

## Intertransitions between Islam and Eastern Orthodoxy in Kazakhstan (XIX - Early XX Centuries)

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to review the historical facts related to conversion of indigenous people of the Kazakh steppe from Islam to Christianity and the conversion of the Russian migrants from Orthodoxy to Islam in Kazakhstan in the nineteenth - early twentieth century. The study deals with the laws that were detrimental to Islam and reforms of the imperial government in terms of administration of Kazakh lands favoring Kazakhs baptism. Using the comparative-historical method, the author analyzes the Orthodox missionary societies in Kazakhstan. The paper also determines reasons of Russian migrants' conversion to Islam. We found that it was mainly voluntary process and people would remain faithful to the new religion for the rest of their lives, were in not for the intervention of the church and the colonial administration. The results have shown that Christianization of the adherents of different faiths was used for change their minds in order to simplify management of the colonial people having other nationalities. Furthermore, church clergy and missionaries were involved in relevant activities among various categories of the population. The practical value of the study is that the submissions may be useful for historians and religious scholars in investigations of religion conversions.

### KEYWORDS

Christianity, Islam, Kazakhs of native population  
Orthodox church, history of religion conversions,  
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## Introduction

As Kazakhstan gradually became part of the Russian Empire, the life of both Kazakh aristocrats and common people changed radically. While aristocrats – the Chingisids – primarily lost their rights to rule, most people lost their land titles (Yavorsky, 1893). Some sultans were part of the administration of the smallest administrative units – volosts. After the abolition of the power of khans, not a single sultan managed to become head of a governorate-general or oblast (Asylbekov & Zharkenova, 2001). This category of the population was not numerous, which is why it was easier to convert it through various gifts, positions, and promises (Klimovich, 1936).

It order to strengthen its positions, the imperial government had to increase the number of its followers among the native population. Sultans and other

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wealthy Kazakhs that were loyal “to the Tsar and the Country” were not enough to get the job done. The colonial local administration and the imperial government were concerned about the general public (Zhakypbek & Belbayeva, 2001). It was difficult to suppress the public through force or fear continuously. Religion could help solve this problem, to a certain extent. Therefore, the Russian Orthodox Church and its clergy had to not only preach among the migrants, but also attract the adherents of a different faith – Kazakhs (Missionary report, 1893).

Before the Christianization of Kazakhs could commence, it was necessary to find out, which god they worshipped. Some people considered Kazakhs pagans, while others considered them indifferent to religious affairs. Both cases were advantageous to preachers of Orthodoxy. This was facilitated by the experience of Christianization of adherents of other faiths (Collection of information regarding Orthodox missions and the activity of the Orthodox missionary society, 1875).

The successful Christianization of Tatars and some other peoples in the regions of the Russian Empire promised similar results for Orthodox preachers in the Kazakh steppes. Isolated cases of conversion of Kazakhs from Islam to Orthodoxy were considered major achievements (Sultangaliyeva, 1996).

What the imperial government did not expect was the conversion of Russian Cossacks and peasants from Orthodoxy to Islam. Thus, the appearance of Islamized migrants among yesterday’s Christians raised concerns among the civil and ecclesiastical administration (Sadvokasova, 2005).

Can note, the pre-revolutionary historiography of scientific works, which deals with the conversion from one religion to another, contains no evidence of faith conversion. Moreover, the issue of “mutual” conversion in Islam and Orthodoxy in Kazakhstan is poorly understood in modern scientific investigations.

### Literature Review

Certain aspects of mutual conversion in religion are investigated in several works of Russian researchers. These authors were members of the colonial administrations, military men, and clergymen. Studies contain interesting facts regarding the activity of eparchies and their members in Kazakhstan (Venjukov, 1876), regarding the work of religious schools and the training of clergymen and missionaries (Sotnikov, 1872), regarding the “exposure” of Islam and its books, regarding the possibilities and prospects of converting Kazakhs to Orthodoxy (Pokrovsky, 1906), regarding the reasons behind the Islamization of Russian migrants, regarding the need to enhance the work to return people to the Russian Orthodox Church, etc.

