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# RELIGIOUS PREFERENCES OF STUDENT YOUTH ON THE EXAMPLE OF THE REPUBLIC OF KAZAKHSTAN

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## Abstract

This paper presents the results of a study of the religious preferences of student youth on the example of the Republic of Kazakhstan. The Republic of Kazakhstan is a young state at the junction of two continents of Asia and Europe, which is home to 130 ethnic groups, professing more than 18 different faiths. It is one of the states that managed to avoid inter-ethnic and interfaith conflicts in the process of secession from the USSR. However, the current religious situation is characterized by the emergence and strengthening of radical Islamist religious communities, the intensification of the activities of centres of non-traditional beliefs, the increasing influence of the foreign missionary movement and the expansion of the social base of sectarian organizations, especially at the expense of young people. Therefore, the authors have selected the student youth represented by young Kazakh and Russian students as the object of their study. The problems of studying the specifics and characteristics of the religious preferences of youth have a pronounced interdisciplinary nature. The fundamental difference about the methodology of socio-psychological research is that the focus here is not just the problem of religious identity in itself, but its internal reflection and perception by individuals as members of different ethnic and religious groups. If other branches of scientific knowledge are limited only by the statement of the presence of certain religious preferences, then only Psychology, exploring their internal content, which determines confessional behaviour, can give the most accurate forecast for their further development. Therefore, the study of religious preferences as a special subject of socio-psychological research seems relevant both in theoretical terms and in the context of applied empirical research.

*Keywords:* ethnicity, Muslims, Christians, religious movements, extremism

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## 1. Introduction

The problem of extremism and radicalism among the population of the Republic of Kazakhstan has acquired a special meaning in connection with the

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terrorist attacks in a number of regions of the country that resulted in deaths among civilians and caused religious tension. Responsibility for these attacks, which killed several people, was claimed by the extremist group called the Caliphate Soldiers, who made their presence known in the fall of 2011, firstly speaking on the Internet and then taking responsibility for a number of extremist actions in Kazakhstan.

In the context of the events that occurred in June 2016 in the city of Aktobe, where an attempt was made to capture a military unit, and in July 2016 in Almaty, where an attack was made on the building of the Almalinsky district department of Internal Affairs and the department of the National Security Committee, where five people have been killed, three of whom were police officers [KTK TV channel news, <https://www.ktk.kz/ru/news/video/2016/06/06/69931>], the society finally began to realize not only the existence of the problem of religious extremism and radicalism but also the threat to the continued existence of the Republic of Kazakhstan. We have to admit that, unfortunately, today the struggle with various radical religious trends in the country is still at that stage when everyone understands that something needs to be done, but so far, it does not go beyond the declaration of ideas about fighting extremism and terrorism.

The danger lies in the fact that these destructive sects and cults inflict psychological harm on young people, in particular, affecting their fragile consciousness, breaking the system of traditional ethnic and religious values. Thus, the sharp quantitative growth of religious associations [1] of an extremist orientation, many of which are represented by autonomous isolated cells or groups of people adhering to a radical ideology, redistribution of confessional spheres of influence in the direction of increasing the share of 'new' religions for Kazakhstan, and involvement of the youth in them create objective prerequisites for the emergence of conflict situations in the country. In this regard, the importance of research aimed at analysing and studying the problems of the religious preferences of the youth in Kazakhstan is increasing.

During the development of our socio-psychological approach to the study of religious preferences, we relied on the concepts developed by Russian and Kazakh scholars I.M. Bogdanovskaya [2], A.I. Klibanov [3], E.N. Medvedeva [4], O.V. Suchkova [5], Y.I. Smetanova [6], E. Karin [1], as well as Western scholars, such as E. Erickson [7], S. Moscovici [8], S. Schwartz and S. Huismans [9], L. Guiso, P. Sapienza and L. Zingales [10] and others [11-26]. The general scientific principles of the sociocultural determinism of mental processes and phenomena as a general paradigm of modern psychology were important for the development of the research problems. They include the cultural and historical theory of L.S. Vygotsky [27] and M. Cole [28]. Thus, interdisciplinary synthesis in the understanding and explanation of religious preferences was chosen as a general theoretical position.

