

Harmonious religious relations are a very sensitive and relevant topic today for Kazakhstan. Assylbek Izbaïrov, director of the institute for geopolitical studies, professor of the institute for diplomacy, religious scholar, told about the regulation in this sphere and how to build a system of religious relations in the interview to CABAR.asia.

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Assylbek Izbaïrov. Photo from his personal archives

CABAR.asia: How many religions are there today in Kazakhstan? How did they come to the country?

Assylbek Izbaïrov: Kazakhstan has more than 3.5 thousand religious associations. The country has almost all religions. The leading religions are Islam and Christianity (Orthodox

and Catholics). Each religion has its own background.

In 756, Islam was introduced to the territory of Kazakhstan as a result of the first Battle of Talas between the Tang Empire and the Arabs (*the troops of the Abbasid Empire and the Karluk Khanate - editor's note*). Back then, the local population came over to the Arabs' side and since then the Islam started gradually penetrating into the areas of Semirechye, south of Kazakhstan, and then throughout the regions.

One of the stages of Islam penetration into Kazakhstan is related to the Kara-Khanid dynasty, when Bogra Khan declared Islam the state religion. Then followed the times of the Golden Horde. Such khans as Berke Khan, Uzbek Khan, Janibek Khan also declared Islam the state religion at their time. And the main period was the Kazakh Khanate. "The true path of Yessim", "The path of light of Kassym Khan", "The seven laws of Tauke Khan" depict the evolution of Islamic regulations, Muslim principles of law.

When we speak about traditional Islam, we mean "Abu Hanifa's school of thought." In other words, this is the line that our muftiate, the Spiritual Directorate of the Muslims of Kazakhstan, keeps to.

What can you tell about other religions practised in Kazakhstan?

Every religion has had its time. We can see gradual penetration of various catholic missions that passed through Kazakhstan in various periods. The Catholicism has been strengthened by back settlers [from Russia] who arrived to Kazakhstan.

The Orthodoxy started its penetration at the times of the Russian empire [that came to the area of today's Kazakhstan] when various Christian missionaries arrived trying to spread the Orthodox ideology.

As to the Buddhism, we should emphasise the three main stages:

The first stage was the period of the Kushan Empire that existed in the territory of Kazakhstan.

The second stage was related to the period of early 5-6th centuries AD when various Buddhist preachers passed through [the territory of Kazakhstan] and started building monasteries.

The next stage was related to the period of the Oirats and the Dzungar invasion, when Buddhist temples were spreading across Kazakhstan.

What are the issues today regarding religious diversity and how they should be solved?

Religious diversity shows that Kazakhstan is multipolar. It has plenty of cultures and directions. On the one hand, it's abundance, yet it could cause conflicts.

In this case, the concept is "unity in diversity." This is where we should be heading to. An abundance of diversity creates polarisation. It is due not only to the historic processes that took place. All wars that had been before the 16th century were caused by religion.

The secular form of government is a unique model. It disregards all religious movements,

has a function of supervision and regulation of religious relations. Domestic conflicts have always existed. But the main thing is to regulate them properly.

How to regulate these religious relations properly?

Proper regulation means training of highly qualified specialists in this area.

For example, sometimes we emphasise other abstract things when we speak about counterpropaganda in terms of extremism and terrorism.

The problems of extremism and terrorism in a form of takfirism should be “treated” the same way. Highly qualified imams and theologians can do it. There’s also a managerial level whose members must know who is who.

Do you mean Kazakhstan lacks theologians?

We lack highly qualified theologians, imams. Some of them are affiliated with religious movements.

When we speak about secularism, we mean equal attitude to all. The most basic principle is law abidance, respect to traditions.

Secularism is not an ideology, it’s neutrality in terms of world outlook. This is the most important thing. Highly qualified specialists will be regulating these processes.

When a terrorist attack happened in Aktobe, we managed to send our highly qualified specialists to solve the situation.

How many universities in Kazakhstan train such specialists?

We should differentiate clearly between purely theological and religious movements.

[Kazakhstan-Egypt] university of [Islamic culture] Nur Mubarak offers the theology programme. There are 4-5 leading universities that prepare religious scholars and experts.

We need to improve the quality and level of education there. Every year the problem of religion becomes more relevant and requires non-standard methods and ways of solution.

30-40 religious scholars per year graduate from the Gumilyov ENU (Eurasian National University), while Kazakhstan prepares around 150 specialists.

See also: [Is the Introduction of Religious Studies in Kazakh Schools a Necessity or Excessiveness?](#)

Why do we lack human resources then?

When we speak about the lack of human resources, we mean quite different aspect. For example, in order to teach at the Nur Mubarak’s level, at the level of leading international universities, we need to develop the school.

So far, we are at the stage of development of our own Central Asian school of theology. This problem won’t be solved in a day. The main thing is that we are moving and working in this direction. Thanks God, we avoid intra-religious conflicts.

There are certain extremism-related problems, which is a global challenge. We need to understand they don’t concern Kazakhstan only. Once in three years we hold the Congress

of World Religions. It does set a certain trend, right direction, the paradigm we need. We need to head for a diverse world, its proper regulation.

To what extent do the state and non-governmental organisations cope with their functions of conflict settlement? How to create a harmonious society despite the religious diversity?

A Kazakhstan model of interfaith concord is an exemplary one for many countries in the world, and our president offers it as an exemplary model.

See also: [Christian Minorities in Kazakhstan: As Quiet As the Grave](#)

Today Kazakhstan is moving in the right direction. We have adopted relevant laws and determined a clear policy. The religious community must obey the law, disapprove terrorism, and respect its history and traditions, so we've stated it all clearly. State authorities have gone through many stages of evolution. We are constantly improving ourselves. Until 2004, we used to have offices and boards responsible for relations with religious associations. In 2004, the Committee on Religious Affairs was established for the first time.

It was established in due time. When terrorist attacks took place in neighbouring Tashkent in 2004, we gave it a thought. The Committee was created as an agency for religious affairs. We needed to adopt a new law. It was reregistered and the new law was passed in 2011. In 2016, external challenges made us establish the Ministry of Religious Affairs, which was then renamed to Ministry of Public Development. Also, special additional authorities are responsible for [religious] affairs.

They all solve the problems not in a revolutionary, but evolutionary way. This mechanism proves their effectiveness. There are akimat-based centres that are responsible for such issues. We also have Spiritual Directorate of the Muslims of Kazakhstan and other agencies.

What measures do you think need to be taken to take the interfaith relations to a higher level in Kazakhstan? Do you have specific suggestions?

We need to solve the issue of religious illiteracy. But we should understand that certain prohibition mechanisms are obsolete. We should be heading towards proper regulation. Classes in the fundamentals of religion studies are taught in our schools from grade 9. However, they are taught by historians, so we need to increase the number of staff. Religious process is always challenging. It is a passionate process.



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