

Despite the fact that the current territory of Turkestan region of Kazakhstan used to be the centre of Sufism, now it is a home for representatives of various faiths, including Islam, who live peacefully here.

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Football unites. This phrase fits excellently exhibition games that are going to be held in Shymkent, in the south of Kazakhstan. Representatives of various religious associations will meet on a football field: imams, priests and pastors will become football players for one day and will compete to be the best team.

“We are all different: some are tall, some are short, some are fat, some are thin, and we all have different religions, appearances. However, we all feel we are a big family, a family of Kazakhstan. And today we are playing together to show that live peacefully and in chime,” said **Aleksandr Mogilevsky**, archpriest of the St Nicholas Cathedral.

Every October, Kazakhstan celebrates the day of spiritual concord. This date was established in the country 28 years ago. According to recent data, the country has 18 faiths and over 3.5 thousand religious associations. Religious diversity is outstanding in the south of the country despite the fact that the region was always deemed Islamic.



Every Sunday, **padre Ariel** holds a divine service in the Roman Catholic church of St Theresa of the Child Jesus. This day the Catholics of Shymkent gather in the chapel to pray and to have a day off together. According to preliminary data, there are about 200 followers of Catholicism in Shymkent. The majority of them are the descendants of Germans, Polacks, Lithuanians and Ukrainians repressed back in the 30s. The first Catholic parish appeared in 1998 in the south of Kazakhstan.

“During the Soviet Union, many Catholics moved here to Kazakhstan, especially to the north. It emerged later than Shymkent had a large community of Catholics. Then they asked the bishop who was in Astana then to give them a Catholic priest. After a while, they managed to register their parish and it was officially opened,” the padre said.

According to him, the number of parishioners in the Shymkent Catholic parish is slowly growing. The new parishioners are those who have not known about its existence all these years. When they learned about its existence, they started to attend it. Among the parishioners are those who changed their religion. The representatives of the titular ethnic group often convert to Catholicism.

“I liked friends and the company here. They are very kind, amicable, and it attracted me a lot. Then I was interested in the religion itself. I like the fact that I changed my religion by

myself. No one among my friends, classmates knew about it in the beginning. Now that I have grown up, my friends know about it, and my mother has always been supportive,” parishioner **Luiza Shakirova** said.



Sunday services are important part in the lives of Shymkent Presbyterians. The Christian Protestant Presbyterian Church Aven Yezer is not the only one in the south of Kazakhstan. Pastor Parasat runs the church. According to the priest, neither the church nor its parishioners feel any oppression in Shymkent. However, the Presbyterians prefer not to draw attention to their religion and avoid talking to journalists, with rare exceptions.

Tursynbai Auelbekov found his way to God when he was young. He had been suffering from misunderstanding of his relatives and open condemnation for 26 years.

“My father-in-law used to criticise me because of my religion, but I have never disputed with him and always tried to help as much as I could. I took his brutality lying down. When I just got married, my wife’s family didn’t want to accept me. They humiliated our religion, but after a while they changed their attitude. They saw I was a regular person and my father-in-law even held me in high regard,” Auelbekov said.

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spirit of faith of people regardless of their religion.

Due to religious diversity, Shymkent has a unique environment. Representatives of various religions and religious associations not only meet on the day of spiritual concord, but try to keep in touch with each other in other times. The clergy often organise joint charity campaigns. On October 18, the Muslims, Orthodox Christians, Catholics and representatives of other religions meet in a friendly environment.

“After all, our common purpose is to strengthen the spirit of faith of people regardless of their religion. There is only one God. When I talked to Catholic priests from other towns, I told them about our situation, about our meetings. They said their situation is different,” padre Ariel said.

Peace and mutual respect

The [Islam](#) emerged in modern [Kazakhstan](#) in southern regions, particularly, in Turkestan region. Its capital - the city of Turkestan - is one of the most ancient towns in Kazakhstan, and it was the centre of Sufism due to religious preacher Ahmad Yasawi. Later on, a mausoleum and a mosque were built in his honour.



Today they are known in the Islamic world as Hazrat Sultan. However, the rich history of Islam in the region does not prevent the emergence of other religions.

“We keep in touch with each other, sometimes attend each other’s homes, often hold joint workshops and meetings. We send greetings on various holidays. Moreover, we organise sport events where representatives of every religion play for their teams. Therefore, people of different religions have mutual respect toward each other,” said **Mukhamedzhan Yestemirov**, deputy chief imam of the Central Mosque of Shymkent.

Trade routes contributed to the emergence of Christianity in Turkestan region. In the first centuries, missionaries began to come here via the Great Silk Road. At the same time, Buddhism and other religions began to appear here for the first time. Later on, the Orthodoxy came here with the Russian empire. Now, the Christians are the second largest religious group in Kazakhstan.

“If Muslims or people of other religions attend our church, we don’t ask them about their ethnic background or religion. If they need help, we help them,” **Grigory Konovalov**, the church officer of the Church of Iversk Icon of the Mother of God, said.

It’s a common thing when the Christians in Kazakhstan celebrate the Nauryz and visit friends during Oraza Ait, and when the Muslims dive into ice water during baptismal bathing and celebrate the Easter.

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