As the object of the study, we chose the student youth – representatives of the Kazakh and Russian ethnic groups. The subject of the study is religious preferences as a socio-psychological phenomenon inherent in young people. The

general hypothesis of the study is the assumption that there are specific manifestations of religious preferences among students of Kazakhstan, which were formed and entrenched under the influence of ethnic and personal characteristics.

## **2. Methods**

To conduct a study of the religious preferences of students we used the 'Questionnaire of religious orientations' created by the Russian psychologist I.M. Bogdanovskaya [2, p. 89]. This technique helps to identify the motives of appeal to religion, attitude to the requirements of the cult system, the degree of assimilation of the fundamentals of dogma and inclination to read dogmatic literature and also helps to identify modern ideas about a religious person.

The empirical base of research is the Al-Farabi Kazakh National University (Almaty) and M.O. Auezov South Kazakhstan University (Shymkent). Almaty is the cultural capital of the republic, where the leading universities of Kazakhstan are located. This is primarily a multicultural and multi-ethnic region of the country. Shymkent is located in the south of Kazakhstan, about 70% of its population are Kazakhs, Russians make up 14% of the population and the rest are Uzbeks, Azeris, Turks and Iranians. As a result, the region has strong Muslim traditions.

The study was conducted from 2015 to 2017. A total of 120 students of the two universities took part in the study. The ethnic composition of the group was the following: 60 students represented the Kazakh ethnic group and 60 were Russian, of which 50 were males and 70 - females, aged 18-23.

When choosing students as an object of empirical research, we proceeded from the understanding that student youth is, first, the most progressive and educated part of youth in Kazakhstan. Second, these young people are psychologically mature to evaluate themselves and people around them properly. Third, a characteristic age feature of students is that during this period the process of forming selective preferences in their minds is actualized, both in the sphere of interpersonal, inter-ethnic and inter-religious cooperation.

## **3. Results**

The study showed that the majority of the students of Kazakh ethnicity professed Islam (90%) and considered themselves Muslims based on their national identity, that is, on the fact of their birth. 7% of the Kazakh students professed 'other' religions, among which the three most frequent answers were Buddhism, Protestantism, Tengriism. Students who answered, 'I Believe in God, but I do not consider myself a follower of a certain religion' and 'I believe in the universal religion' were also included in this category. 3% of the students who participated in the survey identified themselves as atheists who did not believe in God.

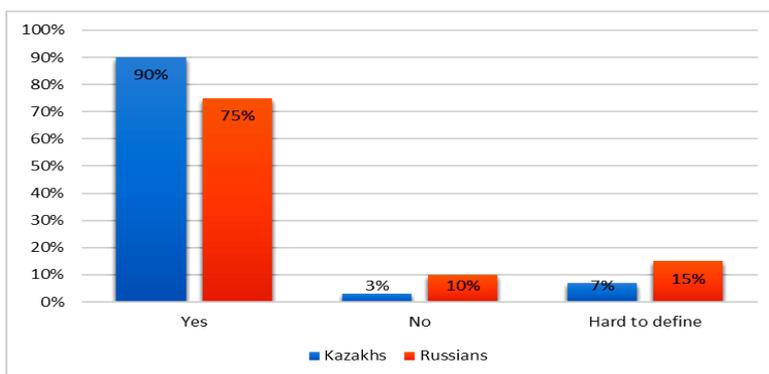
As for students of Russian nationality, the study showed that 75% of them considered themselves Orthodox based on their ethnicity. The Russian population of Kazakhstan, including students, traditionally identify themselves with Orthodoxy as one of the directions of Christianity based on their birth. Orthodoxy in this case, in our opinion, is an important factor in identification with the ethnic group in the multi-ethnic and multi-religious city of Almaty. Therefore, unlike the Kazakhs, among Russian youth, there are very few representatives of other Christian denominations, such as Protestantism, Catholicism, etc.

At the same time, 15% of the surveyed Russian students answered, ‘I believe in God, but I do not recognize religion’ and ‘I believe in the universe’ while 10% of the students considered themselves to be atheists, agnostics, etc.

