

Strategy for Interfaith Tolerance in Modern Kazakhstan and the Jehovah's Witnesses

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ABSTRACT: Even though most citizens of Kazakhstan consider themselves to be Muslim, this does not interfere with the full functioning of other religions. There is a wide range of religious associations in the Republic: starting with traditional creeds (Islam and Christianity) and including less conventional religious organizations (the Bahá'í Faith, ISKCON, the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and so on). The article discusses the Kazakh model of religious tolerance and how the Jehovah's Witnesses fit within it.

KEYWORDS: Religious Tolerance in Kazakhstan, Religion in Kazakhstan, Religious Pluralism in Kazakhstan, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jehovah's Witnesses in Kazakhstan.

Kazakhstan's Model of Religious Tolerance

Since Kazakhstan gained its independence, a balanced state policy in the religious sphere has been in place. One of the specific features of modern development is the constantly increasing role of religion in the life of society. Its authority and status are increasing, its functions are expanding, and the number of believers and religious associations is growing. A stable model of interaction between ethnic groups and religions has been established in the Republic, and it provides stability, an atmosphere of creativity and harmony.

For all their differences in nationality, religion, and political leanings, citizens of Kazakhstan share a common opinion that spirituality, morality, culture, and respect for the laws constitute the basis for the purification and transformation of the country.

In the process of building a democratic society, the relationship between the state and religious associations has radically changed.

Although, during the Soviet regime, religion was persecuted by the state, since Kazakhstan gained its independence, according to the Constitution the state recognizes the equality of all citizens, regardless of their ethnic or religious background (*Конституция Республики Казахстан* 1995, Section 2, article 14.) Article 22 of the Constitution declares: “Everyone shall have the right to freedom of conscience” (*Конституция Республики Казахстан* 1995, article 22). Considering the principle of freedom of religion, the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan of 11 October 2011 states:

This Law is based on the fact that the Republic of Kazakhstan declares itself to be a democratic, secular state, confirms the right of everybody to the freedom of conscience, guarantees equal rights to every person regardless of his/her religious opinion, recognizes the historical role of Islam’s Hanafi school and Orthodox Christianity in the development of the culture and spiritual life of the people, respects other religions that are in harmony with the spiritual heritage of the people of Kazakhstan, recognizes the significance of inter-confessional concord, religious tolerance and respect of people’s religious convictions. (*Закон Республики Казахстан “О религиозной деятельности и религиозных объединениях”* 2011).

The Constitution and the 2011 Law prohibit any form of discrimination on confessional, ethnic, and other grounds, and create all the legal foundations for the free functioning of religious associations.

It is very significant that the country has acceded to the most important international agreements and treaties in the field of human rights, including the fundamental UN covenants in this area. Kazakhstan thus recognizes Article 18 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, which states:

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance (United Nations 1948).

It is impressive that, thanks to the efforts of UNESCO, the concept of “tolerance” has become an international term, the most important keyword in peace affairs in recent decades. The most accurate definition of “tolerance” is provided in UNESCO’s *Declaration of Principles on Tolerance*. It states that tolerance means “respect, acceptance and appreciation of the rich diversity of our world’s cultures, our forms of expression and ways of being human” (UNESCO 1995).

The population of Kazakhstan comprises a wide variety of ethnic and religious groups. Peace, the preservation and strengthening of political stability, economic development, and social progress depend on harmony and peaceful cooperation between people of different beliefs and religions. The state fully understands that, and for this purpose it pursues a policy of preserving interethnic and inter-confessional harmony, maintaining an atmosphere of tolerance and constructive dialogue, and preventing manifestations of extremism.

Kazakhstan's experience in the field of religious harmony is in many ways unique, especially considering the circumstances of post-Soviet countries. There is a wide range of religious associations present in the Republic: starting with creeds that have a long history (Islam and Christianity) and including unconventional religious movements.

According to data from the Ministry of Information and Community Development of the Republic of Kazakhstan, there are 3,834 religious associations within 18 confessions registered in the country. They include: 2,695 Islamic associations; 345 Orthodox; 88 Catholic; 592 Protestant; 60 Jehovah's Witnesses; 24 New Apostolic Church; 12 ISKCON (Hare Krishna); 7 Jewish; 6 Bahá'í; 2 Buddhist; 2 Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons); 1 Unification Church (Family Federation for World Peace and Unification) (Ministry of Information and Social Development of the Republic of Kazakhstan 2022).

