**Religious education in Kazakhstan: changing strategy**

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**Introduction**

The problem of religious education is relevant for many countries of the world, irrespective of the level of economic and social development and character of faith. Modernization of religious education equally excites both mono - and polyconfessional societies.

For the countries of the former Soviet Union, and for Kazakhstan particularly, for the known reasons the problem is put in other plane – not so much modernization, but formation of that branch of education significance of which began to be felt and comprehended with special sharpness and relevance by government institutions only now, after two decades of independent existence.

In this paper the term "religious education" is used in a broad sense, including the knowledge from religion (confessional education) and education about religion (secular Religious Studies). We mean education at university level and in various programs.

Why now? The continuing threats of the extremist actions made in the name of religion, an involvement of young people, since school age, in various sects and religious groups, according to the view of the authorities and Ministry of education and science of Kazakhstan, indicate the need of studying of interrelation between religion and education. Official opinion is that secular character of society and existing education system in Kazakhstan create potential opportunity for separating religion from the conflicts and radicalization.

Reasonable, methodologically robust concept of religious education has to make students more "tolerant" to representatives of other faiths, give them necessary knowledge for perception of the alternative points of view. Anyway critical thinking, creative intelligence which has to be formed in the system of innovative religious education has crucial importance for opposition to extremism and fundamentalism, violence and conflicts.

To introduce better understanding of the need to develop sphere of religious education in Kazakhstan, to find solution of the existing problems and to support innovation in this area it is necessary to use the experience of foreign societies, in particular, the educational structures of the countries that have successfully solved the problem of inter-religious coexistence, or religious conflicts are minimized.

**Two main questions that we are trying to find the answers in this study are how the development of religious education in Kazakhstan has changed over the last years and what factors have influenced these changes?**

**Research method**

In this study, we tried to analyze public policy and situation of religious education in the country. We used empirical methods - scientific observation and description, comparative-historical method and scientific methods of theoretical knowledge - analysis and synthesis, induction and deduction. We analyzed universities’ curricula of the specialties "Religious studies", "Theology", "Islamic Studies". A series of in-depth interviews with teachers, students and university graduates were performed. The principles of full consideration of the objects, the study of social phenomena in the development, as well as comprehensive, historical and logical approaches were implemented. The experience of a number of foreign educational institutions was observed.

At the present stage of development of social sciences and humanities rejection of rigid ideological precepts, spirit of tolerance and objectivity are essential requirement of scientific thinking. It was extremely important for us to maintain an objective stance, avoiding both harsh atheistic critics and religious propaganda, as well as praising the values and traditions of Islam as the dominant religion in Kazakhstan society

**Main body**

Comparative analysis on a variety of countries and continents shows quite a variety of models of religious education, and their interaction with governments and the processes of nation-building. With all the differences of national models of education in these countries, it is obvious that state should adhere to transparent and consistent policy with regard to religion or secularism, and education should contribute to the development of critical thinking which allows even to criticize religious dogma and structure (1).

The right to freedom of expression can and should also include the right to criticize a religion, as a basic element in education, which aims to promote not only critical thinking, but also the expression of critical thinking.

For protection against any extreme views and actions is very important for young people to learn and acquire skills of analysis and evaluation of the situation and information, whether it is speech of religious or political leaders or message from the Internet.

Some researchers believe (2) that Singapore is one of the few countries in Southeast Asia, where the state promotes harmony and interfaith dialogue, and this stability is strictly protected by the state, while the rapid modernization has not led to a reduction of religion space or decreasing the importance of religious institutions among Singaporeans. It is argued that the use of soft power and "egalitarian capitalism" with multicultural education creates a high quality of life and favors cohesion (3). There is a strong rejection of extremism and militancy in the Muslim community in Singapore and uncompromising groups are sharply criticized.

The country has maintained cooperation between Muslim scholars and government agencies.

In the UK, according to the report of The National Secular Society «Religious Education» (4), there are some problems in educational policy in terms of religious particularism.

For example, a discipline that is called "Religious education" enables teachers to proselytize students, although it is a conflict of interest as to preach any religion is unacceptable for teachers of public schools. Politicians do not want to give up the subject of "religious education" for political and cultural reasons, or for fear of condemnation by religious leaders, defending their own interests, but as a result, young people are not getting a fair, objective, relevant and academically rigorous education to which they have right.

