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Teaching Religious Studies as an Academic Discipline in Higher Education Institutions of Kazakhstan

Yerke Kartabayeva^{*}, Bakytkul Soltyeva, Ainura Beisegulova

Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, 71 al-Farabi Avenue, Almaty, 050038, Kazakhstan

Abstract

This article focuses on the analysis of teaching Religious Studies in higher education institutions of Kazakhstan. After the concept of state atheism was abandoned in this country, radical changes have occurred in the role played by religion and religious associations. Naturally, this resulted in the changes in general education programs. The study of religion was included into educational programs and began to be taught in different forms in higher school and in college. In the early 1990s, Religious Studies began to be introduced as a specialization and a major (Religious Studies) or optional courses (History of Religions, Religious Studies, World Religions, etc.) in higher education institutions in Kazakhstan and other post-Soviet states. Since then, vast experience has been accumulated in teaching Religious Studies as an academic discipline, and the authors share it with the colleagues from other countries within this article.

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1. Introduction

“The 21st century will be spiritual or will not be,” said André Malraux (Sattarova, 2010, p. 35),

^{*} Corresponding author. Tel.: +7 727 247 3771
E-mail address: erke_66@mail.ru

a French philosopher, writer, government leader and social activist, in the middle of the 20th century, and his words are proving to be prophetic today. Spirituality has never before been such a burning issue. Today, international community and especially the younger generation are in a deep spiritual and moral crisis. The average age for first-time use of drugs has dropped from 18 to 14. There is a growing number of suicides among adolescents, abortions among girls under the age of 19, drug and alcohol abuse statistics are on the rise. Opinion polls show that many young people won't hesitate to cross moral boundaries to achieve personal success. In short, there is a moral crisis, and it is the main cause of the said phenomena.

The problem is especially important for the countries of the former Soviet Union that are currently going through hard times. New socio-political and socio-cultural realities caused by the collapse of communism and the breakdown of the Soviet Union have triggered the growth of national consciousness and changed spiritual guidelines in the post-Soviet society, as evidenced by the fact that large numbers of people in the CIS countries have started to show keen interest in religious values and traditions. Kazakhstan is no exception. Soon after the Republic of Kazakhstan became an independent country, state atheism was replaced by freedom of religion as per the Law of 1992 which set in motion deep transformations in the religious life of the society. More specifically, the following fundamental changes have occurred: first, a multi-religious environment emerged with numerous religions and religious movements co-existing, and, second, religion started to play a significant role in all aspects of social life. On the one hand, these processes had positive effects when religion became an important driver in the development of spiritual and moral values, as well as one's personality; on the other hand, religion was also used for destruction and disintegration.

In such an environment, it has become crucially important not only to know how to navigate this kaleidoscope of religions, but also to study – with scientific methods – religious processes, their nature, content, the impact of religion, from the personal to the society and international level. This is why the demand for trained professionals in the field of Religious Studies, i.e. for a college-level course in Religious Studies, appeared in Kazakhstan in the 1990s.

Before we stress on our experience in teaching Religious Studies, let's discuss the main aspects of the international experience. There is a well-known classification developed by Professor Michael Grimmit from the University of Birmingham, describing the ways of acquiring knowledge about religion that is widely used by scholars around the world: learning in religion (i.e. confessional education), learning about and learning from religion. Religious Studies are a part of learning about religion, because it is a neutral, objective and critical academic field. Yet, at the same time, during the last 10 years there has been a growing understanding of using the third approach, i.e. learning from religion, when religion is viewed as a resource for the development of the human personality. In general, research in the field of religious education has been growing around the world in recent decades. Moreover, at the end of the 20th century a shift occurred in the paradigm of religious education, including Religious Studies, which was manifested in two aspects. Firstly, the transition from mono-religious to inter-religious and mixed-system religious education, which focuses on the study of different religions and different philosophical systems, and not only religions but also atheism, humanism, secularism, etc. (Valk, 2010, p. 105). Secondly, there has been a shift from focusing on external structural aspects of religious education to the formation of personality, its values, moral principles, promoting the ability to understand other traditions, value systems and, ultimately, reaching self-understanding and self-reflection (Wright, 2004). Thus, the combination of learning about and learning from religion is becoming relevant in the communicative space of discourses on religious education.