In Kazakhstan, followers of all denominations have ample opportunities to meet their spiritual needs, compared with the situation in the neighboring countries.

According to the 2020 Order of the Ministry of Information and Public Development of the Republic of Kazakhstan "Approval of the Rules for the Provision of Public Services in the Field of Religious Activity" (Ministry of Information and Social Development of the Republic of Kazakhstan 2020), foreigners and persons without citizenship may also carry out missionary activity after registration. There are 345 missionaries officially registered, among them 281 foreigners, and 64 citizens of the Republic of Kazakhstan. By denomination, there are 225 Catholic missionaries; 41 Orthodox; 6 from Pentecostal Churches; 17 from the New Apostolic Church; 13 from ISKCON; 21 from the Presbyterian Church; 11 Baptists; 3 Seventh-day Adventists; 2 Islamic; 2 Jewish; 6 Jehovah's Witnesses; 1 Lutheran; and 1 Buddhist.

In total, there are 3,603 religious facilities functioning. They include: 2,693 mosques, 303 Orthodox churches, 108 Catholic churches, 407 Protestant houses of worship, 67 Jehovah's Witnesses places of worship (Kingdom Halls), 24 houses of worship of the New Apostolic Church, 6 synagogues, 2 Bahá'í houses of worship, 2 prayer houses of the ISKCON, 1 Buddhist temple (Ministry of Information and Social Development of the Republic of Kazakhstan 2022). These statistics show that, even though the majority of the population of Kazakhstan consider themselves to be Muslim, this does not interfere with the full functioning of other denominations.

Despite severe persecution in the past, as well as the persecution of their fellow believers in neighboring countries, Jehovah's Witnesses have settled and act freely in Kazakhstan.

The History of Jehovah's Witnesses in Kazakhstan

The history of Jehovah's Witnesses in Kazakhstan covers more than 120 years. In 1892, Semyon Kozlitsky (1835–1935) was exiled from Russia to Kazakhstan for his commitment to the teachings of the Bible Students (as Jehovah's Witnesses were called back then). His place of exile was the village of Bukhtarma, now in Eastern Kazakhstan. Thus, he was the first known Jehovah's Witness in Kazakhstan. Until the end of his life (he died in 1935 at the age of 100), Kozlitsky zealously shared his Biblical beliefs, and in time he gathered a group of followers.

The teachings of Jehovah's Witnesses were widely propagated, and congregations were established in Kazakhstan, by the middle of the 20th century in the 1940s and 1950s, that is, during and right after the end of World War II. This is connected to the tragic history of people from the former Soviet Union—mass repression. Widely spread in Europe in the early 20th century, the Witnesses' teachings spread to the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania) and the territories of Poland and Romania that became part of the USSR. With the new territories, large communities of believers were also brought into the USSR. At the same time, it is important to note that the Bible students were already in the USSR at that time. It is known that Charles Taze Russell (1852–1916) visited Odessa, and there were believers in Russia even before the revolution of 1917

(Ruzmatova 2017). There is still little data on this period. A great archival search in this direction is required.

During World War II, Jehovah's Witnesses being loyal to their principle of political neutrality, refused to serve in Adolf Hitler's (1889–1945) army. Because of this refusal they were subjected to repression, both by Hitler's command and by the authorities of the countries that collaborated with the Nazis. The Nazis imprisoned thousands of Witnesses for refusing to support Hitler and his war of aggression. In concentration camps, the Witnesses behaved with courage and endurance. They also kept on preaching and finding followers of their teachings. For example, in the Ravensbrück concentration camp, 300 people from Russia became Jehovah's Witnesses.

After the war ended, Soviet camps awaited them in their homeland, too. In 1949, about 4,800 Jehovah's Witnesses from Moldova SSR were deported to Siberia and Kazakhstan during the operation called "South." In 1951, the operation called "North" took place, and believers were deported to Siberia. The repressed people were held in extremely unsanitary conditions, starved, worked from dawn to dusk, and were criminally liable for running away from their place of settlement. All members of the organization were under the constant supervision of the state security organs. (Artemyev 2021, 94–5).

As mentioned earlier, in Kazakhstan the doctrine of Jehovah's Witnesses were widely propagated in the 1940s and 1950s, and several congregations were established. Major criminal trials against Jehovah's Witnesses during those years were documented almost all over the country. Karaganda, Saran, Jezkazgan, Ust-Kamenogorsk, Chimkent (now Shymkent), Almaty, Tekeli, Taldy-Kurgan (now Taldykorgan), Petropavlovsk were only some of the cities in the country where the authorities were targeting communities of believers. And their number kept growing. Thus, in 1963, in Kostanay, North Kazakhstan, they already had 50 believers, and, in 1964, according to the reports of the authorities, believers started preaching their teachings "from house to house" in Petropavlovsk.

