local religious situation, work in scientific and educational (universities) organizations and state structures and are engaged in tuning up the relationships between the state and religious associations.

Sociological measurement of religiosity allowed us to outline its model.

Religious identity affects, to a great extent, the lifestyle of an increasingly greater number of Kazakhstanis; we have identified the three main trends of religious conversion:

- (1) Islamization of potentially Muslim or traditionally non-Muslim population;
- (2) evangelization of the potentially Muslim population; and
- (3) involvement of different population groups (with the potentially determined ethnocultural, including traditional confessional, statuses) in neo-orientalist cults and practices.

The country's adult population is more and more clearly identifying itself with religion. The classical pattern of religious self-identification "confirmed believer-a believer rather than an unbeliever-undecided-an unbeliever rather than a believer-confirmed unbeliever" applied to the religious situation in Kazakhstan reveals that the share of confirmed believers is not bigger than 15 to 17%; believers rather than unbelievers, about 30 to 40%, undecided, about 18%; unbelievers rather than believers, 12%, confirmed unbelievers, 13%. About 55% speak of themselves as believers, yet do not follow religious commandments; about one-fifth of the country's population are atheists; between 5 and 11% do not question their religious convictions, while between 7 and 13% are involved in religious conversion.

Up to 13% deliberately demonstrate indifference to religious self-identification; up to 62.5% say that their religious self-identification remained the same: "I have not changed my attitude to religion, I was and still remain a believer" (this is a nominal figure, unrelated to real believers. In the early 2000s, 82.5% of the respondents spoke of themselves as nominal believers). Out of 62.5% of those who spoke of themselves as believers, only 16.8% followed all religious norms and instructions in everyday life; 13% regularly make donations of their own free will to their religious organizations; 11.5% fast regularly; 10.9% pray according to the rules; 10.6% follow religious norms at their workplaces and educational establishments; 8% regularly go to church or mosque; 4.4% read religious literature according to instructions.

## **The Phenomenon of "Sham Religiosity" and Social Religiosity**

In Kazakhstan, perception and interpretation of religiosity is highly distinctive. Here are some eloquent figures: out of 82% of those who speak of themselves as believers 36% never pray; 27.3% pray very rarely; 23.6%, rarely, only 10.9% pray as prescribed.

The small share (8%) of those who regularly attend services likewise speaks volumes; 70.1% observe religious fast: 26.75% of them fast regularly; 26%, rarely and 27.4%, very rarely, while 18.3% never observe religious fasts.

A large share (47.5%) never reads religious literature; 63% are not interested in religion-related TV and radio programs; 65% never pray; 53% never fast; 44.9% do not follow religious prescriptions in everyday life and do not take part in religious rites.

The share of those who regularly and voluntarily donate to religious organizations is highly illustrative: 13% do it regularly; 26.4%—rarely, and 28.8% very rarely.

There are several sub-groups in the adult population group that speaks of itself as faithful: real believers, passive believers, sham believers. There is also the so-called sham religiosity. Kazakhstan is a country of social, rather than spiritual religiosity. Social religiosity means that people follow an approved and fashionable social trend related to religion, but are not fully aware of their inner spiritual requirements (in different contexts positive replies do not reach even 1%). This means that the number of those who speak of themselves as believers is growing at the expense of those who respond to the external, rather than internal, factors.

Spiritual religiosity means a profound awareness of unity with God and a religious brotherhood. These people cherish religion as the ultimate and incontestable value, while the essence of faith becomes obvious in its modalities. In Kazakhstan, the level of spiritual (or true) religiosity is much lower than that of declared religiosity; it did not increase even when atheism has been pushed aside.

The factor and situational analysis of the gradually changing religiosity reveals that mass consciousness does not fully comprehend the phenomenon of religious faith; there are superficial interpretations of religion and distorted identifications in the spiritual sphere. A large number of respondents who speak of themselves as faithful while remaining totally ignorant of the doctrines, religious practices and the entire lifestyle within a religion as a system of ideas rooted in spiritual experience, cultural matrix, spiritual guidance, etc. creates a risk of an extensive spread of quasi-religiosity.

## **Religious Conversions and Their Assessments by Mass Consciousness**

In recent years, religious conversions among those who spoke of themselves as believers reached 12.5%; from 8 to 13% of respondents involved in religious quest

- assumed a religious perception of the world, that is, became believers (6%-8%);
- abandoned religious ideas to become an atheist (up to 3%);
- converted from one confession to another (2%-4%).

The problem of faith/atheism remains absolutely alien to 12.5%-14.5%. In the last few years, the dynamics of religious conversion and its vectors, however, have remained the same. This means that religious conversion is not a chance phenomenon.

