

## Religious Education in a Comparative Perspective: Kazakhstan's Searching

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**ABSTRACT** Together with the achievement of political independence, and the ensuing of spiritual, more specifically, Islamic awakening, the Republic of Kazakhstan has experienced a revival of religious education, which from the beginning of 90s of XX century gradually became wide spread. Since 2011, Islamic education in Kazakhstan has been put under the state control. Though there is no well-designed and formally approved concept of religious education today in Kazakhstan, the situation with secular school religious studies, distinguishing it from the models existing in other countries, deserves the attention of researchers. With the objective to study this type of education in its political and social context, researchers have concluded that the main impetus for the introduction of incentive-oriented disciplines in religious schooling is not so much a desire to uncover potential consolidating, spiritually enriching role of religions for the Kazakhstan society, their peaceful cultural essence, but the complicated ideological situation in the country.

### INTRODUCTION

Issues of religious education and religious studies are relevant in many countries; both in those where they have existed for many years, decades and even centuries, and in others where they are, like in Kazakhstan, just beginning to be realized as required.

The reasons for the occurrence of impulses in the development of new forms and new curriculum content in relation to religion are numerous, and in every society, they are different. On the one hand, this is due to the general rise in religious consciousness, a sit recaptures its position after the era of dominance of scientific rational consciousness, and this phenomenon is observed everywhere, both in the West and in the East. On the other hand, even societies, which were before uncompromisingly atheist such as the CIS countries, have begun to realize that religions have the right to exist, and in fact, that they are part of national identity and cultural heritage.

It is well known that in the past two decades, new social and ideological orientations, a change of spiritual values and benchmarks that led to the growth of religious consciousness in all layers of society and age groups have become apparent in Kazakhstan.

The process of changes of the political and social system that has also covered religious

sphere of the society, led to the emergence of fundamentally new religious situation.

Over the years of sovereignty, the structure of Kazakhstan confessional space has changed. Total atheism and the denial of religious spirituality gave way to a religious revival, change of mind in the direction of tolerance and trust. The pluralism of opinions in the religious sphere and the adoption of legislation on religious cults resulted in the emergence of new, previously unknown religious movements. The confessional pluralism has become an important feature of the contemporary religious situation in the Republic of Kazakhstan.

At the same time, the current religious situation in Kazakhstan is characterized by strengthening the role of government agencies in control over the appearance of radical religious communities, revitalization of the non-traditional beliefs, active struggle against the influence of the foreign missionary movement and the expansion of the social base of sectarian organizations, especially through participation of young people. Strengthening the activities of sects and cults that are considered destructive is of greatest concern to the security agencies. In this regard, the need to learn the basics of religious doctrines, the introduction of religions religious studies education at all levels, starting from elementary schools, has been repeatedly raised in the media, government agencies, and public forums.

Editor of “Religious Education Journal” Joyce Ann Mercer evidences the fact that this issue is not so clear and indisputable: “An important, ongoing public conversation in our time concerns the place of religion and religious education in schools. Should religion be taught in schools at all? If so, how and toward what end?” In the United States, the conversation often occurs against the backdrop of a peculiar interpretation of constitutional requirements making unlawful the government’s sponsorship of any particular religious tradition. This legal framework has been interpreted (incorrectly) as a requirement to exclude all discourse on religion from school contexts. Meanwhile, educators point to the low rates of religious literacy among the American public as a real problem in the present global, political context that necessitates a robust knowledge of the world’s religions for engaged citizenship. In European nations such as the Great Britain, where some form of religious education is a curricular requirement, the conversation about religion in schools addresses slightly different questions. Educators in these contexts debate whether religious education in the schools is an education about religion, into a particular faith tradition, or an experience of learning from religions towards a reflective, moral perspective by which to live (Religious Education 2016).

The religious education, which aims to spread religious faith and to strengthen it, teaches the tenets and practices, regulations and rules of conduct, is taught in Sunday schools, madrasahs, seminaries and Egypt University of Islamic Culture Nur-Mubarak in Kazakhstan.