In 1965, by Order no. 4020-1 of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, "the sect members of Jehovah's Witnesses, members of the True Orthodox Church, Inochentists, Reform Adventists, and members of their families" were released from the administrative supervision of public order authorities, and provisions for their forced settlement were lifted (Corley 1996, 255–57). However, believers were forbidden to return to their places of origin.

Moreover, in the USSR, citizens were required to register at their place of residence, but Jehovah's Witnesses were denied registration, which deprived them of the opportunity to work and pushed them to move to other regions of the USSR. That is why so many believers moved to Kazakhstan. Registration could be granted here, and the hospitality of the local population created good conditions. The people of Kazakhstan were very familiar with hardships, repressions, and grief. And so, there was initially more tolerance here than in other parts of the USSR.

However, the fight against religion and “cults” (*sekty*) had been conducted here, too. We know of many criminal cases against Jehovah's Witnesses in Soviet Kazakhstan. And the infamous KarLag (Karaganda camp) occupied the territory of almost an entire region. Jehovah's Witnesses from different parts of the USSR served their sentences there. After being released, many decided to stay in Kazakhstan.

Jehovah's Witnesses in Independent Kazakhstan

Attitudes toward believers began to change in the second half of the 1980s. In 1989, Jehovah's Witnesses from the USSR were officially permitted to attend international conventions of Jehovah's Witnesses in Poland. At the same time, they still had no official registration and no recognition from the authorities.

In 1990–1991, Jehovah's Witnesses were officially recognized as victims of political repression and were rehabilitated by an Order of the President of the USSR.

In 1991, the religious organization of Jehovah's Witnesses, which had already obtained legal recognition in the USSR, acquired official registration. Also in 1991, the first regional convention on the territory of Central Asia was held in Almaty (Kazakhstan).

In 1992, the law “On Freedom of Religion” was passed in Kazakhstan, which had already become independent. And immediately afterwards, several religious associations of Jehovah's Witnesses were registered simultaneously as legal entities in Kazakhstan.

During 1992 and 1993, the first places of worship of believers (Kingdom Halls) were built in Almaty and Zhambyl regions.

In 1997, the Religious Centre of Jehovah's Witnesses was registered in Almaty region (in Esik). From there, they provided religious leadership for all communities of believers in the country.

Since 2007, the Religious Centre was relocated to Almaty, where the construction of their special complex of administrative and religious buildings had been completed.



Figure 1. The Bethel—the main office or administration of the community of Jehovah's Witnesses, Almaty.

Thus, this brief overview shows that the policies of Kazakhstan were much more progressive, tolerant, and democratic than the policies of neighboring post-Soviet countries, including Russia.

At the same time, despite the many permits and relaxations, the situation of Jehovah's Witnesses improved only slightly.

The main “painful” points of dissatisfaction by the authorities remained the same. These are the position of Jehovah's Witnesses in issues of non-acceptance of blood transfusions, non-singing the national anthem, refusal to participate in patriotic and socio-political events and national holidays, refusal to serve in the army, and refusal to receive military training in schools. And, of course, their intense missionary activity.

Thus, for example, in 2007, Jehovah's Witnesses were fined 185,000 tenge by court order, for "illegal missionary activity" in the Almaty region and in the East Kazakhstan region. In 2007, there were cases of registering refusals to participate in public events and celebrations in Ust-Kamenogorsk. In January 2007, a second-year art student of the theory department of the college of arts, A. Citovich, refused to sing the national anthem of Kazakhstan, as well as to take part in social events of the educational institution. A number of graduates of №39 High school (in Ust-Kamenogorsk) expressed their refusal to attend basic military training classes. Conversations with their parents revealed that the students were members of a religious association of Jehovah's Witnesses. Those children's non-attendance was described as "pacifism" (Kosenov 2014).

The law enforcement authorities impose large fines for distributing religious literature and for preaching. The main points of harassment in the media are refusal of blood transfusions, pacifism, not singing the anthem, not worshipping icons, not celebrating Christmas, birthdays, and other days of observance. According to anti-cultist "experts," such actions "undermine statehood and traditions" and are even "destructive."

