

Kazakhstan's Religious Worlds. A Path of Coexistence

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“Human beings have only three virtues: the burning heart, the bright mind – and creative will. Abai Kunanbaev. Kazakh poet (1845-1904), *Book of Words* (47).



Palace of Peace and Reconciliation. Astana/Kazakhstan. October 2013. Photo: Ursula Gelis

In the winter of 2013, the National Gallery in Berlin commemorated the 200 year anniversary of the death of artist Anton Graff (1736-1813). He painted people of the enlightenment epoch, a period of tolerance espousing the belief that everyone should rely on reason by developing his or her own thoughts and world views. Graff did portraits of the Lutheran Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781), his Jewish friend Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786), and many other intellectuals.

Lessing's friendship with Mendelssohn inspired his theatre play, “Nathan, the Wise” (1779). The popular work was a plea for religious tolerance, bridging gaps between Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

“The centerpiece of the work is the Ring Parable, narrated by Nathan when asked by Saladin which is the true religion. An heirloom ring with the magical ability to render its owner pleasing in the eyes of God and mankind had been passed from father to the son he loved most.

When it came to a father of three sons whom he loved equally, he promised it [...] to each of them. Looking for a way to keep his promise, he had two replicas made, which were indistinguishable from the original, and gave on his deathbed a ring to each of them.

The brothers quarreled over who owned the real ring. A wise judge admonished them that it was impossible to tell at that time – that it even could not be discounted that *all three* rings

were replicas, the original one having been lost at some point in the past; that to find out whether one of them had the real ring it was up to them to live in such a way that their ring's powers could prove true, to live a life that is pleasing in the eyes of God and mankind rather than expecting the ring's miraculous powers to do so.

Nathan compares this to religion, saying that each of us lives by the religion we have [inherited] from those we respect.” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nathan_the_Wise.

Kazakh spiritual culture



Relief showing Kazakh history. Almaty, Republic Square. Oct. 2013. Photo: UG

Many religions and beliefs are present in multi-ethnic Kazakhstan. Uniting more than 120 ethnicities is a challenging undertaking for the young state, which gained independence in 1991, with the break-up of the USSR. The religious affiliations are approximately: 70 % Muslims, 26 % Christians (Russian Orthodox 24 %, others 2.3 %), Buddhists 0.1 %, others 0.2 %, atheists 2.8 %; remainder unspecified (2009 Census).¹

Travelling in modern Kazakhstan today, it is amazing to witness the smooth cooperation between Kazakh and Russian people. Russian is still the language of interethnic communication. You would not necessarily expect such a positive coexistence given the fact that previous forced agricultural programs led to many Kazakh deaths, and attempts to deprive Kazakhs of their culture were part of oppressive Soviet rule.

“A Kazakh should be able to name at least seven of his ancestors.”² Family ties and the impressive history of the nomads are important to Kazakh identity. Many Kazakhs have to improve the use of their own language because foreign rulers had forbidden Kazakh in an attempt to erase traditions.

“Kazakhs bear no grudges against the Russians, despite the fact that the country was occupied for nearly sixty years by the Soviets [...] and not to mention the tsarist domination

¹ <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/kz.html>.

² Claude Salhani. Islam without a Veil. Kazakhstan’s Path of Moderation. Washington DC, 2011, p. 35.

prior to the Communist revolution. [...] The Kazakhs' biggest complaint, though, was the systematic destruction of their nomadic life.”³



Baiterek. Astana. Oct. 2011. Photo: UG

A convincing symbol of religious dialogue and multinational accord, is the Baiterek tower, the ‘Tree of life’, in the heart of Astana, the new capital of Kazakhstan. In the ‘golden egg’, at the top of the monument, Kazakhstan is depicted as the epicenter of peace, inviting people of different faiths to work creatively for coexistence and a world without wars.