It is pertinent to point out that religious works are rare in the soviet historiography. In isolated cases, such works were written only to criticize this or that religious denomination or its followers. Antireligious propaganda was important for the education of a new soviet individual, which is why works that were devoted to this problem had to emphasize the harm that religion could do (Yadrintsev, 1891). It was said that any religion is the opiate of the masses.

L. Klimovich’s (1936) book “Islam in Imperial Russia” describes the harmfulness of Islam. It had to help atheist propagandists in their fight against religious people. This book calls Islam “a weapon of Russian policy”,

Mohammedan clergy – “agents of Russian imperialism”, “Pan-Islamists” – agent provocateurs that act as ideologists, etc. Of course, these characteristics were supported by references. This is explained by the Bolshevik policy of denying the existence of god and building an atheistic state. The fact that this problem is understudied in soviet researches is also related to various obstacles that were created by party ideologists. They gave only limited access to information or, more often, restricted access to information altogether. Attempts to overcome these obstacles could cost dearly, all the way to being declared a “public enemy”.

The turning point in the history of the church and Russia in general was year 1988, when the Soviet Union celebrated the 1000th anniversary of the Christianization of the Kievan Rus'. This was the first time after the establishment of the soviet power that a religious holiday was celebrated widely. The festivities, which the entire world observed in surprise, reached far beyond the parishes and lasted several days in the biggest cities of the Soviet Union. Such a scale of celebrations was associated with the Perestroika, which began in 1985. These events and the subsequent dissolution of the Soviet Union gave impetus to the emergence of numerous scientific papers on religious matters (Sergeyev, 1990; Taymasov, 1991).

However, the content of these papers shows that they did not look favorably upon religion too. For some time, researchers continued looking for negative aspects in the religious life. Nevertheless, better access to information enabled studying religious issues more objectively. A number of Kazakh studies were also carried out (Nurtazina, 2000; Sadvokasova, 2005; Dzhililov, 2006). These studies were mostly devoted to Islam during different periods of the history of the country.

### ***Aim of the Study***

The research questions of this study were as follows: What were the features of colonial imperial policy in Kazakhstan in the second half of the nineteenth – early twentieth centuries? What were the social causes and consequences of “mutual” conversion in Islam and Orthodoxy in the country?

### ***Research questions***

What does socialization of education include and what are its stages?

### ***Method***

In the research we used theoretical methods, namely theoretical analysis of scientific literature and comparative-historical method. The last one has become a key way to examine Orthodox missionary societies.

### ***Data, Analysis, and Results***

#### ***Conversion from Islam to Orthodoxy***

The activity of Orthodox clergymen and missionaries for converting adherents of different faiths starts with the people that lived on the outskirts of the Russian Empire. When Kazakhstan became part of the Empire, similar work was carried out among the Kazakh population. Laws that were detrimental to Islam were adopted to create favorable conditions for Orthodoxy. In addition, the



missionaries used the difficult situation that the Kazakhs were in and employed various techniques to glorify Christianity.

Reforms of the imperial government in terms of administration of Kazakh lands favored baptized Kazakhs. Section 4 “On the Rights of the Kyrgyz People” of the Provisions on the Administration of the Ural, Torghai, Akmola, and Semipalatinsk regions dated 1868 reads:

“247. Any Kyrgyz that converted to Christianity shall be allowed to either remain in their respective communities or move to Russian settlements in the steppe, with the preservation of the rights granted to the Kyrgyz people.

248. Any Kyrgyz that converted to Christianity, if they so desire, shall have the right to be assigned to city and village communities of any description without having to ask for permission of the designated communities”.

After analyzing these two clauses of the Provisions, it is possible to determine the following. Kazakhs, who converted from Islam to Christianity, received privileges in mobility. This was related to the fact that after converting to Christianity, it was virtually impossible for people to live in the same aul as their former coreligionists. Baptized Kazakhs either lived reclusively or tried to get close to Russian communities. The privileges were aimed at compensating for the rejection of religious renegades by their fellow tribesmen. In addition, the presence of newly converted Christians among Russian settlers should have facilitated their quickest Russification. Thus, the Christianization in this case is accompanied and reinforced by Russification.