National Society of secularization proposes to replace this item with a new subject within the National Curriculum, developed on the basis of the study of ethics and philosophy, while it should cover a variety of religious, non-religious and secular worldviews. Development and maintenance of a new training program, the report says, must go through all the necessary procedures and approval of the advisory committee, with the support of experts from experienced teachers and scientists.

Teachers, specialized committees, researchers, employers, higher education institutions and other interested parties should be involved in the consultations, although should not have undue influence on the way the education is realized.

Some experts of the Arab countries, say that in the Arab world, even in its most "secular" states, youth environment, in which the student lives at the moment, is full of religious discourse. This does not mean, of course, that it is necessary to expel the religious teachings of the school, but it is necessary to form a different way of teaching religion.

As writes Fandy, M., in his article «Enriched Islam: The Muslim crisis of education», «it will not only make students more" tolerant "to the representatives of other religions, but also equip them with the knowledge necessary for the alternative concepts of Islam" (5 ).

This is indicated by Muslim educators themselves, in particular Dr.Ahmad, former rector of the International Islamic University in Pakistan, said that "Islamic ideology" is a pseudo-concept that does not have a solid intellectual foundation as divine defies argument (6)

He stands for the debate and serious cooperation with those responsible for the creation of a modern education system based on the ideals of intellectual excellence, administrative responsibility and critical thinking.

# After gaining independence spontaneous religious education began to appear in Kazakhstan. Though due to the lack of central body and qualified specialists there were not uniform curriculum standards in this area.

# Uncontrolled Islamic education was opened to all comers in a large number of private and missionary "autonomous institutions". As for higher Islamic education, up to the creation of "Nur-Mubarak" University in 2001, it was available only abroad.

# As a result, young people were leaving in large groups, although in the end, not all of them have been educated and got qualification. And those who have received diplomas were not qualified for the nostrification of the Ministry of Education and Science of Kazakhstan.

# Today Kazakh society is fully aware of the importance of religious literacy, but the realization of this issue is still not satisfactory. President Nursultan Nazarbayev in his Address to the Nation "Kazakhstan-2050" said: "We must form a religious consciousness, corresponding to the norms of tradition and culture of our country".

# Since 2011, higher religious education has been put under state control. The Ministry of Education and Science has opened new programs and allocated additional government grants for future imams. Thus, the state is trying to create an alternative to foreign religious training and prepare its own qualified specialists.

Bachelors of Religious Studies are prepared in Gumilyov Eurasian National University, Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, in the Karaganda State University, the Egyptian University of Islamic Culture "Nur-Mubarak", Yassavi International Kazakh-Turkish University and the University of business career and foreign languages.

Master and doctoral studies in this specialty has been functioning in Al-Farabi University and University of "Nur-Mubarak".

For some years, the Ministry of Education and Science of Kazakhstan allocated 65 state grants for this specialty. Yet in 2013 academic years, this number had increased to 77 educational grants and in 2014 - up to 82. In addition, some institutions through the provision of their own grants ensure significant part of students in religious studies free of charge.

In Kazakhstan standard of education Religious Studies is justified as an academic discipline about religion.

Training of specialists is carried out in the following religious core areas, "religious scholar - teacher of religion", "religious scholar - an expert on relations between religion and state", "religious scholar - an expert on Islamic theology", "religious scholar - an expert on Christian theology", "religious scholar - an expert on new religious movements "," religious scholar - a theorist. "

Specialty "Theology", which unites the secular and confessional religious trends, was opened in Yassavi Turkestan University in 2009.

The peculiarity of this specialty is that the courses which are not limited to the knowledge and study of religion by an external analysis, assessment and reasoning have a significant advantage, for the study of the inner life of religions are provided there. Thus, theology combines theory with practice, studying the dynamics of religious consciousness, protecting Religious Studies from unilateral atheistic principles

In 2012, the state has allocated 10 grants for specialty "Theology", in 2013 the number had increased to 22 educational grants, in 2014 - decreased to 15.