The study also found that some students were confused about defining their religious identity. Initially, when answering questions about their religious affiliation, they noted their affiliation with Muslims or, conversely, with Christians, then crossed out and wrote everything the other way around. That is, instead of ‘Muslim’, they wrote ‘Christian’, or wrote that they believed in the Universal religion, etc.

During a personal conversation, it turned out that, as a rule, these students were from mixed marriages, where the father is a Muslim and the mother is a Christian or vice versa.

Analysis of the answers to the question ‘There are more believers today, how would you rate this phenomenon?’ showed that most students (21%) studying in the Kazakh National University thought that the increase in the number of religious people was a manifestation of a kind of a fashion trend - ‘these days being religious is fashionable’. 19% of the students answered, ‘it is the way the things are done now’. For 18% of the students, an increase in the number of believers is conditioned by the search for the ideal and the filling of spiritual emptiness. 13% of the young people think that the increase in the number of believers shows the return to the true faith. 11% of the surveyed students believe that faith is ‘opium for the people’. For 7%, an increase in the number of believers is a ‘political game’. For 6% a return to faith is a ‘repentance’ and ‘restoration of traditions’.



**Figure 1.** Self-identification with religious people (Al-Farabi Kazakh National University).

Analysis of the results of the students' answers to the question 'Do you consider yourself a believer?' in the questionnaire is presented in Figure 1. As we see in Figure 1, 90% of Kazakh and 75% of Russian students participating in the survey identified themselves as religious people. 7% of Kazakhs and 15% of Russians did not identify themselves as followers of a particular religion. 3% of Kazakh and 10% of Russian students did not identify themselves as believers at all.

Systematization and analysis of answers to the question 'Do you observe religious rites prescribed by religion?' showed that only 5% of the students often observed religious rites and rituals. 40% of the students rarely observed religious rites and rituals prescribed by religion. 25% observed them 'sometimes'. 20% of the students 'never' observed religious rites and rituals.

Answering the question 'Do you celebrate religious holidays?', 54% of the students gave a positive answer that they celebrated religious holidays traditional for the family. 38% celebrated the most common religious holidays and only 8% celebrated the majority of the holidays prescribed by religion.

Analysis and systematization of the students' answers to the question 'How often do you visit places of religious worship (church, mosque, synagogue, church, Buddhist temple, etc.)?' showed that only 5% of the respondents often visited places of religious worship. 60% visited them sometimes. 20% of the students visited religious worship sites rarely. 15% of the students had never visited religious places of worship.

**Table 1.** Situations of resorting to prayer.

<b>Answer option</b>	<b>Number of answers (%)</b>
In difficult life situations concerning health problems, problems with studies	45
In desperate situations	30
In case of potential life threat	12
In the case of joyful events as a sign of gratitude to God	8
In a state of spiritual search	5

**Table 2.** The definition of a religious person.

<b>Answer option</b>	<b>Number of answers (%)</b>
A person in whose heart God lives	58
A person searching for themselves	21
A person with a pure soul	18
A grateful person	16
A person who is afraid of the punishment of the Higher power	7

Answers to the question 'In what situations do you resort to prayer?' (by frequency of occurrence) are presented in Table 1.

The answers to the question in the questionnaire ‘Give the definition of the concept: ‘a religious person is ...’ (by frequency of occurrence) are presented in Table 2.

The second stage of the study of the religious preferences of students was conducted at M.O. Auezov South Kazakhstan University. The results of our study on the type of religion professed by the student youth living in the South Kazakhstan region showed that the dominant type of religion among Kazakh students was Islam (97%), 2% were non-believers, 1% professed other religions. Among the students of Russian ethnicity, 65% professed Orthodoxy, 15% considered themselves Muslims, 10% were Protestants, 5% belonged to other types of religion and the remaining 5% were not religious.

65% of students of Russian nationality noted Orthodoxy as the main type of religion. 15% of Russian students profess Islam. Living in a region, the vast majority of which is represented by Muslims, including not only Kazakhs, but also Uzbeks, Azerbaijanis, Turks, Iranians, and Kurds, they choose Islam as their preference. At the same time, as the study showed, they clearly identify with their ethnic group.

