

Religions of Kazakhstan

A New Gospel Frontiers Background Paper

Today, approximately 40% of the population inhabiting the Republic of Kazakhstan is Muslim, 25% Russian (Eastern) Orthodox, 33% are non-religious, and 2 percent are Protestant (mainly Baptist). Less than 1% of the population is Jewish, Catholic, Buddhist, Pentecostal or Jehovah's Witness, but these religions are also represented in Kazakhstan. The history, current status, and core beliefs of the Muslim, Russian Orthodox and Protestant religions in the Republic of Kazakhstan are addressed below:

Islam (Muslim)

History

Islamic Arabs began the conquest of what is now Central Asian in earnest in the early 8th century with the objective of spreading Islam. Conversion of the conquered to Islam occurred by means of incentives, gradual acceptance and force of arms. By the ninth century, Islam was the prevalent religion in the region, with the exception of Kazakhstan. Islam began to spread to the native Kazakh people during the 16th century due to Turkish influence in the region. However, many of the Kazakh nomads did not become Muslims until the 18th or even 19th century. By tradition, native Kazakhs are Sunni Muslims of the Hanafi School.

Current Status

As elsewhere in the newly independent Central Asian states, the subject of Islam's role in everyday life, and especially in politics, is a delicate one in Kazakhstan. As part of the Central Asian population and the Turkic world, Kazakhs are conscious of the role Islam plays in their identity, and there is strong public pressure to increase the role that faith plays in society. At the same time, the roots of Islam in many segments of Kazakh society are not as deep as they are in neighboring countries.

Since achieving national independence in 1991, Islamic religious activity has increased significantly. Construction of mosques and religious schools accelerated in the 1990s, with financial help from Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Egypt. Within one year of national independence in 1991, some 170 mosques were operating, more than half of them newly built; at that time, an estimated 230 Muslim communities were active in Kazakhstan. This dramatic growth has continued over the last decade.

Most Kazakhs would say that to be a Kazakh is to be a Muslim. In their eyes, religion and culture are tied together. However, because of the religious oppression of the Soviets, most Kazakhs have never read the Koran or been to a mosque. It should be understood that while almost all Kazakhs claim to be Muslim, it is estimated that only about 5% are actual practicing Muslims.

Protestant missionaries have had some success in Kazakhstan. Muslim clergy are opposed to Christian influences in Kazakhstan and have repeatedly expressed their concerns regarding

the success of Christian evangelism. This situation reached a peak in 1994, when Islamic leaders distributed an open letter that expressed concern over the renunciation of youth "from the religion of our ancestors" and it was offered legislatively "to forbid the Kazakhs from converting to other religions". Fortunately, this request was not adopted by government officials.

Beliefs

Kazakhs do not practice strict orthodox Islam like Arabs in the Middle East. In practice, most Kazakhs are more influenced by folk Islam. They mix superstition with Muslim practices. They fear the evil eye, which is the constant fear of hurt or destruction caused by other people's envy. They are wary of "djun" or spirits, which may cause physical or mental illness. Kazakhs will visit the graves of Muslim saints to try to gain favor or blessings. Kazakhs will buy and wear "tumars" which are charms that have a portion of Koran scripture to try to protect themselves from evil. They will go to fortune-tellers and faith healers to try to divine the future or find a cure for an illness. Kazakh Muslims worship their ancestors and pray to them for advice.

Russian Orthodox

History

By tradition, the Russian people are Russian Orthodox, and the majority of the Russians living in Kazakhstan are Russian Orthodox. The Russian (Eastern) Orthodox church has a long history that traces its way back to the days of the Roman Empire, and the rift between the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church parallels the rift between East and West in the Roman Empire.

From Apostolic times, each local church was a self-governing unit with its own independent hierarchical structure defined according to the Scriptures. However, standards governing the relations of these self-contained churches with each other had not been defined in the Scriptures. In response to this open issue, an organizational power structure modeled primarily upon the organization of the Roman Empire emerged by common consensus. The local churches were grouped into provinces, and it was customary to give greater honor to the bishop of the capital city of each province.