The Religious studies, which aim to study religions as an integral part of the culture in their relationship and interaction with other areas of human life and activity, give knowledge about religion, which should possess everyone, regardless of his or her faith, or lack of it, are carried out within educational institutions – schools, colleges, universities.

The main question of this essay is as follows: what are the characteristics of secular school religious studies in Kazakhstan, distinguishing it from the models existing in other countries?

### Literature Review

Studied models of religious education in Europe, USA, in South Africa, are varied; some-

times they are based on the prevailing national traditions, but sometimes can be borrowed, not completely, but with the individual elements. Much of the format and content of religious and/or religious studies education depends on the particular political and social conditions, and the needs of society.

The view of Professor Miedema (2014), a member of a consortium of academic philosophers of education, religious educators, is that the aim will no longer to be teaching and learning into *a religion or worldview*, but rather combining teaching and learning *about religions* with teaching and learning *from religions and worldviews*. This will enable students to develop their own point of view in matters of religion and worldview in the context of plurality via encounter and dialogue. He calls for the inclusion of religious and ideological formation of identity in the education of all students in public and religious schools, and strengthen the development of their own responsibility, self-determination in respect of religions and philosophies, while avoiding policies and practices that contribute to anxiety, fear and contempt (Agho et al. 1992).

The Croatian model of school-based religious education permits confessional religious education in preschool, primary and secondary education, as an elective subject and in this regard is similar to existing practices of religious education in some other European countries.

The results of the study, performed by Denis Barića and Josip Burušić (2014), suggest that the primary educational goal is closest to the perspective labeled as ‘teaching religion.’ In the Finnish education system, which is considered as one of the most respected education systems at the level of primary education, 99.6 percent of religious education teachers agreed that ‘teaching about religion’ is the most important goal of religious education in schools. However, two thirds of the same religious education teachers 62.7 percent also stress the importance of “teaching religion” in religious education (Barića et al. 2014).

In the works of American specialists in the field of religious education, a broader and more interdisciplinary focus and emphasis on the relevance of religion in other disciplines attracted our attention. Moore (2014) suggests incorporating the non-sectarian study of religion as central to all religious education endeavors, includ-

ing those focused in religiously affiliated schools and departments and reconfiguring faculty appointments in religious education departments to include scholars from other disciplines (Moore 2014).

By recognizing many of the difficulties associated with courses of religion professor of University of Illinois Walter Feinberg (2014) believes that they could serve as an important civilian targets and contribute to building a democratic civil population, where people of different traditions will work together to build a common future.

“The purpose of this revival of religion courses in public schools is not to change the faith, rather from civil point of view; it is to promote civic skills, through a change in the process of faith, and thus to pave the way for bringing different perspectives to the formation of civil society” (Feinberg 2014).

### METHODOLOGY

Examination is made of social, cultural, and economic changes in Kazakhstan society moving from a preoccupation with “problems” to focusing on “phenomena”.

Comparative analysis of foreign religious educational models provides a wide space for creative thinking and evaluation of the current situation in the country. The study of materials and sources involved stimulates the search for optimal educational concepts in line with the latest developments and trajectories of the social sciences.

Combining of the social sciences approach and area studies’ analysis of changing reality could make sense of various events, achievements and failures.

The legislation of Kazakhstan on issues of religion and education in general meets international standards in this area, especially it implements a number of international legal conventions to which our country is. Among the basic documents in this area can be named the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the UN on 10 December 1948, and the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief, adopted by the UN General Assembly on November 25, 1981.

### OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

The Constitution of The Republic of Kazakhstan proclaims it a democratic, secular, legal

and social state whose highest values are an individual, his life, rights and freedoms, (Article 1). The right to freedom of religion is enshrined in Article 22 of the Basic Law.