In accordance with the Rules of educational grants awarding, the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan allocated for the training of qualified personnel in the specialty "Islamic Studies" 100 grants in 2011, 128 grants in 2012, 150 grants in 2013 and 150 grants in 2014-. Thus, at the beginning of the 2014-2015 academic year, most students receiving higher religious education were provided by state grants. All graduates receive a state diploma

One of the main actors in the market of religious education is Egyptian University of Islamic Culture "Nur", which was created on the basis of an intergovernmental agreement between Kazakhstan and the Arab Republic of Egypt, signed in 2001. The agreement was ratified by the Parliament of our Republic in July 2003 and came into legal force according to the decree of the President. University was licensed by the Ministry of Education and Science after passing the state certification.

The main task of the university, as stated in its Strategic Development Plan, "is to train highly qualified specialists - bachelors and masters, deeply mastered the basics of Islam and the history and philosophy of Islam, as well as possessing modern secular sciences and able to solve actual theoretical and practical problems, that face society ".

Nur University is the only university operating under the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan which trains specialists on Islamic direction.

Initially, the University "Nur-Mubarak" had four secular (Arabic Philology, Translation Studies, Regional Studies) and one religious specialty. Each of them was assigned by the Ministry of Education classification code, with the exception of the specialty "Islamic Studies", which trained imams. This meant that it was not registered in the Ministry, and a diploma issued had no legal force.

Any institution had the right to refuse such a specialist at employment. This situation caused discontent among the graduates: "Why do we need a diploma that has no specialty code number?"  
In spring 2004 the University was visited by the Minister of Education, and in a conversation with the teachers he promised to solve the problem. The main obstacle to which the Minister referred, was that in a secular society, religion is separated from the state, and legitimizing Imam specialty in these conditions is not easy.

The university on its part was reassuring students: "Specialty code is not required. But its introducing would entail the opening of such specialties throughout the country, which has a negative impact on the quality of training. "

After four years of paid education students believed they had the right for a full diploma. Moreover the lack of code number in diploma put graduates in a tough dependence on the Spiritual Administration of Muslims and deprived of freedom in choosing a job.

However, after a few years, this problem has been solved. The introduction of "Islamic Studies" in the Classifier of specialties of graduate and postgraduate education has allowed to form a new direction in the Kazakhstan humanities, to start a comprehensive study of Islam in Kazakhstan, to develop the methodology of Islamic studies in the context of the justification of historical, and cultural features of Islam in our country - as the basis of spiritual and ethical consensus in Kazakhstan society.

In 2012, the Board of Trustees decided to open three faculties: "Fundamentals of religion and Islamic preaching", "Sharia" and "Arabic philology and Islamic civilization." Also at the University the Research Center of Abu Hanifa was established. The challenge of new faculties is an advanced training in Islamic studies, religious studies and Arabic. Previously, the university was training Imam-khatibs, now with the opening of "Sharia» Faculty students began to study Islamic law. More attention has been given to sermons, as they must meet modern requirements and are based on the fundamental Islamic knowledge.

In 2014, taking into account the majority of Kazakhstan Muslims following the Hanafi madhhab Rector Zhuda Basyuni carefully selected 11 doctors and professors from Egypt, who teach on madhhab of Imam Abu Hanifa Agzam and have scientific works on his legacy.

All experts from Egypt are doctors of sciences of different specialization - the Arabic language, Arabic literature, Fiqh, Koranic science, aqida, Islamic philosophy. They are employees and experts of such renowned educational institutions as the "Al-Azhar", "Ain Shams", Cairo University, Alexandria University and the University of Al-Minia.

The fact that the university has "native speakers" is very important because during the first and second years Arabic teachers lay the foundation of language training, allowing students in the future on the third-fourth year to work independently with sources in Arabic.

That is why it was decided to open a preparatory course at the University and this is a new stage in the development of the university, as well as an opportunity for students who want to get theological education at the University of "Nur-Mubarak" to learn the basics of the Arabic language. Graduates of the early years recall how hard it was at first, when they had to listen to the content of the most complicated lectures of Arab teachers and their language proficiency was obviously insufficient.

 Preparatory program continues for 8 months. It should be noted that approximately 70% of the students who enter the university Nur - are representatives of rural youth from families with low income, thereby University creates for them opportunity for "social lift» in their career.