Conversion, its course and results involves not only the converts themselves, but also those around them (their families, close friends and colleagues). Kazakhstanis demonstrate religious tolerance. The share of those who would object to religious conversion of relatives (45.8%) points to the share of those who consistently support traditional values; 17.3% will remain indifferent to a religious conversion of their relatives; 27.4% will respect their choice; 3.9% changed their faiths.

The range of responses to conversion among the closest relatives is fairly wide: it stretches from the readiness to fight till the end against it and a refusal to accept their choice to the readiness to unconditionally accept it as a realized constitutional right. We obtained these answers from people of different ages, social statuses and confessions.

An impact of the religious factor on identification through socialization in non-traditional communities is far from unambiguous: religious ideas affect, in very different ways, the social situation,

family and civil status, which finally deprives society of its influence on cultural and, subsequently, political processes.

In the social, cultural and economic context, Kazakhstanis turn to religion (frequently to less frequently or even rarely) in hard existential situations; for socialization and re-socialization purposes; when they need spiritual pillars, when they merely follow fashion or when religion helps resolve psychological collisions at the individual/group level.

Mass consciousness very differently assesses the shift from lack of faith to faith, from one religion to another and from faith to lack of faith.

The shift from lack of faith to faith is assessed in a highly positive manner (74.8%); 9.8% insist that these shifts do not change much in individual lives; 4.6% consider it as a negative act, while 10.8% are undecided.

Religious conversion invites very different assessments: 15.8% of the respondents are positive; 38.9% very negative; 23.9% believe that it does not affect personal lives to any significant extent; 21.4% remain undecided.

On the whole, there is a firm conviction in Kazakhstan that faith is better than its absence, which explains why common people are more positive about new converts and are fairly negative about the shift from faith to atheism.

## **Ethnocultural Predestination to the Choice of Religion**

A world outlook that corresponds to ethnocultural roots is the main or even dominant trend when it comes to the choice of religion. This strengthens the traditional ethno-confessional identity related to the Hanafi madhhab, Russian Orthodoxy, as well as the faiths of the people who live in Kazakhstan. Comparative analysis (2013 and 2016) points to the following trends:

- The choice of traditional ethnocultural religious self-identification as an unavoidable paradigm of world outlook is not only consistent but also tends to modest growth—from 55.8% to 64.8%;
- There is a statistically insignificant, yet de facto noticeable number (from 7.6% to 8.4%) of those who opt for religious identification outside their ethnocultural traditions;
- The share of those who can potentially be drawn into religious conversion is registered within the 22.5%-30% range.

Those who correlate religious identity and sociocultural tradition constitute 64.8%; 19.5% (one-fifth of the respondents) believe that there is no need for all believers living in Kazakhstan to follow the religions prescribed by its political and cultural past. Over one-third of the adult population (35.2%) can be regarded as potential and real supporters of nontraditional faiths and organizations or potential converts.

## **Trends and Intensity of Religious Conversion**

An assessment of the changes unfolding on the religious field of Kazakhstan through the eyes of the respondents is reconstructed as following:

- Conversion of unbelievers to traditional Islam of Hanafi madhhab is intensive, 35%;
- Conversion from traditional to nontraditional Islam is less intensive—30.1%;
- A fairly large number (19.8%) of people fell into the trap of corporations preaching sham religious ideologies (trade nets, pyramids, etc.);
- Not infrequently people (14.3%) are attracted by pseudo-religious cults and movements;
- Orthodoxy is less popular than nontraditional cults (13.7%);
- New orientalist cults attract a fairly big share (9.2 %) of converts;
- Protestantism attracts a steady flow of new converts—6.2%;
- Catholicism is less popular, 4.7%;
- The number of people who turn to atheism is even smaller—4.5%;
- Buddhism, likewise, is rarely chosen as a new religion—3.6%;
- No conversions—25.5%.

Society in Kazakhstan has registered that most frequently Kazakhstanis (potentially Islamic and Christian population) prefer traditional religions (51%), nontraditional religions (18.9%); neo-orientalist cults and movements (8.8%); 7.1% of the potentially Christian population join Islam while 5.1% of the potentially Islamic population are attracted by Christianity.

Despite the fact that conversion to traditional Islam and Orthodoxy predominate, conversion to other religions and movements is gradually spreading. This undermines, to a great extent, traditional religious mentalities and, in the final count, transforms them. Amid the never-ending religious conversions confessional agreement and confessional unity is and will remain one of the most urgent issues.