“May Kazakhstan – the land of peace and accord be blessed”. Astana, Baiterek. Oct. 2011. Photo: UG

“According [...] to an old ancient Kazakh legend, on the banks of the World River grew the tree of life, Baiterek. The roots of the tree lay in the subterranean world, its trunk in the earthly one and its crown in the heavens. Each year the sacred bird Samruk laid a golden egg in the crown of the tree, only for it to be consumed by the dragon Aidakhar, which lives at the

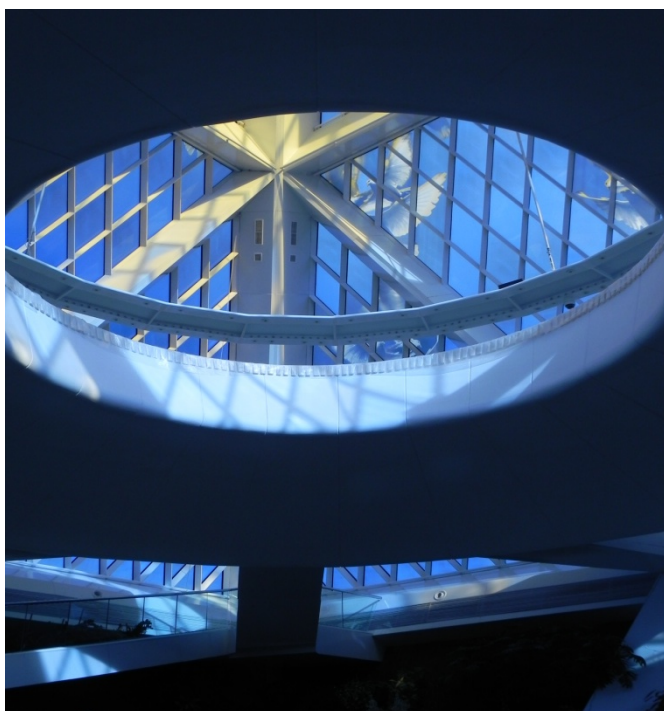
³ Claude Salhani. Islam without a Veil. Kazakhstan’s Path of Moderation. Washington DC, 2011, p. 39.

base of it. This annual routine of egg laying and destruction symbolized the switch between summer and winter, day and night, good and evil.”⁴

The Bible story of Genesis (chapter 2.8-9) comes to mind, referring to Paradise. “The LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and placed there the man whom he had formed. And from the ground the LORD God caused to grow every tree [...] with the tree of life in the middle of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and bad.”⁵

The struggle between good and evil goes to the core of religions and it is easy to see that the human family is one. Adam and Eve have eaten from the tree of knowledge and since then mankind struggles to cope with the loss of innocence.

Following the path of subduing nature had brought us to the tipping point of environmental destruction. Finding new ways to reconcile people with each other and our natural habitat is a task for everyone. Concerted efforts by religious leaders will certainly help to develop the necessary consciousness to preserve our exploited Earth.



Palace of Peace and Reconciliation (upper floor). Astana, Oct. 2013. Photo: UG

The movement of spiritual concord in Kazakhstan addresses those urgent questions at frequent inter-religious conferences in Astana, held at the Palace of Peace and Accord (Reconciliation).

⁴ Paul Brummell. Kazakhstan. (2nd ed. 2011) p. 98.

⁵ The Jewish Bible. Tanakh. The Holy Scriptures. 1985, p. 5.

“World peace is more than a peaceful world. This concept [...] involves structural changes in the whole system of civilization, and these changes [...] should take place in those areas of life [...] responsible for the safe coexistence [...]. Fear, violence, destruction, death, poverty - all these are the products of the old world, its negative factors affecting destructively [...]. Along with unwinding of military conflicts the following factors can be referred to as well: global-scale environmental challenges, terrorism, the global economic crisis, [...] food security, information violence, damaging people's minds, religious-based disputes, the lack of harmonious coexistence [...].

Genuine peace - is not just the absence of war. Only a world free of violence and fear is the real world.” <http://www.astanaforum.kz/en/press-center/news/685-appeal-of-world-forum-of-spiritual-culture-presidium-to-all-people-of-good-will-and-to-all-peace-loving>.

If we are talking about necessary *structural* changes in civilizations we have to address the fact that women are often systematically excluded from decision-making processes, both in times of peace and war.

