

According to the recent census of 2009, almost 1.5 million Kazakhstanis in the age of 15-19 specified their affiliation to religion. Slightly more than 40 thousand teenagers designated themselves as non-believers.

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** This publication was prepared as a series of CABAR.asia articles dedicated to raising awareness on religious diversity in Central Asian countries. The authors do not seek to promote any religion.*

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Mariam, 17 years old, a Muslim:

— I am at the university all day long. In my spare time, which is little, I try to read more and sleep to get some rest from the university. I am a first-year student majoring in translation from Korean and English into Kazakh and Russian languages.

I am a Muslim. I was born in a religious family; all those around me are very religious. Actually, I’ve had no choice; however, I’ve read and studied a lot, and over time I’ve realised I was a real Muslim. When I was 11, I started wearing a hijab. Everyone in the town feels adequately about wearing a hijab, while the older generation out of town where I live takes everything with doubt.



Photo: A. Bilyalova

I often go by bus and all passengers stare at me all the time. Sometimes they approach me and ask if it's too early for me to wear a hijab and suggest I should take it off. At school, guys used to call me an old girl. At the university, I have good relations with everyone despite the majority of students being agnostics or atheists.

When I dance, do make-up, sing, tell dirty jokes, people wonder, "Are you sane? Is it allowed for people like you?" But I am not just a hijab. I am what I am. I am a human, an individual."

I have prayed five-time namaz since I was nine. I think it was too early for me. No one has ever forced me to pray and wear a hijab, I did it myself. My parents wanted to persuade me from that because they thought it was my unconscious decision.

Once at school, when I just started wearing a hijab, one of the teachers pointed her finger at me and said she wouldn't teach students like me because Islam is not the religion of Kazakhstan.

Before Kazakhstan passed the law banning the hijab at schools, we agreed with the principal about me wearing a hijab. After the law was passed, my parents and I decided to stop wearing a headscarf if I want to get good education just like other children. When I got back to school without my hijab, I felt myself naked.

The order of the minister of education of Kazakhstan “On approval of requirements to obligatory school uniform for secondary education institutions” No. 26 as of January 14, 2016 contains no ban on wearing a hijab as such, however, it approves school uniform for schoolgirls, which doesn’t contain a headscarf.

See also: [*Clothing of Discord. How Kazakstan Struggles against Wearing Hijabs at Schools*](#)

There was a time when I had many doubts. I’ve started to explore many new things and I’ve noticed that some religious groups humiliate minority groups. A terrible situation in Chechnya when residents caught, tortured and killed homosexuals has broken me. I was crying a lot about it and thought if religion was what I see and read, why would it ever exist? I’ve arrived at a conclusion that cruelty doesn’t come from religion, but from a human. I am against violence.



Photo: A. Bilyalova

Vladimir, 19 years old, an Orthodox Christian:

— I used to parkour before, but now I have a knee injury, so my hobby has fallen by the wayside. Now I try to read more and self-develop. I've assembled, reupholstered and repaired furniture with my father since I was 13, so I know everything about furniture and can give advice on any related issues.

I am an Orthodox Christian. I was born in a religious family and was baptised when I was a few months old. I've been taught to believe in God all my childhood. For me, God is not a human, but something more spiritual. I don't fear him, but respect him. I think even I have any sins, I would account for them only after death.

I don't remember I was wrapped up in religion. I attend church but I still don't understand why. But when I go out of church, I feel myself a better man, spiritually clean. When I'm inside a church, I feel something great, I usually light a candle and read a prayer.

I don't believe that God created the earth and all living creatures. I think religions were created because we had to believe in something to solve our problems. However, belief helps me. I always rely on myself and I don't think God will ever do something for me, however, he can help me whenever I need it. When I feel bad, I pray and it gets easier.

Actually, when I was a child, I believed more in some deity that created the earth. Maybe it was because I grew up in a religious community. It's like belief in Santa Claus, some day you understand he doesn't exist.