2. Objectives, methodology and research design

The goal of the study is to analyze the experience of teaching Religious Studies in Kazakhstan universities as an academic discipline. The methodology is based on the comparative approach which was used for the comparative analysis of the experience of teaching Religious Studies at various universities in Kazakhstan.

The first stage of the study focuses on the history of formation of Religious Studies education in Kazakhstan universities, exploring its legal framework. Next stages provide a thorough analysis of the current state

of teaching Religious Studies in higher education institutions, pointing out the problems and setting targets in this field.

3. History of formation and development of Religious Studies as an academic discipline

As already mentioned, after the state atheism was abandoned in this country, radical changes occurred in the role played by religion and religious associations. It naturally resulted in the changes in the content of general education. Today religion is no longer regarded as an obstacle to the development of science, a means of preserving the power of the exploiters. The study of religion is included into educational programs, taught in various forms in higher school and college.

Kazakhstan's legislation on religion and education basically meets international standards in this area, and primarily it implements a number of international legal conventions signed by Kazakhstan. Among the basic documents in this field is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations on December 10, 1948, and the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief proclaimed by the UN General Assembly on November 25, 1981. The rules of cooperation between the state, education authorities and religious organizations have been laid in the national legislation. The Constitution (1995) declares the Republic of Kazakhstan is a “democratic and secular state governed by the rule of law, whose most valuable assets are people, their lives, rights and freedoms” (Konstitucija Respubliki Kazahstan, 1995, Article 1). The right to freedom for religion is protected by Article 22 of the Constitution.

In Religious Studies courses, teachers follow a number of principles enshrined in the legislation of the Republic of Kazakhstan and implemented in state higher education institutions. Firstly, it is secularism. Adhering to scientific approach, teachers are not allowed to speak highly or unfavorably about a particular doctrine, call to embrace or abandon certain religious views. Secondly, unlike theological approach, where your perception has to be based on the follower's perspective, scientific approach focuses on comparative methods in Religious Studies. Thirdly, interdisciplinary interaction is extremely important. Religious issues cannot be considered in isolation from the wider historical and cultural context. In this sense, Religious Studies form essential knowledge and skills together with a range of other courses, including National History, History of the World, Cultural Studies and Philosophy.

In the early 1990s, Religious Studies was first introduced in Kazakhstan and other post-Soviet states as a discipline in higher education institutions with a number of courses to choose from, such as History of Religions, Religious Studies, World Religions, etc. To be more precise, the History of Religious Studies in Kazakhstan dates back to 1991, when a major named “Religion and Freedom of Thought” appeared in Ahmed Yassawi International Kazakh-Turkish University. The sub-department was called “Philosophy and Religion” in 2007–2009 and “Archaeology, Ethnology and Religion” in 2009–2010. In 2011, the sub-department changed its name to “Religious Studies and Theology” and became a part of the department of history and pedagogy. Thus, after searching for an appropriate model for teaching Religious Studies, this university opted for interaction between religion and theology. And as theology is always about religious beliefs, Religious Studies are mainly focused on the study of Islam, as evidenced by the areas of research conducted by the sub-department: 1) Modern problems of Islam; 2) Islamic foundation of Kazakh cultural traditions; 3) History of Turkic Islam and philosophical problems; 4) Spiritual heritage of religion. As a result, Ahmed Yassawi International Kazakh-Turkish University offers training in Religious Studies (graduate and postgraduate courses), as well as in Theology (graduate course).

In 1999, Religious Studies section was opened in Al-Farabi Kazakh National University at the Department of Philosophy and Political Science as part of the sub-department of Religious and Cultural Studies, promoting the study of religion as a cultural phenomenon with a variety of courses in the curriculum and research interests of the sub-department's faculty. Starting from 2003, there have been valiant attempts to find a proper model for Religious Studies as an academic discipline, in particular, preparations began for the introduction of a new major, Theology, and a PhD course in the field of Religious Anthropology, marking a transition from the model where Religious Studies and Theology were separated to a model of coexistence and collaboration. International cooperation includes mainly Turkey and Malaysia, proving that Islamic direction is a priority, despite diverse academic disciplines and scientific interests of the sub-department's faculty.