How can a global society create sustainable concepts without bringing the knowledge and needs of 50 % of the world population into international fora? Where are the women during those important conferences?



Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions. Astana, 2009. - Photo at the Palace Wall. Photo: UG

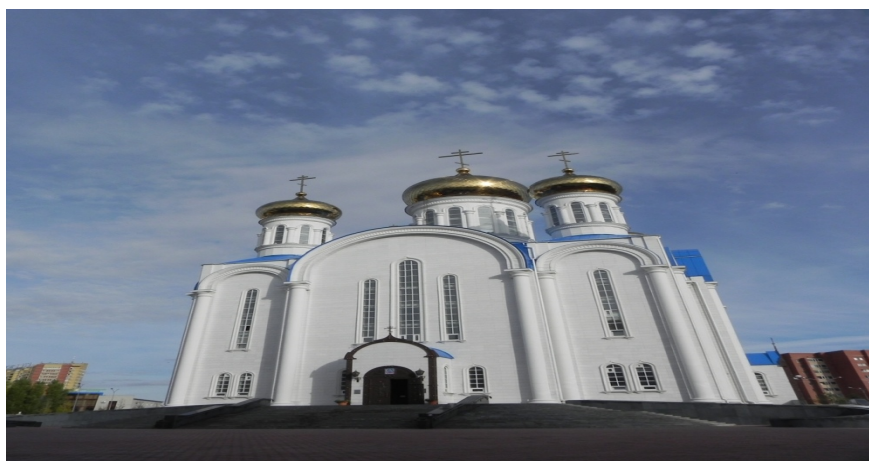
Religious revival

In 2005, construction for ‘Uspensky’ Cathedral in Astana began. Five years later, the Cathedral of the ‘Assumption of the Virgin Mary’ (‘Uspensky’) was consecrated. For decades no Cathedral had been built in Central Asia.

Sometimes Christians have difficulties to admit that they are worshipping a Jewish mother, Mary, and her child Jesus. Of course, by introducing new religious interpretations, Jesus became Jesus Christ, and Christianity ‘was born’. However, Jesus grew up with Jewish traditions. In Islam, Mary is the one of four righteous, leading women in Paradise. (The Holy Qur’an; Surah 19, Maryam).

Christians in Kazakhstan have left the dark years of suppression behind, when their churches were destroyed or devaluated as storage halls, as at St. Nicholas Cathedral in Almaty, where priests were deported and some died as martyrs. Karl Marx (1818-83) defined religion as 'opium of the people' and communism persecuted religious people.

In May 2013, President Nursultan Nazarbayev attended an Orthodox Easter liturgy at 'Uspensky', saying that "today the whole world celebrates Christianity's most important and joyful holiday - Easter. Easter means revival, renewal and also symbolizes our country, as Kazakhstan is becoming a new state where various ethnicities and religions co-exist peacefully".⁶



The Uspensky (Assumption) Cathedral, Astana/Kazakhstan, Oct. 2013. Photo: UG.

Not only churches in the capital receive believers. I remember a visit to Katya S, an old church in Semipalatinsk, - (today's Semey) -, where my Muslim interpreter and I were immediately identified as non-Russian orthodox women – and it did not matter. An elderly lady proudly explained a Greek icon to us, connecting Eastern Kazakhstan to Greece, united in faith. I saw the cracks in the church walls, thinking that they might be from shock waves, caused by the former tests of nuclear weapons nearby. Between 1949 and 1989 the Soviets tested more than 450 nuclear devices around 120 kilometers away from Semey. The ground was shaking then...

⁶ <http://www.inform.kz/eng/article/2555933>.



Zenkov Cathedral (Ascension Cathedral), Almaty. October 2013. Photo: UG.

If buildings could speak, the Zenkov Cathedral in Almaty, named after the architect Andrey P. Zenkov who was made famous for his earthquake-proof construction, would have a lot to tell to the young and old worshippers spending Sundays in crowds around the colorful Cathedral.

Constructed to be a house of God in 1907, the building survived an earthquake four years later. Since 1929, it served as the Central State Museum of the former Kazakh Soviet Republic.