The main function of graduates - scholars of Islam and Imams - is promotion of traditional Hanafi Islam in Kazakhstan, study of its provisions scientifically and familiarization the Muslim part of the population with them.

However, you will notice that in the curriculum of the University Nur boundary between faith-based specialties (theology, Islamic studies) with the uncritical induction of students into a worldview and secular (Religious Studies) with the access to a range of contested belief Systems are not very clearly marked while the principal approaches there should vary considerably.

On the one hand, this may be due to the fact that educational standards set by the Ministry of Education and Science, to which all academic programs must comply, require general education courses that make up the compulsory component - 33 credits. Of the remaining 64 credits for elective courses Mandatory component that is unrelated to religion (Professional Kazakh (Russian) language, professionally oriented foreign language, etc.) makes 8 credits.

Thus, in the "Islamic Studies" of 129 credits of theoretical training 56 are religious disciplines, that is, less than half. Among them mandatory - Taharat, Namaz and Fasting conditions (fiqh), Tәzhuid, Hadith, Zyakat and Hajj, and elective - Legacy, Ethics of Fatwas, Modern Tafsir Directions, Objectives of Islamic philosophy, Dahili in Tafsir, Religious Sermons and Challenges of our time, Introduction to Aqidah, Principles of Fiqh, Islamic sects and madhhabs and others.

In the program of "Theology" from 129 credits 60 credits are for religious studies. Among the compulsory subjects - History of Religion, Religious Philosophy, Modern non-traditional Religious Movements, Sociology of Religion, Methods of teaching Theology, Basics of Theological doctrines, Fundamentals of Religious Law. Elective subjects partly repeat Islamic Studies program.

Prospects for further development of the university Nur were discussed just a few days ago in the capital Astana at the Ministry of Culture and Sports of the Republic of Kazakhstan, where the meeting of the clergy and government officials was held.

It was noted that "Nur Mubarak" University, which was recently accredited by the National Commission, has extensive capabilities. University plans include not only training scholars of Islam, but also the opening of such specialties as Islamic Economics, Islamic Journalism, and Translation Studies, which are of great interest in the society today. In addition, publishing literature about the merits of Abu Hanifah mazhab and holding events of religious informing the population are expected.

Unfortunately, during the high school accreditation commission of the Ministry of Education and Science does not apply criteria for evaluating students' ability to think critically, these parameters in general are difficult to define and measure.

In secular universities, which usually hold students scientific conferences, debates on political, social, cultural issues, there are clubs and associations on interests, such monitoring is feasible, but in Nur-Mubarak university tradition of active student life, according to our informants, has not formed yet. Students’ participation in the activities of other universities is not practiced, so to assess the overall level of creativity, and students’ ability to analyze and evaluate various types of phenomena, their autonomy and independence of assessment is not possible, that does not mean, of course, that students of the university do not have these skills and qualities.

Just only teachers can judge them directly on the basis of seminars and the implementation of final works. Meanwhile, «the ability of students to engage critically with key religious issues and thereby develop appropriate levels of religious literacy and so learn to discern and evaluate different religious traditions and accounts of religion» is extremely important and necessary for their future activities.

This is especially important, because they have to work with people of different social strata, different currents within Islam, and even, perhaps, to lead discussions on the dissuasion, explaining the erroneous views of their opponents.

They may have to conduct explanatory work in prisons, where, according to the relevant bodies the religious moods sharply intensified, and many young people turn to radical Islam. In some prisons the number of prisoners converted to Islam reaches 40%.

Moreover, in recent months, Kazakhstan faced the departure of Muslim youth abroad to place of fighting in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and religious figures also should work and take preventive measures to clarify the situation.

To work at this level of consciousness, to convince people the highest professionalism, skills of a psychologist, intellectual baggage, great erudition and eloquence are needed.

If appropriate levels of religious literacy are to be established, and students enabled to respond to religion in an informed, intelligent and reflective way, they must be exposed to a variety of critical aspects of religion.

They should also experience variation between different academic disciplines and methodologies, in this sense, the presence in the curricula of various disciplines in blocks of compulsory and elective components must play a positive role in expanding the horizons of thought and varying methodological approaches, giving a variety of tools to use in their practice.