## **Religious Conversion: Risks**

Disintegration (or weakening) of personal contacts in the post-socialist period as the country was moving towards the market, has created objective conditions for conversion as a means and a channel of socialization through social and economic, rather than religious, contacts. As a socialization factor, religion in Kazakhstan intensifies traditional ethno-confessional identification and, on the other hand, expands the potential for conversion or even radicalization.

Conversion became popular because religion (or its quasi-image) has replaced, to a certain extent, unsatisfactory social relationships. This explains why people with no interest in religion join religious organizations when they find themselves in complicated situations caused, among other things, by the loss of axiological and meaningful codes and prospects.

In Kazakhstan, religious conversion is, primarily, the main channel through which young people, socially crippled population groups and individuals seeking socialization, new collectivity, spirituality and the meaning of life are drawn into quasi-religious structures. This radically changes their life style; they become vehicles of new ideas about the world that, in many respects, do not correlate with the values cherished by Kazakhstan society, the unity of the Kazakhstanis being one of them.

Conversion affects the life of the present and future generations and changes Kazakhstan as a secular state. The effect is highly ambiguous: the sphere of traditional religions is gradually narrowing down, which greatly distorts cultural identities. Religious conversion replaces the traditional

confessional statuses based on Kazakhstan's ethnic and cultural identities and its history with new, frequently quasi-religious, identities.

As a social phenomenon, religious conversion is highly ambivalent; on the one hand, one out of three respondents (31.8%) is convinced that it should be treated as a strictly private personal choice immune to interference of the state. An equal share of the respondents (31.5%) is of an opposite opinion: religious conversion disunites people (members of one family or a religious community) and leads to conflicts within families and society. One out of six respondents (16.2%) believes that today religious conversion cannot and does not strongly affect social and political life. The share of those who believe that religious conversions might help resolve social and political problems is very small (8.9%).

Spiritual and moral health of the nation is closely connected with religious conversion, due to nontraditional cults' strict principles and the increasingly stricter rules imposed on the members of nontraditional religious groups. The country's population as a whole disagrees over the impact of religious conversion on the spiritual and moral health of new converts: 37.4% believe that the impact is negative since people lose the religious tradition of their ancestors; 36.5% believe that conversion does not affect the spiritual and moral health of the nation, while 17.4% describe the impact as positive: conversion means a religious quest that draws an increasingly greater number of people into religion. Kazakhstanis do not consider important the spiritual and moral values that help align the idea of the world with the religious paradigms and promote socialization within the religious paradigm.

Monitoring of the requirements related to religious problems has identified that

- (1) the state does not supply adequate information about religious organizations and their activities;
- (2) people need a scholarly and educational discourse in the media in the form of understandable and accessible information about traditional and new religions, religious organizations and religious movements;
- (3) it is expected that experts will finally offer a critical analysis of the religious situation;
- (4) people are ready to support the state and its tolerance of religious variety in the country;
- (5) people want to learn more about religion's socializing function in Kazakhstan.

## **Radicalization: How People Assess its Risks**

The Kazakhstanis can identify activities that pose as religions, subjects of such activities and assess the problems created by these subjects. Identification of the agents of extremism easily understood as such by the nation—religious sects, sham religions (including healers, financial and trade pyramids, societies and corporations) and radical Islam—shows that the problem of radical Islam is less dangerous than sham religions and religious sects: over one-third (35.2%) of the respondents believe that the situation is under control; one-fourth (26%) points to the latent nature of the process and its possible negative outcrops; one-fifth (19.1%) speaks of the situation as critical and calling for special measures.

Open and latent quasi-religious radicalization of social mentality (conscience and behavior) creates a "flexible consciousness" that rejects civic values, that has alienated itself from the matrices of cultural-historical memory, that is alien to inherited spiritual traditions and is not ready to promote them.

Socially vulnerable people deprived of adequate conditions of labor, educational and family socialization; people with strong emotional (psychological) problems who are keenly aware of social injustices; those with axiological orientations that remained undeveloped in the process of family or school socialization and those with no clear ideas about the world because of incompetence of experts in religions are the ones who willingly embrace radical ideology. They are easily radicalized: after two or three months of brainwashing they become suicide bombers. De-radicalization, on the other hand, requires 1.5 or 2 years or even more.

We have organized expert assessments of the risks created by the religiously motivated radical ideologies and the means used to oppose them in the following table.