In 2002, a section of Religious Studies was opened in the Eurasian National University (graduate and postgraduate programs) at the Department of Philosophy. During this time, Religious Studies and Theology were treated separately in the Religious Studies training at Gumilev Eurasian National University.

In 2002, Buketov Karaganda State University started to offer courses in Religious Studies (graduate and postgraduate) at the Department of Philosophy and Psychology. After reviewing the information available online, it becomes obvious that, firstly, the model used is multi-religious rather than mono-religious (because research interests of the faculty are so diverse), secondly, Theology and Religious Studies are treated separately, and thirdly, international cooperation focuses on western and Russian universities. Since 2010, this university has been operating a research laboratory for the integrated study of current religious situation in Kazakhstan.

4. Current state of Religious Studies as a college course: directions and levels

Apart from the already mentioned universities, graduate courses in Religious Studies in today's Kazakhstan are offered by the Department of Religious Studies of Nur-Mubarak Egyptian University of Islamic Culture and the sub-department of Religious Studies at the University of Business Career and Foreign Languages.

In addition, all of the above mentioned institutions, except Buketov University in Karaganda, offer postgraduate courses in Religious Studies, whereas Al-Farabi Kazakh National University and Nur-Mubarak Egyptian University of Islamic Culture offer PhD training in the indicated discipline.

Religious Studies was first introduced as a counterbalance to western theology. During its evolution as an academic discipline, two major opinions eventually formed. Supporters of the first opinion believed that Religious Studies is a discipline about religion, while proponents of the second opinion thought of it as a discipline that should be studied by means of religion (from the point of view of theology). In Kazakhstan's standard specifications on education, Religious Studies is described as an academic discipline about religion, yet during the educational process, faculty members have two contiguous points of view about the possibility of connection between knowledge about religion and Religious Studies.

Today, there is a number of training programs in Religious Studies, including Religious Scholar/Teacher of Religious Studies, Religious Scholar/Expert in Relations between Religion and State, Religious Scholar/Expert in Islamic Theology, Religious Scholar/Expert in Christian Theology, Religious Scholar/Expert in New Religious Movements, Religious Scholar-Theorist. Training in the above mentioned fields is mainly offered by Ahmed Yassawi International Kazakh-Turkish University and Al-Farabi Kazakh National University. The latter also has postgraduate programs in Religious Studies with applied and pedagogic specializations for research and teaching in universities.

Training in Religious Studies in the existing classification of religious education is a form of professional religious education. Professional religious education consists of two types. The first type is professional clergy training (clergy, choir directors, missionaries and preachers), which is based on the study of religion from within. The second type is Religious Studies as an academic discipline, meaning that religion is studied from outside, i.e. on a secular basis.

Organization of academic courses in Religious Studies has several important elements. Firstly, it is important to decide on the methodological approaches and principles which a course in Religious Studies will be fundamentally based on. Secondly, the content of the course, starting from how you define religion as an academic discipline in the context of educational problems. Thirdly, epistemological and ethical issues associated with teaching and studying religion. Fourthly, practical aspects of Religious Studies, which are directly concerned with practical application.

Based on these points, let us explore the basic principles of Religious Studies teaching which college teachers in Kazakhstan adhere. Firstly, it is the principle of non-denomination, as Religious Studies is part of non-denominational education. This applies both to the content of education and to the participants of the educational process. During their education, students should retain their freedom of belief, whether religious or not. At the same time, it should be clearly stated that the academic study of religion is possible only when you are detached from

your personal religious biases, i.e. you have to isolate yourself from all your religious beliefs and become ideologically neutral. Naturally, a Religious Studies teacher is not allowed to speak on behalf of any religion or, even worse, a religious organization and explain the material through the prism of his or her personal beliefs.

Secondly, it is a scientific approach. You can still hear that Religious Studies is not a real scientific discipline because, although it has a subject of research, i.e. religion with the multitude of its manifestations, it still uses tools from other disciplines and has no exclusive research techniques of its own. Indeed, Religious Studies is an inter-disciplinary field of study, and that is due to the specifics of the subject of religion, which is deeply rooted in the existential strata of the human being and at the same time is an important part of an individual's socio-cultural life. Its inter-disciplinary nature and inter-disciplinary approach are a virtue of Religious Studies as a scientific discipline. The scientific approach should definitely include critical reflection.