Kazakhs that nomadized along fortified lines were most susceptible to the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church and its missionaries. The influence manifested in that certain Kazakhs put candles to Saint Nicholas. Missionaries were lucky if they managed to be close to a Kazakh in times of hardship. That way it was easier to convince him that all he had to do was convert to Christianity and all his problems would disappear. This ideological treatment was almost failproof.

After such educating conversations, some Kazakhs took holy water and sprinkled it on their cattle, especially during die-off. Losing cattle was equal to death for Kazakhs, which is why nomads had to renounce their faith to save the cattle. Missionaries also used attributes of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Orthodox preachers were often encountered in various parts of the Kazakh steppe. Appearing in times of hardship, they showcased the advantages of their religion before adherents of another faith. There were cases when “the holy cross was applied to a pregnant woman who was late on delivery” (Sotnikov, 1872). The task of the clergymen was to show the power of the Orthodox Church and the all-mighty Russian god. Baptized Kazakhs sometimes included ones that were devoted to Orthodoxy and not only were baptized, but were also part of the clergy. Such people were the pride of clergymen and missionaries and made the latter confident that their work would thrive. Their activity resulted in an increase of followers among the local population. Training future missionaries among the local population was also a task of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Generally, baptized “natives”, unlike Russian missionaries, were valuable personnel for Orthodox preachers. They knew the language, traditions, customs, and psychology of their people. It would be easier for them to choose the right moment to advocate Orthodoxy. Children of non-Christians, who were bought by

Russian Cossacks, merchants, and other people, played an important role in the history of the clergy. Without their parents and in an unfamiliar environment, these children absorbed the religion, ideas, and habits that were alien to them. The Imperial Edict dated May 23, 1808 legalized the sale of poor Kazakhs' children. The price varied, depending on the wealth and mood of the buyer and the needs of the seller. One merchant bought a Kyrgyz child for 25 rubles, while another one had to pay 150 rubles (Sotnikov, 1872).

The abovementioned law on the buying of "Kyrgyz, Kalmyk, and other Asians" was repealed in 1825, but with a reservation. In Western Siberia, trading was allowed with nomads for female children to compensate for the lack of females (Kuznetsov, 1913). This did not imply that one could exchange a Kazakh girl for a Russian boy. This question was not raised in the documents. The assumption is that it implied exchanging children for goods or cattle.

The girls were baptized and brought up in a Russian environment; they adopted the Russian language, customs, and traditions. With the passage of time, grown-up girls found it difficult to recall their roots. After marrying an Orthodox man, such a girl was lost for the Kazakh society. Kazakhs were encountered among people praying in church. Even before Russian peasants came here, the Orthodox Church took first steps to establish its influence on local dwellers.

In Christianity, an eparchy is an ecclesiastical administrative territorial unit. The number of such units in Russia grew constantly during the pre-reform period: 37 eparchies existed in 1825; 50 – in 1841; 55 – in 1851; 58 – in 1861. Sixty-seven eparchies existed in 1905 (Dmitriyev, 1966). New eparchies were also established in Kazakhstan.

Before the appearance of the Omsk Eparchy, the Kyrgyz Ecclesiastical Mission was established with the permission of the Holy Synod in 1881. Fourteen missionary centers with 17 missionary schools for Kazakh children were established in Kazakhstan by 1883 upon the initiative of this mission (Asylbekov & Zharkenova, 2001).

The tasks of the Kyrgyz Ecclesiastical Mission also included spreading Orthodoxy among the Kazakh population. Orthodox missions also had other equally important tasks: they had to "focus their activity not so much on acquiring followers from among native Mohammedans as on keeping those that once converted to Christianity from apostasy". Kazakhs that converted from Islam to Christianity were always attended. During its early history, the Kyrgyz Ecclesiastical Mission functioned as a branch of the Almaty Mission of the Tobolsk Eparchy and had the objective of "converting to Christianity the Kyrgyz people, who lived in the territory of the eparchy, and to affirm the enlightened non-Christians of the truths of the holy faith and the rules of Christian morality" (Missionary anti-Muslim collection, 1894).