*Table*

**Expert Assessment of the Risks Created by Religiously Motivated Radical Ideologies and Means and Methods of Opposition**

Why is the Impact of Religiously Motivated Radical Ideologies Dangerous?	What Can be Done to Oppose the Impact of Extremist Ideology in Kazakhstan?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Radicalism and organized crime join forces in criminal communities that are organized into networks.</li> <li>● Integration of terrorism, organized crime and radical groups acting under different political, religious or other slogans threaten the political system.</li> <li>● External or internal political actors are geared at regime change.</li> <li>● Deterrence was and remains the main method of efficient struggle against terrorism and extremism; it is necessary to expand the powers of corresponding structures to block illegal activities.</li> <li>● Certain radical religious organizations are not banned by law.</li> <li>● Outflow to radical Islamic organizations against the background of growing religiosity might become a form of protest against the low living standards, unemployment and corruption.</li> <li>● A national idea based on social justice is needed.</li> <li>● Since the requirements of many social strata are not realized within the actual norms and rules, society turns to the “third power.”</li> <li>● Inertia of the traditional religious institutions not engaged in active proselytism.</li> <li>● The low level of religious knowledge: the nation knows next to nothing about religions.</li> <li>● Cultivation (in certain circles) of a romantic image of radicalism that allegedly defends the faith, fights for justice and is opposed to corrupt power and amoral society.</li> <li>● The state’s inadequacy when it comes to practical, effective, consistent and balanced religious policy.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Liability for extremist crimes should be increased.</li> <li>○ The activities of religious organizations with due account for public opinion should be monitored.</li> <li>○ Social prerequisites and the base of extremism should be narrowed down by solving social and economic problems—unemployment, poverty, marginalization, and new approaches to ideology (another round of de-ideologization) should be taken.</li> <li>○ Conditions for the functioning of mediation institutes with due account for different interests should be created.</li> <li>○ Comprehensive approaches with due account for regional specifics should become common practice needed to cultivate national traditions, customs and common national values.</li> <li>○ A system of secular religious education should be set up.</li> <li>○ The possibilities of counter-propaganda online, in the media and through works of art should be widened.</li> <li>○ Joint efforts of traditional religions, state structures, and civil society should be intensified to arrive at new methods of shaping the culture of world outlook.</li> <li>○ Religious institutes should organize wide-scale educational and propaganda activities to stop the proliferation, among young people in the first place, of all sorts of stupefying and anti-state destructive ideologies.</li> </ul>

The latent protest potential in Kazakhstan society runs along the secular vs. the religious line, is associated with the alienation of certain groups of believers from the social context of life, with civil disobedience of radicalized consciousness dissatisfied with the cultural, social, political, economic and other parameters of social life and the state and power institutions.

Inadequately elaborated state ideology opens doors to religious ideas about the world as an alternative to secular ideas about life and values. Experts have identified three population groups that are potentially much more inclined to change sides: young people, labor migrants living under permanent economic and psychological stress and prison inmates.

There is a dilemma created by civil responsibility and the rules and norms of religious associations that should be resolved in the context of everyday life.

Religious identity prevails, to a fairly great extent, over civilian identity in different social and demographic groups. In the gender category, men are more inclined to disobedience (14.1%) than women (10.7%); in the age category all groups are differently inclined to obey the demands of their religious communities rather than the state. The younger the respondent, the less willing he is to obey the state. In the under-29 group, 14.7% are ready to fulfill their religious obligations and avoid by all means their duties as citizens; the share in the oldest group (61 and older) is 7.9%.

Among the ethnic groups, 13.1% of Russian respondents feel more obliged to comply with their religious responsibilities than with those of the state; 12.1% of Kazakhs feel the same; the share of respondents of other nationalities is 8.8%.

Different educational levels demonstrate different and thought-provoking results: 23.6% (practically over one-fourth of the group) of people with incomplete higher education prefer to fulfill their duty to the religious community rather than to the state. The gap separating this group from the other groups is large enough, yet the share of those who are ready to disobey the law is fairly big: 14.4% among people with secondary education; 11.5% among people with higher education; 10.4% with specialized secondary education and 8.8% among those who upgraded their higher education.

All groups, irrespective of their incomes, are ready to disobey the state, albeit to different degrees. The richest (with an income of 120,000 tenge and up) and the poorest (with an income below the 20,000 tenge level) are less inclined to follow the calls of the religious community—7% and 9%, respectively. The respondents who earn between 20,000 and 80,000 tenge who can be described as “needy” and the lower level of the “relatively well-off” are especially inclined to disobey the state and assume quasi-religious ideas (13% and 14.6%).

The geographic distribution of those who would rather side with their religious communities than with the state demonstrates that the greatest number of them live in small cities (17.3%), regional centers (13.9%) in the capital (12.2%), in auls and villages (10.9%); their share in Almaty (5%) is the country’s lowest.

We have established the volume of potentially deviant behavior (12.1%) of those prepared to act not in the secular-legal but in the religious sphere of decision making. In view of the fact that 15%, or one out of six remained undecided, we may surmise that some of them might, likewise, act outside the legal field.