For the better understanding of the scientific approach in Religious Studies it is necessary to turn to Max Muller, one of the founders of Religious Studies in the 19th century who dedicated a number of his lectures to this subject. Scientific study means treating your subject with respect, “but above all with relentless and uncompromising pursuit of truth” (Mjuller, 1996, p. 36).

Thirdly, it is focus, meaning that teaching should be focused on religion with the unity and diversity of its manifestations.

Fourthly, it is depth, the need for deep understanding of religion at all levels, from existential (in particular, religious experience) to social (activities of religious organizations), beyond some shallow knowledge of religious topics.

Fifthly, it is openness, meaning, first of all, the fundamental dialogical approach to training, using different perspectives in education. Secondly, it is inter-cultural, inter-religious approach, implying openness to the study of other religious traditions. Thirdly, it is the focus of education on promoting tolerance, fighting against all sorts of xenophobia and isolationism. These five principles are strategic for religious scholars in Kazakhstan.

Based on the above, the content of Religious Studies training is determined. First of all, in the educational process, we assume that religion is part of culture, a cultural phenomenon. Paul Tillich (2015), a well-known theologian and religious scholar, perceived religion as a deep layer of human culture. Religion, just as culture, combines universal and local. Which means that, on the one hand, the content has a universal side, i.e. the list of subjects studied by Religious Studies students includes courses on methodology of religious learning, in particular phenomenology of religion, psychology of religion, philosophy of religion, religious philosophy, and religious vs. non-religious views, science and religion. The second part includes courses aimed at studying religions and religious movements, namely, Islamic theology, Christian theology and modern nontraditional denominations and movements. The third part includes courses about the nature of manifestation and functioning of religions and religious movements in Kazakhstan, such as History of Religions in Kazakhstan, or Religions in Modern Kazakhstan. These subjects are studied by graduate students.

After Kazakhstan joined the global education framework through the Bologna Process, changes have occurred in the state educational policy in general, and in Religious Studies in particular. The general trend is that the number of mandatory courses is falling and the number of optional courses is growing. It means that there is a real opportunity to shape the strategy in Religious Studies training, especially in postgraduate and PhD programs.

Every year, changes are made to curricula in both graduate and postgraduate programs to address two main issues. Strengthening the Kazakh component, i.e. adding more courses aimed at understanding of history and current state of religions in Kazakhstan, the role of religion in everyday life of people in Kazakhstan. Second, specialization in Religious Studies. These are two main challenges which religious scholars in Kazakhstan have been trying to solve for the past three years by adjusting curricula.

As of 2012, educational strategy of postgraduate training at Gumilev Eurasian National University includes specialization in two areas. The first one is history of religions. The second one is anthropology of religions,

focusing on the study of everyday religious practices, methods of collecting data in the field and methods of its processing and interpretation. These steps are intended to make Religious Studies training more practice-oriented, teach students the skills necessary to collect data in the field and analytical skills for the analysis, religious evaluation and forecasting (Shapoval, 2013).

Improvement of the curriculum in graduate and postgraduate programs happens in parallel with growing international cooperation, which contributes greatly to improving the quality of Religious Studies training and bringing it to the international level. It is important to remember that graduate and especially postgraduate students shall be engaged in research. This is why Religious Studies students actively participate in national and international conferences. Another significant step in Religious Studies education is connected with internships in the International Center of Cultures and Religions, Agency for Religious Affairs, municipalities, higher schools and specialized colleges, where students can learn practical skills.

5. Problems and prospects of development

It seems important to stress attention to the problems, challenges and prospects of Religious Studies.

All education institutions in Kazakhstan offer courses in Religious Studies that comply with the state standard of education. However, the learning process is not free from inconsistencies caused by the following issues:

- lack of the unified training program;
- large variety of major textbooks and additional literature;
- different levels of teacher training;
- different areas of specialization of sub-departments.