The Altay Ecclesiastical Mission was active from 1828 to 1917. Its main goal was to increase the number of Orthodox followers with converted Mohammedans, pagans, and religious renegades. At first, the mission was successful. According to its reports, 1077 baptisms were carried out from 1830 to 1850, 1829 baptisms were carried out from 1851 to 1865, 1965 baptisms were carried out from 1865 to 1870, and 331 baptisms took place only in 1873. This period was followed by a decline: 197 baptisms in 1874. It is possible that the decline in the number of baptisms was the reason why the Kyrgyz Ecclesiastical



Mission became independent. This allowed increasing the number of missionary staff, intensifying work, having the mission's own church and chapel, boarding school, and moving closer to the nomads.

Before 1890, the Kyrgyz Ecclesiastical Mission consisted of one missionary clergyman, who was engaged in preparations for the upcoming Christianization of the native population. The mission gradually grew independent and completely separated itself from the Altay Mission after the establishment of the Omsk Eparchy. The mission got its administrator archimandrite, 4 centers and 11 clergymen, who annually converted to Christianity up to 70 adherents of different faiths. Further activity of the Kyrgyz Ecclesiastical Mission was not notable for a great number of converted Kyrgyz people. Only 19 people were baptized in 1906, including eight Kazakhs. During the same period, the results of the Altay Ecclesiastical Mission came to naught, as it failed to convert a single adherent of a different faith to Christianity, "despite a considerable missionary staff". This caused criticism in the press regarding the expenses for baptizing non-Christians. The "Rech" newspaper wrote that each baptized person in the Kyrgyz Ecclesiastical Mission alone "cost more than 700 rubles" (On the activity of missionaries, 1910).

Clergymen, missionaries, colonial administration officials, and different demographics participated in spreading Orthodoxy in Kazakhstan. Personnel that were educated and trained in these matters had advantages over those, who considered themselves masters in said matters only because they were close to clergymen. The "Society for Distributing the Holy Bible in Russia" was established in 1863 to bolster and develop the missionary work (Dameshek, 1986). The crucial task of the society was to support the existing and establish new missions, to convert to Orthodoxy all non-Christians in the Russian Empire, and to affirm the new congregation in the "truths of the Holy Faith".

Missionaries played an important role by trying to increase the number of followers not only among Russians, but also among the natives. Recruitment of missionaries from the local ethnic group was praised highly by the ecclesiastical authorities. Special attention was paid to Kazakh women. In the far-reaching plans of missionaries, Kazakh women had to become their allies, since the missionaries noted their high level of freedom.

It is obvious that Kazakh traditions and customs were neglected. For Kazakhs, the man is the head of the family and all genealogical roots are traced to him. Relationships in Kazakh families were based on mutual respect, with rigorous acceptance of male priority. It is difficult to imagine that the authors of these laws were unaware of these traditions and of the fact that such clauses dishonored men. This is aggravated by the fact that in Russia, the attitude to women was disrespectful – women were not even considered "soul" persons. In this case, Russians ignored their own traditions to Christianize adherents of a different faith.

However, even such provisions, which were unnatural for Kazakhs, turned out to be insufficient to advocate Orthodoxy. Other ways to convert Kazakh men to Orthodoxy were devised. The "Anti-Muslim Mission" part of the Brief history of the missionary work at the Tobolsk eparchy instructs to use vodka. Teaching Kazakhs to drink was suggested to increase the number of baptized persons. Since Kazakhs did not consume alcohol and thus did not produce it, the suggestion was to create Russian-Kazakh families by marrying Kazakh men to

Russian women. The women would teach the men to produce alcohol and drink it. Children that would be born in such a marriage would easily accept Orthodoxy. Therefore, the task of the missionaries was to support and reward both sides (Missionary anti-Muslim collection, 1894). Of course, most Kazakhs did not look kindly upon such individuals.