Article 3 of the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan “On Education” dated 27 July 2007, includes as basic principles of state policy in the field of education secular, humanistic and developing nature of education, the priority of civil values, human life and health, free development of personality, respect for human rights and freedoms.

However, nothing is said about the religious or theological education in the State Program for Education Development of the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2011-2020 (Official Home Page of zakon.kz 2010).

Thus, Kazakhstan in principle adopts a position of impartiality towards all religions and other worldviews. Nevertheless, a separationist model for the secular state, which means divorcing completely the religious and secular spheres of a society, is not the case of Kazakhstan, where there is considerable interchange between religion and public life. That is why the authorities see religion as one of the most important instruments for the removal of tension in society, to prevent ethnic and religious conflicts. The authorities hoped that the Muslim civil society would help to create an Islamic social ethics, in accordance with the objectives of the power structures of the country, as was the case in Indonesia (Hefner 2016).

Thus, the cooperative model, with both the principle of legal separation, and the possibility of interaction, seemed most appropriate to the leaders of the country.

This model, as repeatedly stated at all levels of the power, encourages an ongoing dialogue between religious groups and the state in areas of common interest and concern. However, Muslim civil society in the country has not been formed, in addition the state has selected only the so-called world and traditional religions, as its partners in the dialogue.

The main impetus for the introduction of incentive-oriented disciplines in religious schooling has become not so much a desire to uncover potential consolidating spiritually enriching role of the religions for the Kazakhstan society, their peaceful cultural essence, although this reason also was declared, but the complicated religious situation in the country.

Among the features of the religious situation in the early 2000s, the emancipation of the religious consciousness is first to be noted. This appeal to moral values of the population was one of the aspects of the general revival of traditional culture.

Second, it significantly increased the activity of religious associations of traditional religions in Kazakhstan. Inevitable character of realization of the religious identity of young people in one form or another is indicated in an editorial of "Religious Education: The official journal of the Religious Education Association" (2016): "Such phenomena suggest that whether youth participation in religions is growing or waning, the desires of young people to live and act meaningfully to repair the world—sometimes religiously motivated, sometimes not—remain strong."

Third, the number of illegal religious groups that are reputed to "totalitarian sects" and "destructive cults" have increased. They are charged with orienting their members to violate the laws of the country, evade military service and carry out other social vices.

Fourth, there were attempts to politicize the activities of several denominations, extend their influence to the scope of political relations, culture, education, etc. The most dangerous form of clericalism was the manifestations of religious and political extremism. Their influence is especially evident in much of the southern and western regions of Kazakhstan, which differ by more difficult socio-economic situation with predominantly Muslim population. In addition, inadequate initial response of government authorities to the change in religious tendencies in the country and incorrect assessment of the situation in some cases led to erroneous decisions and actions, which further complicated the already undesirable trends.

Young people more actively than other social strata became involved in radical organizations. That is why the policy of government bodies and official clergy concerning the education of young people and increasing religious literacy has been significantly intensified.

Decree of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan "On measures for the prevention and suppression of manifestations of terrorism and extremism" was issued on 10.02.2000. According to it a special course "Basics of religious studies" should be taught in secondary schools since

2004. And in 2009, 1 hour per week of elective course "Basics of religious studies" was introduced in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade of secondary schools in the basic curriculum.

The wording of the above-mentioned Decree refers to the main motivations of the course introduction in schools – they are state security concerns. All subsequent measures connected with this disposal have been taken to ensure its implementation. This explains the fact that this subject quietly acquired the status of a mandatory and not an optional course in schools. Many students and parents are not even aware that they had the right to choose or refuse it. In the absence of a specialized teacher training in this field, full-time positions in religious studies, conducting these lessons was entrusted to teachers of history.

The reaction of society to the introduction of the course is ambiguous. Some believe that religious education should be the exclusive prerogative of the family and school should not deal with issues of religion since the church is separated from state. This is exactly the case when the religious education and education of religious studies are incorrectly equalized. Other people are afraid that the lessons of religion can be used to students zombification, suggestion and manipulation by teachers.