All my friends are atheists, but I try not to talk with them about religion. Sometimes they ask me why I need religion but I don't want to argue with them so I just tell them I believe for no reason. But I have a Muslim friend and we debate with him about God from time to time, but try not to hit the ceiling so we just change the topic.



Mark, 15 years old, a Krishnaist:

— I study at school and also at the IT academy for a programmer. In my spare time, I play basketball, take photographs, edit videos, sometimes I compose music and long reads.

I am a Krishnaist. I've been in this religion and knowledge for about six years. For me, religion is a support, something that backs me up. Whenever I have hard times, religion and fine sense of God help me so much. Of course, there were moments when I was distant from religion, but I always got back to it and I knew it was my way.



I preach Vaishnavism, this religion is better known in the society as Krishnaism. It is based on happiness, it says God is first of all love. In many other religions, God should be feared; however, our religion says we should love him. God, Krishna, loves all living creatures.

Vaishnavism is one of the forms of Hinduism, characterised by devotion to the god Vishnu and his incarnations (mainly, Krishna and Rama). ([source](#))

Our belief is based on love: love to God, love to world, love to all living creatures. That's why I am a vegetarian.

In Vaishnavism, there are four key principles: ahimsa - non-violence, it implies full veganism. You can't cause pain to living creatures, so I don't eat meat. Also, you can't use real fur and leather. The second principle is non-use of alcohol, cigarettes, illegal drugs, as well as onion and garlic. The third principle is non-participation in financial fraud, gambling and stuff like that. The fourth principle is non-participation in illicit sex. Every person has their own interpretation of this principle. For me, it means sex without relationship or infidelity. I eat eggs, onion and garlic, but observe the rest of these

principles.

Thanks to my father, now I am in Vaishnavism. One day, he read an article about Hinduism and he started exploring more about it. This is how he revealed Krishnaism. In Almaty, he found a local branch of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness and started attending worships and events.

Worship in Vaishnavism differs much from Christian one. We chant mantras using various musical instruments, people dance, many Indian foods and sweets are sold. Vaishnavism has such a concept as 'Prasad', consecrated food. Sweets are considered the holiest food, especially, if made of milk.

I chant the Maha Mantra, which is the great mantra in Vaishnavism, it should be chanted on beads every day. The beads are made of Tulasi, the sacred tree such as basil only in the form of a tree. There are 108 beads in total. A person can set their own number of rounds to chant daily. I chant three or four rounds 108 beads each every day.

My parents treat my religion decently as my father is a Krishnaist and mother is kind to all religions.

Many people think that Vaishnavism is a hippie movement or something of the kind, but it's a wrong stereotype. Vaishnavism is a branch of Hinduism. I try to keep my religion within my inner circle, so I don't encounter any abuses. My relatives have got used to my religion and think that faith in God is better than atheism.



Alina, 16 years old, an agnostic:

— I'm studying at the 11th grade, and spend much time at school. Now I am working hard on my English. I like drawing very much and often spend time drawing some sketches or some big pictures. At weekends or vacations, I take photos of my friends or nature. Also, I like to write short stories or posts, but I want to become a director in future.

I am an agnostic. Agnosticism is something in between belief and atheism for me. I have arrived at this conclusion because there are things in this world that cannot be explain neither by science nor by logic.



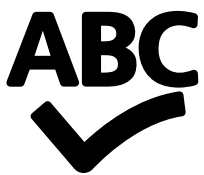
I was born and grew up in a non-religious family. We have never celebrated any religion-related holidays; I've never attended churches or mosques to pray. Now almost all those around me are agnostics. We don't deny God's existence, yet we don't accept any specific religion.

I don't have any special rituals related to my world view, but I believe in good luck that some things bring. For example, I wear a trinket during exams because I think it can bring me good luck. Also, I believe in omens. I'll never walk further if a black cat crosses my path. Some of my friends find it weird that I know three times on wood, yet it works for me.

Many people have a stereotype that every man has to believe in some deity and practise some religion and they cannot understand why I am not a Muslim or a Christian. In their opinion, I believe in some abstract things. Strangers wonder that I don't practise any religion because they think that belief is one of the components of a person.



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