The primacy of Rome in this hierarchal structure did not entail universal jurisdictional power over the others. On the contrary, all bishops were equal. No one bishop, however exalted his province, could claim supremacy over the others. The bishop of Rome was simply vested with the presidency, as the senior bishop - the first among equals. The move of the Emperor from Rome to Constantinople (modern day Istanbul, Turkey) in 330 A.D. greatly strengthened the power of the Catholic bishop of Rome, who was no longer restrained by the immediate presence of an Emperor. Meanwhile, the patriarch of Constantinople remained under the political control of the Emperor. During this period, Rome began to interpret her primacy in terms of sovereignty, as a God-given right involving universal jurisdiction in the Church. The collegial nature of the Church, in effect, was gradually abandoned in favor of a gathering of unlimited power over the entire Church by Rome.

Cultural, political, philosophical, linguistic and theological differences strained relations between Rome and Constantinople. Rome demanded Latin as the one ecclesiastical language, but Constantinople encouraged national languages for the liturgy and emphasized translation of the Scriptures. One such doctrinal dispute was over whether the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father only (Eastern Orthodoxy), or from the Father and the Son (Roman Catholic). The situation culminated in 1054, when the leaders of the two bodies excommunicated each other. This schism between Eastern and Western Christianity was aided by the estrangement of the Eastern from the Western Roman Empire due to German and Islamic conquests that drove a physical wedge between the two, gradually isolating them and preventing communications. This isolation left Constantinople with undisputed primacy over the eastern provinces and Rome with undisputed primacy over the western provinces. This is how Rome became the head of the Western Roman Catholic Church and Constantinople became the primary overseer of the Eastern Orthodox Church.

Constantinople's greatest missionary outreach was to Northern areas then known as Kievan Rus, which would later become Russia. Eastern Orthodox Christianity was introduced into Kievan Rus by missionaries from Byzantium in the 9th century. An organized Christian community is known to have existed at Kiev as early as the first half of the 10th century. In A.D. 988, Prince Vladimir made the Eastern Orthodox variant of Christianity the state religion of Russia. The Russian church was subordinate to the patriarch of Constantinople, seat of the Byzantine Empire.

Russia was conquered by Genghis Khan in the 13th century and lay under Mongol rule through the 15th century, effectively cutting Russia off from communication with Constantinople. Finally, in 1448 the Russian bishops elected their own patriarch without recourse to Constantinople, and the Russian Orthodox Church was thenceforth independent from the Eastern Orthodox Church.

For the atheistic Bolsheviks who came to power in the October Revolution of 1917, the Russian Orthodox Church was an ideological enemy a priori, especially since it was an institutional part of tsarist Russia and resolutely defended the old regime. The new declared State religion was Leninism, a false religion to which faithful Orthodox refused to conform. Thus many bishops, thousands of clergymen, monks and nuns were subjected to repression up to execution that was striking in its brutality. In just the first five years of the Soviet Union (1922-26), twenty-eight Russian Orthodox bishops and more than 1,200 priests were executed, and many others were persecuted.

By the beginning of World War II the church structure was almost completely destroyed throughout the country. The catastrophic course of combat in the beginning of World War II forced Stalin to mobilize all national resources for defense of the homeland, including the Russian Orthodox Church as the people's moral force. Without delay churches were opened for services, and clergy including bishops were released from prisons. This process of rapprochement between Church and State was a patriotic union based on dire need.