According to the "instructive and methodological letter of Scientific research institute of preschool and secondary education of the National Academy of Education "On peculiarities of teaching the optional course "Basics of religious studies" in general education schools of the Republic of Kazakhstan", maintaining the course is considered mandatory by teachers of History, State and Law subjects, and preferably of higher category.

The same document gives the following justification for the introduction of the course: "Every day, it becomes apparent that the influence of religious factors is a real force in the internal development of society. In such a situation, it is essential to prevent the impact of destructive religious movements and dangerous extremist groups on the younger generation of the country. This shows that for maintaining mutual understanding and inter-religious harmony in the country, strengthening of statehood and further development of patriotic feelings, we must use science-based assessments to involve the younger generation to the spiritual richness and the histori-

cal and cultural heritage of the Kazakh thinkers and traditional religions.”

Control over the implementation of these guidelines, is provided not only by the relevant authorities of the Ministry of Education and Science (MES), but the procuracy, which is an unprecedented fact for the school subject.

Officials of the Office of the Prosecutor General of the Republic of Kazakhstan, wondered whether this school subject is efficient as a precaution against religious extremism and terrorism, *Zakon.kz* reports quoting the prosecutor's office.

According to the prosecutor Nysanbayev (Official Home Page of *zakon.kz* 2014), "... the Kazakh society has faced violent manifestations of religious radicalism. In addition, the fact of the growth of the number of believers in the country is obvious. This fact, the prosecutor says, requires the implementation of comprehensive and systematic measures to improve religious literacy of citizens, especially among pupils and students, in order to prevent their involvement in radical religious structures. Therefore the question of religious education of the young generation of Kazakhstan is treated seriously.”

However, the results of studying the regulatory framework governing matters of teaching the course, allowed the prosecutor's office to conclude that the MES has not taken sufficient and comprehensive measures to ensure the quality of teaching this course (Official Home Page of *zakon.kz* 2014).

The debate around the subject has not yet subsided, when the Ministry of Education and Science decided to change the discipline. A new course "Secularism and basics of religious studies" which will replace previous elective course will be introduced in secondary schools of the country in 2017. Moreover, there is a proposal to make the disciplines of religious studies mandatory in higher education and, again, as an important instrument of confrontation ideology and practice of radicalism and extremism. These changes were caused by the Message of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev to the people of Kazakhstan named as "Strategy "Kazakhstan – 2050": New political course of the state", that he made 14 December 2012. He again indicated that Kazakhstan is secular state and that the state will provide citizens' freedom of faith and conscience, but at the same time, firmly resist attempts to impose on society

any rules that run counter to his traditions and legislation. MES reacted quickly, and in order to explain the principles of the secular state and the traditional values of Kazakh society, the name of the course was changed. A new discipline-training program was developed; course content was extended by "conceptual" additions, including the theme of anti-extremist and anti-terrorist propaganda.

Since the problem of countering extremism and terrorism is a complex task that goes beyond a single course of Religious Studies, in accordance with the new standards of secondary education, new model curricula are designed and approved by the Department of Secondary Education, MES of Kazakhstan in August 2012. It is supposed to teach students fighting terrorism and extremism in the disciplines of "Basic military training", "Self-discovery" and an integrated discipline of "Man. Society. Right" (Official Home Page of Instructive-Methodical Letter 2010).

Controversy, which has been unfolded in the recent years over the teaching of religious studies courses in secondary schools, around the proposed textbooks, showed that this issue is relevant, and may attract the attention of not only religious communities, but also the whole society. However, all decisions are made and carried out in the government, the fact that is connected with a particular ideological significance of this discipline, and inability or fear of MES bodies to take over full responsibility for its implementation.

What is the difference between the Kazakh approach to the introduction of religious studies in school and other approaches in foreign systems of education?