Since 1995 believers can again enjoy the outstanding Cathedral, perceived as the second largest wooden church in the world.⁷ In front of the building, children ride on decorated horses, looked after by stylish mothers and young fathers, or accompanied by grandmothers overlooking different periods of Kazakh history.

Being able to live a faith openly again makes this place in Almaty special. It is a reminder that we all have to defend our precious freedoms because they are not a constant given.

“We are all just people”

I visited the new synagogue in Astana. The ‘House of the Assembly’ (Beit ha-Knesset) is named after another famous woman of the scriptures, Rachel. She was the second wife of Jacob and the mother of Joseph and Benjamin. She died while giving birth to her second son (Genesis 35, 16f.); a cause of death for thousands of women until today.

Her tomb stone is at Ephrath, now Bethlehem. Jewish women and men are mourning inside the monument, worshipping the ‘brave mother’ of the Israelites. Sitting among them was like entering the realm of deepest conviction.

⁷ <http://www.kazakhstan.discovery.com/russian-orthodox-church.html>.



Beit Rahel Synagogue, Astana. Oct. 2013. Photo: UG

Businessman Alexander Mashkevich named the synagogue, opened in 2004, in honor of his mother. The Jewish temple serves about 150 families originally from Belorussia, the Ukraine and Lithuania.⁸

Judaism has many ramifications. In Kazakhstan, we encounter a branch called ‘Chabad-Hasidism’. The term ‘Hasidim’, the ‘pious’, is used in rabbinic literature to designate those who maintained a higher standard in observing the religious and moral commandments.⁹

Chabad stresses intellectuality, hence it’s name Hokhmah, Binah, Da’at (“Wisdom, Understanding, Knowledge”), and emphasizes the study of the Torah, the Jewish Bible. It was founded in Belorussia by Israel ben Eliezer Ba’al Shem Tov (ca. 1700-60).¹⁰

During the dark days of communism, many religious leaders were persecuted and executed. Jewish institutions were demolished and Jewish autonomy was eliminated. The German invasion in 1941 forced many Jews into ghettos or to unnatural deaths. After the demise of the Soviet Union, messengers of Chabad-Judaism revived Jewish life in Kazakhstan.

Entering the Jewish community center in Almaty is like visiting an open house. Without a pre-arranged appointment I ascended to the Hebrew-speaking voice one floor up and found myself standing in front of a Rabbi who looked at me with curiosity.

As soon as I introduced myself as a German visitor, the Rabbi wants to know why millions of Jews had to die under German rule. Acting according to ethical values is for the Rabbi the essence of human existence and he tries to understand how people can disregard moral convictions and simply turn into mass murders.

We discuss racism and anti-Semitism, and he is emphasizing that in this region of the world, in today’s Kazakhstan, near the Chinese border, Jewish persecution never happened. He

⁸ www.kazembassy.org.my/astana_cultural.htm#4.

⁹ (Encyclopaedia Judaica, Jerusalem, 1972, vol. 7, 1383).

¹⁰ (Encyclopaedia Judaica, Jerusalem, 1972, vol. 7, 1013).

stresses Nursultan Nazarbayev's wise and necessary decision to advocate for religious dialogue.

At a celebration which marked the 15th anniversary of Kazakhstan's independence, the Kazakh President wished the Rabbi "Shabbat Shalom". And he answered: "The fact that I can observe Shabbat safely in Kazakhstan can definitely be defined as a spiritual victory."¹¹

"There are many attempts of coexistence globally, yet only in Kazakhstan the government is undertaking such an initiative", he adds. Needless to say, that he is participating in inter-religious conferences with peers representing other key religions.

Finally, after a breath-taking tour de force about ethics, Jewish life and new synagogues in the country – as in Ust-Kamenogorsk, I finally get the chance to ask him about his name. "I am the chief Rabbi of Kazakhstan, but we are all just people".



Chief Rabbi of Kazakhstan: Yeshayah Elazar Cohen. Oct. 2013. Photo: UG

As-Sirat al-Mustaqim: The Straight Path

The French philosopher Voltaire (1694-1778) declared that he would not tolerate intolerance. "Are you Muslim?" This question was posed to me before I could enter a mosque in Northern Africa. Now I am sitting in the Hazrat Sultan Mosque in Astana – and it is a different story.