In the decades that followed, the communist leadership frequently used the restored Patriarch as a propaganda agent, allowing him to meet with foreign religious representatives in an effort to create the impression of freedom of religion in the Soviet Union. At the same time,

atheism was mandatory for members of the ruling Russian Communist Party (Bolshevik). As the grip of communism weakened in the 1980s, however, a religious awakening occurred throughout the Soviet Union. Symbolic gestures by President Gorbachev and his government, under glasnost, indicated unmistakably that Soviet policy was changing. In 1988 Gorbachev met with Orthodox leaders and explicitly discussed the role of religion in the lives of their followers.

Then in 1990, the Soviet legislature passed a new law on religious freedom, proposed by Gorbachev; at the same time, some of the constituent republics began enacting their own laws on the same subject. In the fall of 1990, a new deputy to the parliament of the Russian Republic, the Orthodox priest Gleb Yakunin, guided the passage of an extraordinarily liberal law on religious freedom. That law remained in force when Russia became a separate nation the following year.

Current Status

Since 1990, the Russian Orthodox Church has been led by Patriarch Alexy II of Moscow, the 15th patriarch in its history, who governs together with the Holy Synod. In the Russian Orthodox Church there are now 128 dioceses (for comparison, there were 67 dioceses in 1989), 19000 parishes (6893 in 1988), and nearly 480 monasteries (18 in 1980). The pastoral service is carried out by 150 bishops, 17500 priests and 2300 deacons. These figures point vividly to the recent all-round revival of the Russian Orthodox Church.

In the first half of the 1990s, the Russian government returned numerous religious facilities that had been confiscated by its communist predecessors, providing some assistance in the repair and reconstruction of damaged structures. The most visible such project was the building of the completely new Christ the Savior Cathedral, erected in Moscow at an expense of about US\$300 million to replace the showplace cathedral demolished in 1931 as part of the Stalinist campaign against religion. Financed mainly by private donations, the new church is considered a visible acknowledgment of the mistakes of the Soviet past.

The political leadership regularly seeks the approval of the church as moral authority for virtually all types of government policy. Boris Yeltsin's appearance at a Moscow Easter service in 1991 was considered a major factor in his success in the presidential election held two months later. Patriarch Aleksiy officiated at Yeltsin's inauguration that year.

Although the status of Russian Orthodoxy has risen considerably, experts do not predict that it will become Russia's official state religion. About 25 percent of Russia's believers profess other faiths, and experts stated that in the mid-1990s the church lacked the clerics, the organizational dynamism, and the infrastructure to assume such a position.

There is also somewhat of a backlash against the corruption of some Russian Orthodox priests, who for example teach that a person must be buried in the church cemetery to go to heaven, and then sell cemetery plots for exorbitant fees that only the wealthy can afford. Quantification of this sentiment is difficult, but clearly some Russian Orthodox believers are disaffected by the corruption of their priests.

Along with Russia, most of the states comprising the former Soviet Union adhere to the Eastern Orthodox version of Christianity that broke from Roman Catholicism in 1054 A.D. The Roman Catholic Pope is trying to mend the rift between Eastern and Western Christianity. His trips to Romania, Ukraine, Greece, Ukraine and Syria over the last few years are part of his mission to unite the two branches of the Church.

Beliefs

Like Roman Catholicism, Orthodoxy claims a direct line of succession back to the original apostles. The Orthodox recognize seven Ecumenical Councils, up to the Second Nicene Council (787). Like Catholicism, Orthodoxy observes seven sacraments. Worship is heavily mystical, and the veneration of icons is perhaps the most notable feature of Eastern Orthodox worship. The faithful practice a mystical spiritual discipline known as hesychasm, in which tranquility and spiritual light are sought by quietism and strict control of the body, measuring the phrasing of one's silent praying by the rhythm of one's breathing, in order to unite soul and body in prayer.