If we look at the model of South Africa, we will note that the focus of attention here is concentrated on attentive studying of religions of the continent, and the role that they can play in the moral and ethical development of students. "Religion Education shall include teaching and learning about the religions of the world, with particular attention to the religions of South Africa, as well as worldviews. In recognizing the particular value of the rich and diverse religious heritage of our country, we identify the distinctive contributions that religion can make to education, and that education can make to teaching and learning about religion, and will therefore promote the role of religion in education. In do-

ing so, we work from the premise that the public school has an educational responsibility for teaching and learning about religion and religions... in ways that are different from the religious instruction and religious nurture provided by the home, family, and religious community” (Smit 2003).

In this model, there are explicit social aspects missing in the Kazakh version. “Religion Education is justified by its contribution to the promotion of social justice, and respect for the environment, that can be served by this field of study within the school curriculum.”

If the South African model provides that Religion Education should purposefully pursue the moral and ethical development of pupils, the Canadian version of “clear line separates religious education and moral education, as in many other countries where the British meaning of religious education has been influential, though both topics are strongly associated with the school’s curriculum. Moral education functions as an alternative to religious education” (Official Home Page of nyu.edu classes 2016). Within this constitutional framework, public schools have a calling to promote the core values of a democratic society, through the curriculum, through extra-curricular activities, and in the way that they approach religious festivals, school uniforms and even diets.

The researchers think that the experience of some American school teachers deserves attention and could be used in Kazakhstani school practice. It is possible to review a number of existing courses on social, political, humanitarian sciences, fill them with elements and approaches that meet the needs of the time, change perspective and assessment, introduce a wider range of sources, such developing critical thinking form of work as essay, field studies, etc. Such steps should gradually bring teachers closer to the goal—forming a new generation of school graduates widely informed and creative in the field of religious discourse.

Instead, there are a rigid control from security service, securitization of the sphere of religious education, attempt to solve new delicate problems by formal methods without studying of the already existing experience of other countries and education systems. Need to fight the threat of “radical” Islam blocks searching for the common cultural bases of a national identity and traditional Islam (Official Home Page of e-islam.kz 2015).

Division of religions on “traditional” and “non-conventional”, “world” and “new”, “good” and “bad”, the image of “non-conventional” religions as threats for the state and the acceptance of repressive measures for fight against them – all this subject which is present at the textbook and programs for the course “Basics of Religious Studies” also is specifically Kazakhstani content, in many respects rhetorical, illogical and politically engaged.

Ideological manipulations in the field of education are fraught with the fact that yet another generation of Kazakh youth can grow civically immature, incapable of independent critical thinking.

“Kazakhstan’s specificity” is particularly noticeable against the background of some samples of religious courses in foreign schools, where much greater emphasis on the development of critical analysis, which can teach pupils about a world of religious diversity, on unified, multi-tradition program, appropriately trained professional educators, the quality of teacher competences and the quality of teaching practice is respected.

## CONCLUSION

In this essay, researchers tried to consider the nature of religious education in modern Kazakhstan, and to define its distinctive features in comparison with the models existing and developing abroad. When studying some foreign systems of religious education, researchers found essential distinctions and specifics of religious and world outlooks. Obviously, the specifics of religious education are influenced by certain historical, political and social context prevailing in each country. Various opinions on formation of religious and world outlook identity, an education involvement into a political discourse of the state, interdisciplinary or specialized nature of religious-oriented disciplines, vocational training of teachers, the purposes and tasks formulated in national training programs and curricula impact the system of religious education.

Political goals of the state, such as an attempt to form a united nation, safe and loyal society, and fear toward religious conflicts do not allow individuals to be different in social, cultural, ethnic, and religious or worldview background. Hasty and often times, unsuccessful attempts to execute the order of the authorities “politicize” the school humanities disciplines, in the interests and challenges of today, and re-

place an open, plural, informed, intercultural and interdisciplinary study of religion in public schools.

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