In accordance with the acquisition of certain competences and skills, as well as according to The Variation Theory of Learning “students should intend to understand the material for themselves, rather than simply reproduce the curricular content; they should interact critically, rather than passively accept ideas and information; they should relate their learning to previous knowledge and experience, rather than concentrate on the assessment requirements; they should use organizing principles to integrate their ideas, rather than think unsystematically; they should relate evidence to conclusions, rather than simply memorize facts. As applied to religion, it means that learning is an on-going dialogue between the horizon of meaning of the students and of the aspect of religion being taught.[ Learning ‘about’ and ‘from’ religion: phenomenography, the Variation Theory of Learning and religious education in Finland and the UK Elina Hella and Andrew Wright. British Journal of Religious Education Vol. 31, No. 1, January 2009, 53–64 ]

Fundamental difference between the learning processes in a secular university and in Nur-Mubarak university is the position of teachers.

If in the first it is not acceptable for a teacher to impose a particular religious or atheistic worldview on students, nor it is sufficient for students to express a personal preference for one belief system or another, since religious education should aim to empower students to make informed judgments about the ultimate nature of reality, in the latter it is impossible

Attitude toward Islam as native religion exists in Islamic University originally.

The identity of students is determined, first as an Islamic identity and, secondly, great importance is given to students’ awareness of their national identity and citizenship status.

Probably for the authorities a national identity has even greater priority due to the fact that it unites people to a greater extent than belonging to Islam.

In this connection a division of functions takes place in Nur-Mubarak University- Egyptian teachers are responsible for language training and the basics of Islam, local teachers, whose number is growing every year, take on general subjects with methodological and scientific components and disciplines with "Kazakh content" that are closer to the real life, in which students have to live.

Thus Arab teachers take into account local rules and regulations, teaching students not to deviate from the national peculiarities of Islam and principles established among the Kazakhs, if they do not explicitly contradict the fundamental principles of Islam.

We should not forget that the university is not only under the control of the Ministry of Education and Science, like all other higher education institutions, but also the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan, the Committee for Religious Affairs of the Ministry of Culture and Sports, the municipality of Almaty city and, obviously, the National Security Committee.

However, the contradictions between modern secular knowledge and Islamic spiritual and moral values do not arise, according to the data of our interviewed students at the University of Islamic culture that testifies again the formation of a tolerant nature and flexibility of the existing system at Nur University.

There were situations when lecturers invited from outside were teaching certain secular disciplines. As one of the interviewed graduates told, "It could be ardent atheists that called hijab - "bag on the head" (I had to calm the entire audience and explain to the students that we need professional experience of the professor and his convictions should be taken with “*Sabr*”( leniency) and young hotheads cooled down)”.

It can be concluded that the recent initiative -the Islamization of knowledge - is not embodied in the strategy of the University and the reconstruction of social science, history, and other disciplines in accordance with Islamic principles is not required

Rather critical, but fair opinion was expressed by one of the recent graduates of the university, "I think that Nur-Mubarak, although called the university and perceived as a major educational institution, yet it is not. I would call it the Big Madrasah, which is still at the stage of its formation. Therefore, it is unlikely to meet high modern demands. Most of the teachers are its recent or current master and doctoral students, and it is clear that their life and teaching experience is still very limited.

However, in secular state universities, not all problems of the Religions Education can be considered as resolved.

According to Naguima Baitenova Doctor of Philosophy., professor of the Department of Religious and Cultural Studies of al-Farabi University "Similar to the Religious Studies Islamic studies are the basics of Islam from the perspective of science, objectivity, secularism.

In the first years of religious studies education formation there was a definite problem with the professional identity, school graduates and their parents believed that we are preparing imams in "Religious studies", clearly had no idea where and how they will work after graduation.

Today, our graduates are working quite successfully in various divisions in the field of religion and interfaith relations. But we cannot say that fully meet the demand for religious studies. Training of highly qualified specialists in religious studies, preparation of textbooks and teaching materials of new generation, especially in the Kazakh language is one of the most acute and topical issues in modern Kazakhstan”, Prof. Baitenova says.