Protestant

History

The penetration of evangelical Christianity from the West to Russia began in the middle of the 19th century. In 1855 Baptists first appeared in Finland, and in 1860 they had moved east into Latvia. In the 1860s and 1870s, the Baptists spread among the Russian and Ukrainian populations. In 1884, the Union of Russian Baptists was established and in St. Petersburg, an Englishman named Lord Radstock began his mission. Despite severe official persecution the seeds planted in a few brief visits by Lord Radstock grew into one of Russia's largest Protestant denominations. Thanks to this effort, evangelical Christian ideas were spread among the St. Petersburg aristocracy. Few today realize what a sensation evangelical preaching produced among St. Petersburg aristocrats during this period.

By 1912, there were approximately 115 thousand Baptists and 31 thousand evangelical Christians in the Russian Empire. Initial attempts to unite the two related movements did not yield any significant result.

The Russian Orthodox Church, supported by the State, did everything humanly possible to combat the Baptists and evangelical Christians, perceiving them as a threat to the unlimited spiritual reign of Orthodoxy. The situation was somewhat relieved after the Manifesto of October 17, 1905, proclaiming religious tolerance, was adopted.

After the February and then the October 1917 Revolutions, especially during the period of "New Economic Policy", the conditions for Baptist and evangelical worshippers were quite favorable. The number of churches and believers was soaring (up to 500,000 believers in 1927). It was then that the Federal Union of Baptists was created.

However, in 1928 persecution started and the Federal Union of Baptists was dissolved; its leaders, preachers and ordinary believers were subjected to repression. Only in 1943-44 were

the churches allowed again, and in 1944, as a result of the unification of Baptists and evangelical Christians the Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptists was created. In 1961 a group of believers seceded from the Union, to eventually establish the Council of Evangelical Christian Baptist Churches.

The Baptist movement in Russia gathered pace during the final thirty years of the nineteenth century. During this period some 160,000 evangelical believers were brought into God's kingdom. This was despite persecution first by the Tsar and then, more especially, by the Communists.

In the early twentieth century the new State religion was Leninism. In 1929, the State promulgated the Law of Religious Cults, aimed at closing down all churches. No children were to be allowed into churches. Church work among young people, and indeed any evangelism, was forbidden. Within ten years all evangelical churches were closed and ministers were either killed or imprisoned.

In 1944, the Soviet government set up a Religious Affairs Department under the control of the KGB, to oversee and regulate the activities of churches. The KGB set out to find, among imprisoned pastors, any who might be ready to work with the regime. In exchange for a relaxation of persecution, these men had to agree to prevent church work among children and young people, and to keep the number of baptisms within a low, prescribed limit.

The Soviet government initiated the creation of the Union of Evangelical Christians and Baptists (the 'Baptist Union') in order to further these policies. There were, however, other groups of churches that would not submit to KGB oversight. These 'unregistered' churches were bitterly persecuted, right up to the fall of the Soviet system.

In reality, the unregistered churches were persecuted at the hands of the State especially through supposed brethren, the compromised leaders and pastors of the government-inspired 'Baptist Union'. The International Council of Churches of Evangelical Christians – Baptists broke away from the mainstream Baptist Union over issues of co-operation with the atheist Soviet state in 1961. This organization was then renamed the Union of Evangelical Christians – Baptists (UECB), and is the founder of the Almaty Bible Institute.

Current Status

With the fall of Soviet communism and the liberation of Kazakhstan in 1991, the country is open for evangelical Christian missions work as never before in history. Of the five countries comprising Central Asia (Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmeistan, Uzbekistan), the Republic of Kazakhstan enjoys the most religious freedom due to the stronger Islamic influence in the rest of Central Asia. The people of Kazakhstan are open to the Gospel. This is an historic opportunity to reach the nation of Kazakhstan for Christ. The mission field is ripe for harvest and God is calling young men from existing churches to full time ministry to reap the harvest. The difficulty is that those called by God need support during their formal training and as they proceed into the mission field. It is this barrier that is preventing a great work from being done in Kazakhstan.

Beliefs

The common beliefs of the Union of Evangelical Christians – Baptists and the Almaty Bible Institute are defined in the Statement of Faith.