Many baptized people confessed that despite converting to Orthodoxy, they remained Muslim in their hearts. They later asked for permission to return to Islam, because they could not abandon the faith of their fathers and grandfathers. They considered unnecessary and pointless visiting a priest for “exhortation”. Moreover, some baptized people converted back to Islam when they got old. Mohammedan Suymende Alsypova became Pelageya Petrovna after the baptism. When she was 70 years old, she asked to be converted back to Islam. She explained her decision to get baptized by the fact that when she was young, her father forced her to marry an old man. She ran away with her beloved man. After losing their pursuit, both got baptized. The priest’s exhortations were unsuccessful and she decided to convert to Islam of her own accord. In 1914, 30 baptized people from different volosts sent such requests to the Governor of Semipalatinsk. In most cases, the baptized people confessed that they were forced to convert due to various circumstances. However, after becoming Christians, they had to live double lives, which they found depressive. Belief in two different religions ultimately failed to bring them comfort, quite the opposite – it bore heavily on their state of mind. Being unable to carry this burden, they requested to be converted to their previous faith.

Can add that some Kazakhs converted to Christianity perforce. The missionaries sought to achieve set goals through various techniques. Some missionaries reported their success while hiding the actual state of affairs. The results turned out to be ephemeral, because many baptized persons with the passage of time asked the civil or ecclesiastical authorities to be converted back to their previous faith. Such requests were often denied and the people had to worship two gods.

### ***Conversion from Orthodoxy to Islam***

While the clergymen did their best to increase the number of Christians among the Kazakh population, cases occurred that went against the missionaries’ plans. Kazakhs were subjected to involuntary methods more often than not. Russian migrants that converted to Islam said that it was their own decision, rather than the influence of Muslim preachers or outside pressure.

Many neophytes were encountered among Russian peasants and Cossacks that found themselves in the Kazakh steppes for one reason or another. While preaching Christianity among non-Christians and resorting to various means (financial remuneration, giving lands to baptized persons, involving said persons in the work for the local colonial administration, etc.), the Orthodox clergy faced unexpected phenomena. Russian migrants got “Islamized” under the influence of the natives.

The reports of the Orenburg Eparchial Committee of the Orthodox Missionary Society noted that such phenomena as polygamy and conversion to Islam were observed among Russian settlers (Missionary report, 1893). Being thousands of kilometers away from home, Russian peasants not only had material needs, but also required spiritual support in hardship.



In addition, the construction of churches was associated not only with the presence of Orthodox people, but also with the need to spread Orthodoxy among the natives. If the latter were absent, then the construction itself was questionable. Therefore, one of the reasons why migrants converted to Islam was that they needed to relieve their spiritual state by turning to traditions and culture of the people, who lived in the same area. There may be other reasons why Orthodox people converted to Islam. Perhaps the people did not want to share a faith with a sovereign, who forced his deprived subjects to look for better life far away from home.

Migrants' detachment from Russia and the influence of the native people that surrounded them affected the spiritual life of the former. The clergymen realized this and emphasized the isolation of the Orthodox population from Russia. During the early period of resettlement, places of worship were not built in each settlement. Therefore, migrants ended up 30 km or even 100 km away from their temples. Priests visited them six or seven times a year on occasions of Christian services and on the great holidays (Melgunov, 1907).

Dwellers of remote Russian settlements fell out of the habit of visiting temples and performing their Christian duties, and adopted the customs and traditions of Muslims.

While expecting to gain a firm foothold in this new land, some migrants eagerly adopted the local religion. Missionaries were surprised to find Russian peasants that abandoned Christianity without pressure from Kazakhs or their clergy. To avoid the conversion of migrants to Islam, missionaries suggested improving their financial status and putting them if not into a dominant, then at least an equal position, which was promoted gradually. This resulted in natives becoming dependent on the newcomers.

The suggestion was "to open a parochial missionary (anti-Muslim) school in each more or less important settlement". The objectives of such schools were to affect firstly the Russian population so as to prevent it from converting to a different faith and make it join the ranks of followers of the clergy.

However, missionaries failed to prevent or restrain the natural processes that occurred with some migrants. While the conversion from Islam to Christianity was always encouraged, the reverse process always faced obstacles.

The conversion of Orthodox people to Islam was voluntary, unlike the forced Christianization of Muslims. Cases like Tolstikov and Borodikhina were not singular. In 1910, 27 Orthodox people in the Semipalatinsk oblast converted to a different faith: 13 – to Islam, others – to Baptism, Judaism, and other religions (Missionary report, 1893). Apparently, some migrants became followers of Islam, which did not disturb them; on the contrary, it made their lives easier and brought them closer to the Kazakhs.