Scholars and international human rights activists characterize all this as propaganda hype. Exposing the accusations against Jehovah's Witnesses, sociologist Massimo Introvigne and the president of the European Federation for Freedom of Belief (FOB), lawyer Alessandro Amicarelli, state:

Most anti-cult publications rely heavily on press clippings and testimonies by disgruntled ex-members, and rarely if ever are based on academic studies or fieldwork among the religious movements they criticize (Introvigne and Amicarelli 2020, 6).

Religious Conversion Studies and the Case of the Religious Organization of Jehovah's Witnesses in Kazakhstan

The author of this article is currently engaged in field research on religious conversion, studying the activities of religious associations in Kazakhstan. The study found that the religious organization of Jehovah's Witnesses is one of the fastest growing denominations in Kazakhstan. It is also necessary to note the multinational composition of this organization—Kazakhs, Russians, Ukrainians, Poles, Belarusians, Tatars, and others. The question arose as to why people leave their beliefs and become Jehovah's Witnesses.

Classical patterns of religious conversion are based on the following steps:

- 1) an individual's crisis condition;
- 2) divine insight into the way out of the crisis;
- 3) the impact of missionary (or, now, Internet) presence;
- 4) rejecting the old way of life and embracing the new;
- 5) entering a new religion, a new organization (Lofland and Stark 1965)

A change in behavior always goes along with a change in religious beliefs.

People of all ages, from rebellious adolescents to lonely, elderly people, can convert to a new faith. They may also be drug addicts or marginalized people trying to get on the path to moral recovery. But mostly, they are common people looking for meaning and purpose in their life. In religious conversion, a believer goes through the following steps:

- 1) the spiritual quest for a "new" religion;
- 2) defection to a new religious organization;
- 3) reading religious literature, interacting with members of a religious group;
- 4) changes in personality, vocabulary, behavior;
- 5) change in religious attitudes occurs as a result of a change in identity and socialization into a religious organization.

This means that, according to the author's observation, this type of religious conversion occurs in the case of the organization of Jehovah's Witnesses—no one is "dragged" anywhere. There is a rational choice of a given religion as a consequence of the spiritual search for alternatives, guided and "continually controlled" by the community.

There is no doubt that the individual, when engaged in a spiritual quest, experiences cognitive dissonance, which cannot be resolved without the help of a religious group. Therefore, religious associations and organizations serve cognitive and psychological purposes. They are based on the operation of the fundamental mental mechanisms that support human social existence (Tremelin 2012).

Jehovah's Witnesses, working in a style we can compare to American rationalism, offer the adherents a "religious commodity," such as denying

vation of the Cross (icons), which is unusual in the Christian mentality; it is shocking, but this is why it is becoming in demand in our Kazakh market. Or another example—it is very difficult to explain to a modern person what the “Trinity” and the “Holy Spirit” are. But the religious dogmas that are preached by the Jehovah’s Witnesses are understandable and easy to grasp. Jehovah is the One True God, Jesus Christ is God’s son, the Holy Spirit is God’s active force. Thus, the individual, using a rational type of religious conversion, seeks simplification through faith. And the annual increase in number in Jehovah’s Witnesses indicates the effectiveness of this organization. It should also be noted that the members of this organization are honest, principled, and lead a healthy lifestyle.

The Activity of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Modern Kazakhstan

Going back to significant events in the history of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Kazakhstan, the following dates should be mentioned,

In 2013, all communities were re-registered.

In 2017, despite the ban on Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia, Kazakhstan’s authorities officially stated that they did not consider the believers as extremists and would not ban them. This was a key event that is important to mention here.

In 2014, a complete translation of the Bible (*The New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures*) was released in Kazakh. This was an event of national importance and a huge contribution by believers to the development of the Kazakh language.

In 2017, Almaty hosted an international convention of Jehovah’s Witnesses. That was the second international convention in Central Asia. However, that congress was not held at the city’s stadium, but on their own property. This reduced the number of delegates who could attend. Nonetheless, the government still allowed it to be held.

In 2022, the activity of Jehovah’s Witnesses was officially allowed in our country in all regions and cities of national importance (data from the archive of the religious association of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, which I accessed in 2022).

Witnesses are allowed to meet regularly for religious meetings in places of worship and to hold conventions (but only on their own property) without obstacles and without interference from the authorities.



Figure 2. Congress of Jehovah's Witnesses, Petropavlovsk, North Kazakhstan.



Figure 3. The evening of Remembrance of the Death of Jesus Christ (Memorial), Astana.