In the same region, the positions of Protestant missionaries from South Korea are very strong. Therefore, it is not surprising that 10% of the surveyed Russian students identified themselves as Protestants. The remaining 5% of the students were non-believers.

An analysis of the answers to the question ‘The number of believers is increasing today, how would you rate this phenomenon?’ in the questionnaire showed that the majority (50%) of the students said that the increase in the number of believers was growing as people returned to the sincere belief that their parents, grandmothers and grandfathers had professed. 15% believed that ‘that is the way of doing things now’ and 15% of the participants believed that people, in search of the ideal, were thus filling their spiritual void. Only 10% of the surveyed students thought that the increase in numbers of religious people happened due to those people committing sins and needing to repent before God. 5% of the students believed that faith was ‘opium for the people’. According to the remaining 5% of the students, faith is a ‘political game’.

The analysis of the results of the answers of students of the Kazakh and Russian ethnicities at M.O. Auezov South Kazakhstan University to the question ‘Do you consider yourself a religious person?’ showed that 85% of the participants firmly considered themselves to be religious. 10%, despite the fact that they attributed themselves to religious people, still doubted it and only 5% did not think that they belonged to a particular religion.

The answer to the registered indicator of observance of religious precepts can be found in the response to the question ‘Do you observe religious rites or rituals prescribed by religion?’. Analysis of the responses to this item of the questionnaire revealed that only 50% of the 85% of the students who considered themselves religious often observed rites and rituals. 20% observed them sometimes, 25% - rarely and 5% never complied with the standards prescribed by religion.

The analysis of the question ‘Do you celebrate religious holidays?’ showed that 40% of the students of both Kazakh and Russian ethnic background celebrated religious holidays accepted in the family. Slightly fewer participants (35%) celebrated the most common religious holidays. Only 25% of the participants celebrated the majority of holidays prescribed by religion.

The analysis of the answers to the question ‘How often do you visit places of religious worship (church, mosque, synagogue, church, Buddhist temple, etc.)?’ showed that 45% of the students often attended places of religious worship, namely, a mosque, church, and others. 30% of the subjects visited them occasionally, 19% - rarely and 5% had never been to places of worship.

The analysis of the answers to the question ‘Do you read religious literature?’ showed that 52% of the students sometimes read books of religious origin, 25% read them often, 14% - rarely. Some people among the students had never read the holy books (9%).

Analysis and systematization of students’ answers to the question ‘Do you pray to God?’ showed us an interesting fact. It turned out that all students had addressed God in the past or still did that at that moment, even the atheists. 74% of the participants often turned to God with prayer. 16% of the students did it sometimes and 10% - seldom. No people were found among the participants who had never addressed God with a request in prayer.

To the open question ‘In what situations do you resort to prayer?’ the surveyed students gave the following answers (by frequency of occurrence) presented in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Situations of turning to God in prayer.

<b>Answer option</b>	<b>Number of answers (%)</b>
In difficult life situations or in critical circumstances	45
Always	23
When sad	15
In the case of joyful events as a sign of gratitude to God	10
Preferred not to answer	7

Thus, we see that the students (45%) mainly resort to prayer in connection with difficult situations or being in critical condition concerning health or their studies. 23% of the students always pray, 15% pray when sad, 10% pray in case of joyful events, as a sign of gratitude to God and 7% of the surveyed students preferred not to answer.

Analysing the next question ‘Give the definition of the concept: ‘A religious person is ...’’, we see that the majority of the students (51%) believe that a religious person is, first of all, someone who believes in the existence of God himself. Then, many also noted that one can call a true believer only a person who professes a religion and observes the statutes of God (24%). 16% observe the statutes of God. 5% of the students believe that religious people seek harmony and support from God and 4% of the students think that they seek themselves.