## **Religious Trends in the Republic of Kazakhstan and Related Problems**

It is commonly accepted in Kazakhstan that a religious quest is a centuries-old phenomenon of any nation’s cultural history; it is a part of human nature and, therefore, cannot be blocked off or discontinued. At the same time, a marginal worldview; inadequate, if any, knowledge about religion;

incomplete civil socialization; vague convictions based on the system of Kazakhstan values; weaker educational (socializing) impact of the family and school; and inadequate efforts of the state and society intensify religious conversions, including conversions to nontraditional religions unconnected with the local ethnocultural tradition and, therefore, undesirable from the point of view of the sustained development of state and society.

The inertia of the traditional religious institutions with no experience of active proselytism; the low level of religious knowledge of the country's population (people know next to nothing about religious studies); promotion in certain circles of a romanticized idea of radicalism as the struggle for faith and fairness as opposed to corrupt power and amoral society; inadequate efforts of the state to pursue an efficient, consistent and balanced religious policy and the fact that certain religious and openly extremist communities are not banned are the factors responsible for the merge of radicalism with organized crime and the emergence of religiously motivated radical network groups.

The political system is threatened by glorification of terrorism, organized crime and radical groups operating under all sorts of political, religious and other slogans.

Having failed to satisfy their requirements within the current norms and rules, social groups turn to the "third power." In fact, against the background of mounting religiosity of the country's population, membership in radical Islamist organizations might develop into protests on the back of the low living standards, unemployment and corruption.

In Kazakhstan, which is a multinational and poly-confessional state, extremism and manifestations of terrorism (including religiously motivated one) have become relatively common. This forced the state to formulate, adopt and realize the State Programs of Opposition to Religious Extremism and Terrorism in the Republic of Kazakhstan for the period of 2018-2022 with the budget of 270,148.8 million tenge. The first program was realized in 2013-2017 with the budget of 103,176.375 million tenge. Targeted at consistent opposition to extremism and terrorism, they were expected to neutralize the vehicles of radical ideas, their rehabilitation and re-socialization.

Practical realization of such programs is highly complicated and requires dynamism, competent decisions and due regard for numerous factors to exclude social risks in the process of shaping worldview identities, including their religious component.

## **Political Risks and Religious Situation**

Today, the preservation and extension of unique Kazakhstan identity based on openness, unity, tolerance, variety, etc. is moving towards the zone of risk. This means that the state should cooperate with religious institutions more actively and more efficiently than before in a search of a consensus based on laws and public support.

In order to be realized, this religious policy and its concepts require scientifically substantiated strategies: a model of secularity, a corpus of state conceptions and programs of shaping intellectual spirituality and a legal system designed to regulate the relationships between the state and confessions; adequate worldview identification adjusted to the requirements of modernity. We should permanently monitor the shifts in the religious sphere; identify religious trends and tendencies of religiosity, as well as involvement in the so-called "field of interests" of international monitoring structures, missions, etc.

The state is still looking for a secular model; it has assumed international obligations related to religious freedoms only to find itself in a more ambiguous situation than the nontraditional religions, which unfolded alternative networks of ideological impacts on the country's population to undermine the traditional ethnocultural and confessional foundations. The country has found itself under the

strong pressure of globalization due to the processes of religiosity up to and including its radical forms.

The process of initiation, preparation and discussion of new laws related to the sphere of religion revealed that different social groups perceive the state policies of legal regulation of the religious sphere differently: religious organizations and individual believers disagree, openly or latently, with amendments. This gives a chance to international monitoring missions to exploit discussions and use public platforms to criticize state policies or even humiliate the state, while indiscriminately interpreting the concepts of the freedom of religion, secular state, etc. They are not alien to lecturing; they call on the state to fold up the endorsed and realized monitoring procedures and skillfully replace the idea of legal regulation of the religious sphere with the anarchy of the market of religious faiths, the process that the Western liberal community left behind in the 1960s.

The discussions of the draft Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan on the Amendments and Additions to certain legal acts of the Republic of Kazakhstan related to religious activities and religious associations created the situation in which the state preferred to “put off” final decisions. There is no intention to accelerate the discussion by the parliament; public discussions are still going on which is quite understandable and absolutely correct.

At the same time, all sorts of target groups (authorized structures, law and order structures and the nongovernment sector) need algorithms that can be applied to non-contradictory legal causes. That is why the understanding of the principles of freedom of religion, confessional and extra-confessional religiosity, secularity, pluralism of the ideas about the world, religiously motivated destructive activities, etc. should be adapted to the context of Kazakhstan.