Over the past thirty years, since the first congregations were registered in Kazakhstan, believers have repeatedly defended their rights in the country's courts. The Supreme Court of Kazakhstan has issued more than ten favorable decisions in their defense.

At present, in Kazakhstan there are more than 17,300 baptized Jehovah's Witnesses, and last year more than 35,000 people attended their annual celebration—the Memorial of Christ's death.

Communities of believers continue to grow. Thus, for example, there are more than 1,000 Jehovah's Witnesses living in Astana and Akmola region, and about 600 of them reside in Astana city proper. About 1,500–2,000 people from across Kazakhstan attend the meetings.

Moreover, believers who live in the capital city have their own Kingdom Hall. The first Kingdom Hall in Astana city was built in 2007, by donations and by the believers themselves. Jehovah's Witnesses lost their religious building in 2015, when the state bought the land beneath it to build a transportation bridge. The new place of worship is now in a renovated two-story building at 6/1 Moskovskaya Street.

It is worth noting that unlike many other religious groups, Jehovah's Witnesses try not to look distinctive in their clothing or in their appearance. And the places of worship of the Jehovah's Witnesses, which are called Kingdom Halls, are usually no different from other buildings and fit in well with the city's image. They are simple, functional buildings without any religious symbols or “religious” architectural elements (spires, crosses, domes, etc.)



Figure 4. Kingdom Hall of the Jehovah's Witnesses, Astana, Kazakhstan.

Today, authorities and government experts increasingly realize that, although for a person to be one of the Jehovah's Witnesses means non-interference in state policy, as well as not singing the national anthem, nor saluting the flag and the national emblem, and believers also do not participate in political parties and elections, they cannot be accused of disrespecting the very institution of power. That is because much of their worship is actually devoted to the theme of respect for authority and obedience to the laws of the state, and doing anything that would denigrate the symbols of the state is not acceptable for them and is forbidden.

Military service is also unacceptable to them, even if their refusal entails criminal prosecution and imprisonment. But most Jehovah's Witnesses do not refuse alternative civilian service. And although Jehovah's Witnesses refuse blood transfusions, they do not refuse to see doctors, indeed, they themselves actively seek and agree to alternative and bloodless methods of treatment. They do not refuse vaccination. Many medical issues they actually consider as the personal decision of each believer individually ("a matter of conscience").

It is remarkable that during the COVID-19 pandemic, they were among the first to close their Kingdom Halls, and moved their worship services (both small and large) online. They have not been seen by authorities to violate quarantine measures. They even suspended their house-to-house ministry.

This is important to emphasize because it illustrates that their doctrine and practice require careful and deep study. What the media and anti-cultists present to the authorities and to society as "fanaticism," upon a closer and more thorough study turns out to be a quite normal, permissible, and balanced position, a conscious choice, which in no way threatens believers or those around them. Of course, one may disagree with this position and consider it wrong, but this does not make it a "threat" to others. It is a common pluralism of opinions. It exists in all societies where a plurality of religions operate.

It is pleasing to see that believers themselves seek contact with authorities and experts. The information and openness they provide is very helpful in sifting out the lies and myths of the Soviet period. The image created by Soviet propaganda for the Jehovah's Witnesses as "closed, limited, and dangerous 'cultists' who shut themselves off from the world and any knowledge" is gradually disappearing from Kazakh society. And this is very encouraging because it also helps with the development of tolerance.

Jehovah's Witnesses consider that they have earned the right to be part of Kazakh society by their sweat and blood, their labor for the good of the homeland, as well as the time they spent in the camps. They have the right to live as they see appropriate, as long as it does not threaten the state or other people.

At present, state authorities are showing a more lenient attitude to the activities of Jehovah's Witnesses. Thus, the Law of Republic of Kazakhstan does not provide for a universal right to conscientious objection to military duty, but clergymen of recognized religious organizations, including Jehovah's Witnesses, may be exempted from compulsory military service.

The Religious Association of Jehovah's Witnesses is not an extremist organization, and the authorities of Kazakhstan have no plans to ban their activities. In contrast to the popular belief that Jehovah's Witnesses are in constant conflict with the state and do not subject themselves to its laws, Jehovah's Witnesses, like other religious associations registered in Kazakhstan, do not interfere in the affairs of the state, and the state does not interfere in the affairs of religions. It is encouraging to see that Jehovah's Witnesses and the state are engaged in a regular and in-depth dialogue. It is not always easy, in fact it is often difficult. But as long as the dialogue continues, the hope for peace grows stronger. As a local proverb says, "A bad peace is better than a good quarrel."

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