#### **4. Discussion**

The results of our study are in many ways similar to the study conducted by Y.I. Shcherbakova [29], dedicated to the study of the religious identity of the individual as a factor of tolerance in interpersonal relationships. In this study, it has been proved that there is a relationship between the components of religious identity, characteristics of religious experience and tolerance in interpersonal relationships. That said, the nature of the relationship between religious identity and tolerance is determined by the level of religious identity - the strength of the religious worldview, religious motivation, religious behaviour and religious feelings. The tolerance of an Orthodox Christian in interpersonal relations is due not so much to religious identity as to the ethno-cultural identity and tolerance strategies in behaviour formed under the influence of the Orthodox tradition.

I.M. Bogdanovskaya, studying the semantic organization of the modern religious experience of the individual, identified three groups of main motives for addressing religion: personal - 'repentance', 'searching for the ideal, filling in spiritual emptiness', 'searching for personal religion', characteristic mainly of mature people and due to psychological content midlife crisis; social and personal - 'restoration of traditions', 'return to the true faith', caused by the need to harmonize personal changes and social requirements, as well as the need for cultural and historical self-identification; external social - 'this is the way things are done now', 'political game', caused by the need to harmonize the external side of the person's activities with changing social conditions. In the researcher's opinion, the motives for resorting to religion reviewed by her play the role of motivation and meaning in the formation of religious orientations and reflect the human need to make changes in their life world, the formation of religious identity [2, p. 122].

D.V. Olshansky, studying the problem of the actualization of religion, believes that, first, the religious appeal can be determined by the desire to learn more about the world. Such a motive, in his opinion, is typical for poorly educated people seeking to fill the picture of the world with biblical mythology. To the second motive, he attributes the expectation of 'heavenly bliss after death' expected by those who have difficult living conditions [30]. The third motive of turning to God, according to D.V. Olshansky is the need to communicate, to identify with a certain group. As a rule, it is typical for lonely people who deeply experience the phenomenon of alienation. The fourth motive is the conviction of the need for religion to preserve morality. The main thing for believers with such a motive of conversion is the spread of moral and ethical religious principles. The fifth motive is, as noted by D.V. Olshansky, 'faith just in case', 'what if God really exists?'. The sixth motive is a professional and material motive. For religious people with this motive of conversion, faith is a source of income or professional aspirations [30].

Thus, a discussion of these studies showed that each age and each social group have their own various motives for turning to God. While in the studies of Y.I. Shcherbakova, I.M. Bogdanovskaya and D.V. Olshansky, where the study

was performed on adults the motives were mostly personal, in our study performed on young people, these were problems caused by difficult life situations related to health, studies, also difficult hopeless situations, like the death of parents, loved ones, betrayal of friends, loved ones, absence and constant lack of livelihood, etc.

## **5. Conclusions**

The study of the religious preferences of students on the example of the Republic of Kazakhstan showed a steady increase in the role of religion in the lives of students, in its authority, as well as in the number of young believers. The study showed that students of higher education institutions are oriented towards the preference of the two most widespread official religions in the country – Islam and Orthodoxy.

The cross-cultural aspect of the study of religious preferences showed that students of the Kazakh nationality prefer Islam, represented by the Hanafi madhhab, while Orthodoxy is preferred by students of the Russian nationality. At the same time, the study showed that among both Kazakhs and Russians, there are students who prefer other denominations. This conclusion confirms the hypothesis of the study on the presence of specific manifestations of religious preferences among students of Kazakhstan, formed influenced by ethnic and personal characteristics.

Despite this specific manifestation of religious preferences, the study showed that young people of both nationalities are characterized by tolerance to representatives of all the numerous religious denominations present in Kazakhstan.

These results obtained during the study can be used in the process of developing state and regional policies in the interfaith sphere to predict the further development of interfaith relations, as well as to prevent the development of disintegration trends in Kazakh society. They can also be an effective scientific basis for organizing psycho-correctional work in order to develop interfaith understanding between representatives of all ethnic groups living in Kazakhstan.

In addition, the results of the study can become an incentive to intensify research on religious identity in a cross-cultural context, which is especially important for multi-faith Kazakhstan today. In general, the results of the study are of great importance for studying the real situation in the field of interfaith relations in the republic in the modern period, characterized by an increase in religious intolerance and tension.

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