The largest mosque in Central Asia is located close to the Palace of Peace and Reconciliation and was named after the highly influential Sufi Ahmed Yesevi (b. second half of the 11th century, died 1166). His poetry paved the way for the development of mystical folk literature (Encycl. Britannica). The mosque was inaugurated in 2012.

¹¹ <http://www.chabad.kz/31889.html>



Hazrat Sultan Mosque in Astana. Oct. 2013. Photo: UG

Without any interrogation, I reached the shelves to put my shoes on, and with calm curiosity I entered the bathing section where women were washing their faces and feet. Over impressive floors, I ascended to the main hall and simply sat down on the comfortable ground in the women's section. The architecture is stunning and the art overwhelming. While listening to the murmur of voices in prayer around me, my thoughts wander to the Muslim who made me familiar with Kazakh life.

I am talking about my friend Omirzhan Zhakupov, - who unfortunately died in 2013, - a man who lived what he believed in -, by following an ethical path.

He took me to several villages around the former Soviet nuclear test site and introduced me to problems related to the monstrous nuclear explosions carried out in his homeland. He not only wrote a book about the affected families in the region (published 2010) but also honored local poet Tolegen Ismailov, who died at the young age of 40 in 2012. Omirzhan collected his writings and made his work known to the public.

While driving in his car, the prayer beads (Subha) danced in front, accompanying the rhythm of Omirzhan's explanations.

Many interesting birds – maybe among them the holy bird Samruk? – flew over the beautiful steppe and I admired the 'spiritual' landscape free from the burden of 'civilized' exploitation – as it seemed.



Omirzhan Zhakupov. Akbulak, September 2012. Photo: UG

My friend took me back into reality. Omirzhan lived his whole life near the test site and he and his family – like so many others - paid the price for the competition for the most effective nuclear device – coping with health threats all their lives.

He founded a non-governmental organization, Birlestik, to address the nuclear legacy of his beloved country, served as mayor and helped children into life as a ‘midwife’. His social activities made him highly respected in his community. Being Christian or Muslim was not important for him because Omirzhan looked through the layers and labels of people.

His hospitality was outstanding and the nights I spent in his house made me feel at home. In his village Tanat, he worked on a memorial for the test victims. – Sadly now I have to visit it without my smiling companion. Like Kazakh Abisich Kekilbayev’s (1939-) literary heroes, Omirzhan saw that the meaning of life in sharing and helping.

With Al-Ghazali in Semey

“When man controls his predatory quality and sets it within its proper limits, he acquires such virtues as courage, generosity, self control, patience, forgiveness and dignity” (Al-Ghazali’s Ihya’ Ulum al-Din; Revitalization of the Sciences of Religion, vol. 1: Overall Attributes of the Heart).

I am on my way to one of the mosques in Semey. Along quiet small roads I am travelling back in time. Old wooden houses have preserved the atmosphere when Dostoyevsky (1821-1881) lived in Semipalatinsk. When the exiled revolutionary arrived in 1854 he was still searching for God. The five years in the Siberian town were important for his personal and literary development.

Old trees are slowly shaking in soft autumn light. Not far away a friendly green minaret seems to invite me. An old wooden door gives way into the Latif Sadyk Uly Musin mosque. After finding the slippers, I enter the next room, welcomed by the Imam and a worshipper. I am hesitant because I am standing right in front of the men’s section. No problem for Imam Idin who takes me into the main hall and proudly shows me around. I want to demonstrate my appreciation for his kindness by writing my name in Arabic on the blackboard. He does the same. Dignity and language – does it need more?

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Imam Idin of the Latif Sadyk Uly Musin Mosque in Semey. Oct. 2013. Photo: UG

Websites:

<http://www.astanatimes.com/2014/03/foreign-ministry-holds-briefing-diplomats-religious-freedom-country/>.

<http://www.chabad.kz/>.

<http://www.advantour.com/kazakhstan/astana/khasret-sultan-mosque.htm>