The problems with the way Religious Studies sub-departments operate are basically caused by a number of reasons, such as the choice of curriculum being at the discretion of the faculty, inconsistencies in textbooks and teaching programs, relying on textbooks which have not been approved by Religious Studies inspectors, resulting in Religious Studies students with different levels of training. It should be noted that the number of Religious Studies textbooks is limited. Moreover, they are printed mainly in Russia outside Kazakhstan, in the post-Soviet countries or elsewhere, so they cannot possibly cover and explain all the aspects of the religious situation in this country. Unfortunately, we have to emphasize the scarcity of domestic textbooks suitable for different levels of education, which would employ modern techniques and could be used in the courses on Religious Studies and history of religion. Also, a number of textbooks is biased towards atheism and cannot provide objective answers to the questions about religion, or promote ideological and logical integrity.

Certainly, in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious environment like today's Kazakhstan (140 ethnic groups and 46 religious communities currently live in Kazakhstan) has to offer special standards not only for the content of training, but also for teaching methods, as well as for the qualifications and moral qualities of teachers. The main problem with teaching staff is that most teachers and lecturers in Religious Studies courses are experts in philosophy, culture, etc. Although teachers have some experience in the field of religious relations, the lack of basic knowledge makes the quality of Religious Studies training somewhat inadequate. However, there have been some positive changes over the last 2–3 years thanks to the appearance of religious scholars with postgraduate and PhD training, as well as lectures in higher education institutions.

Due to the combination of majors such as philosophy, cultural theory and theology at sub-departments of Religious Studies in certain education institutions, there is a tendency to focus on a particular field. This should be regarded as a form of specialization rather than as a deficiency in the entire process. However, a teacher's specialization defines his/her views and methods for teaching Religious Studies. As a result, the existence of various sub-departments causes a lack of conceptual uniformity of the educational process in Religious Studies.

Today, foreign teachers have to be invited to teach certain courses because the number of local teachers is insufficient. This is extremely important for gaining international experience and making course programs more diverse. However, as foreign teachers do not speak Kazakh or Russian, and the students' knowledge of foreign languages is limited, lectures take more time than they should, complicating the training process.

Speaking about the challenges facing Religious Studies education, one of the major priorities is to increase the number of graduates, who could teach Religious Studies in higher school. This need is driven by the plans to replace the optional higher school course “Basic Theology” (introduced in 2009) with a compulsory course “Secularism and the Basics of Theology” in 2017. Unfortunately, there are no professional religious scholars, who could teach this discipline. The problem is that college training is mostly focused on research, with graduates going to work in research centers and government agencies. Even if a Religious Studies graduate wanted to become a higher school teacher, he or she would have to teach other subjects to reach the required minimum of working hours. Therefore, in most cases Religious Studies is currently taught by history teachers. Given the current situation, some universities in Kazakhstan are now training historians with the specialization in Religious Studies. Actions such as these should be encouraged. In addition, specialists in the history of religion at history departments began to introduce optional courses in Religious Studies. For example, the Department of History, Archeology and Ethnology of Al-Farabi Kazakh National University has a number of courses on the history of religion, including a basic course “History of World Religions”, optional courses “History of Major Denominations in Islam”, “History of Sufism in Central Asia” “Comparative Analysis of Religious Systems”.

The second goal is improving the quality of research conducted by undergraduate, postgraduate and PhD students and teachers, bringing it to the international level which also means having publications in major journals about religious and cultural studies.

Finally, the third goal is promoting international cooperation, student exchange programs and joint research projects even further.

6. Conclusion

Thus, Kazakhstan is in the early stages of building up its own experience in teaching Religious Studies, creating its own legislative and regulatory framework that would help to coordinate the relationship between education and religion. In such a relatively short time, Kazakh experts in Religious Studies have been able to achieve tangible professional results that we have analyzed in this article. Still, determining the criteria for Religious Studies as an academic discipline and improving the quality of training remains an urgent priority. All these issues require serious thought from scientific, theoretical, legal and methodological points of view.

Overall, improving the quality of Religious Studies training is a dynamic open-ended process that should address the problems of modern society and respond to the emerging challenges of religious and political extremism and religious conflicts. High-quality Religious Studies training should contribute to greater stability of the Kazakh society.

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