Colonial administration officials and the clergy analyzed the conversion of Russians to Islam. They found that some people converted due to financial problems. For instance, in March of 1910, the bishop of Turkestan and Tashkent reported, "recently, I have received numerous reports of conversion of Orthodox people to Islam". Some were attracted "not by the dogmas of the false prophet, but rather by the life of Muslim societies and their well-organized financial aid to their members in need". However, in some cases, "the apostates explained

their deed by the fact that they liked Mohammed's religion". However, not a single case had reports of forced conversion to Islam (DeWeese, 2010).

Those who wanted to convert from Orthodoxy to Islam and other religions referred in their requests to the Imperial Edict dated April 17, 1905, which declared "freedom of belief". According to this Edict, all those who wished to convert to a different religion had first be exhorted by ecclesiastical authorities all the way to reuniting with Orthodoxy. However, the Edict does not mention, "what the apostate should expect if the exhortations have no effect". This means that the pending issue gave the opportunity for administrative outrage, which local officials often used. The law also failed to indicate the penalty for abandoning Orthodoxy. Taking children away from their mother, as was the case with Borodikhina, is too severe a penalty, in the authors' opinion. The police took her children away: one was two years old, the other – two months old, and "sent them to Chernoretsk, 53 km away, when it was 20 degrees below" (Melgunov, 1907).

Generally, determining the total number of Orthodox people that converted to Islam is difficult due to the scarcity of such information. Even available information is contradictory, because the clergy, missionaries, and the civil administration tried to hide all facts of conversion to Islam or other religions. Abandoning of Orthodoxy caused a negative response on their part. All available forces and means were mobilized to return neophytes to Orthodoxy. If all the methods and techniques of influence failed to return Russians to their former religion, the hidden was revealed; such information is now found in documents.

## Discussion and Conclusion

We observed mixing and transformation of Russian migrants occurred in different ways. Explorer of the Siberia N.M. Yadrintsev (1891) believed that it occurred "through blood relations and an addition of an element from a different faith to the Russian national character". He also noted that the mixing in the East happened since ancient times.

It is pertinent to point out that Islamization was one of the reasons why Kazakh names started appearing among Russian migrants. Of course, one cannot date the changes in Russian names strictly to the period under consideration. Such changes occurred before. In her book "The Name Through the Ages and Countries", A.V. Superanskaya (1990) explained the origins of Turkic names among Russians. Her study confirms our thesis that close relationships between the Turkic and Slavic peoples resulted in many Turkic tribal and family names being borrowed by Russian families.

This shows that some Russian families or their members had Turkic names during a certain period. Perhaps, this was a result of mixed marriages or close everyday contact, imprisonment or enslavement, or other reasons". A.V. Superanskaya (1990) gives several examples. For instance, such Turkic names as Azanov (azan), Bulakov (bulak), Salakov (salak), Taukin (tauk), etc. are encountered among Russians. In Kazakh, "azan" means "morning", "bulak" means "spring", "salak" means "sloppy", and "tauk" means "chicken".

To sum up, Christianization of the adherents of different faiths had to change their minds in order to simplify management of the colonial people having other nationalities. Without neglecting various techniques, church clergy and missionaries were involved in relevant activities among various categories



of the population. Successful work required educated preachers. To that end, educational institutions were established that trained clergymen and missionaries.

Furthermore, much attention was paid to baptizing Kazakh women. Special attention to this demographic was explained by the fact that the mothers and wives could benefit the deal greatly. Increasing the numbers of neophytes among Kazakh females that were to bring up and instill in their children the loyalty “to the throne and the motherland” did not yield expected results. Many baptized Kazakh women converted back to the faith of their ancestors.

Generally, Russian migrants converted to Islam for various reasons. Some adopted the lifestyle of non-Christians, including their faith. The conversion from Orthodoxy to Islam was mainly voluntary and people would remain faithful to the new religion for the rest of their lives, were in not for the intervention of the church and the colonial administration.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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