One of the significant drawbacks of the "Religious Studies" at state universities is the lack of credit granted for the languages of world religions ​​- Arabic, Latin, and Sanskrit. Meanwhile, a deep understanding of many religious concepts, contents of sacred texts is not possible without knowing the language.

Any theological dispute or controversy eventually rest on the direct quotation in the original language of religious or historical text. The problem is aggravated by the fact that the teachers themselves, as a rule, do not speak these languages and are familiar with the sacred texts only in Russian translations, but they do not consider it as a professional disadvantage.

The Committee on Religious Affairs of the Ministry of Culture and Sports also has its claims to the state universities, as it insists on Committee’s examination of textbooks and programs for Religious specialties that hardly is feasible, since these institutions are not in direct subordination of the Ministry of Culture and Sports and its structures.

General knowledge, opportunities to improve their skills, scientific and academic mobility, participation in the development of research projects at state universities, of course, are much more, as well as growth opportunities for students, especially in master's and doctoral studies.

Post-graduate programs provide scientific supervision not only of domestic professor, but also foreign one, sometimes from very prestigious universities, as well as scientific internship in one of the European or American universities.

Today, according to our information there are three doctoral dissertations by themes on the Hanafi mazhab and about a dozen master's theses in the process of completing.

**Conclusion**

Obviously, the development of religious education in Kazakhstan is influenced by specific historical, political and social factorsthat is connected with involvement of this type of education in the political discourse of the State

In regard to the relationship between religion and public education, we can state that in Kazakhstan over the past few years understanding of the need for cooperative model which combines constitutional separation and de facto recognition of the importance of these two areas for each other has matured.

There are reasons to believe that, in addition to the declared objective of education - namely, the provision of knowledge about the world and traditional religions, which should help young people to understand the world, cultural and spiritual aspects of human life, complicated religious situation in the country has become no less important motivating impulse to the introduction of religious disciplines in higher education.

Along with the increased activity of religious associations belonging to the traditional religions in Kazakhstan, historically they are Islam and Orthodoxy, the number of religious communities that have the reputation of "totalitarian sects" and "destructive cults "has increased.

The attempts of some religious groups to politicize their activities to extend the influence on the economy, culture, education, etc. as well as the manifestations of religious and political extremism have forced the country's leadership and the security agencies to fight both with power and ideological methods, including the prevention of radicalism and extremism in educational institutions.

In Kazakhstan such important political goals of the state, as an attempt to form a united nation, peace and harmony require the formation of tolerance, even if for the sake of this we have to ignore some of the existing cultural, religious, and ethnic differences that come into conflict with this principle,

# Today Kazakh society is fully aware of the importance of religious literacy, but the realization of this issue is still not up to par

# Since 2011, religious education was put under state control. The Ministry of Education and Science has opened new specialties and allocated more than 500 state grants for future imams and other experts in the field of religion. Thus, the state has created an alternative to foreign religious training and start preparing their own qualified personnel.

The main actors in the field of religious education are the Egyptian University of Islamic Culture Nur-Mubarak, now just Nour, and several state universities

A certain dynamics in the development of ordering and university religious education at all three levels - undergraduate, graduate and doctoral programs can be traced. Thus priority in the preparation of bachelors - scholars of Islam and theologians is given to Egyptian University of Islamic Culture Nur and undergraduate Religious Studies, Master's and Doctoral degree are largely concentrated in state universities with extensive experience in training researchers.

A major impetus for the development of the Egyptian University, that long time before remained in the humble position in the domestic market of educational services, was the desire of the state to ensure the religious sphere qualified national personnel who have received proven, loyal, in the framework of local religious traditions, education, which excludes radicalism and fundamentalism from Kazakh religious space.

The introducing of specialty "Islamic Studies" to the National classifier, increasing from year to year grant funding of religious students specialties, the opening of new faculties and preparatory branch, careful selection of foreign professors - all this measures create favorable conditions for strengthening the position of religious education in the country.

However, all these political legal, and financial changes should be supported by improving religious education programs and methodological maintenance in order to prepare well-informed religious figures, creative thinkers who have civic courage, high morals, critical thinking, that can peacefully and rationally deal with all the problems affecting the religious sphere of our lives.

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