Woman and Religion in post-Soviet Kazakhstan – a View from Within

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ABSTRACT

The 2009 Kazakhstan National Census for the first time in its post-Soviet history included a question on the religious affiliation of the population. The majority, 97%, identified themselves with a certain religion, and 70.1% identified themselves specifically with Islam. Most of these, 80%, are ethnic Kazakhs who composed more than half, 64.55%, of Kazakhstan’s culturally diverse population. Therefore, this research focuses on Kazakh women who statistically determine the main trends in female religiosity in Kazakhstan.

These figures reflect the ongoing re-emergence of religion, and especially Islam, in contemporary Kazakhstan. The return of religion to public space has acquired a visible gendered character such as the appearance of the hijab among women. It is noteworthy that the relationship of Islam and women has raised the controversy over the role of Islam in society in general.

The goal of this paper is to explore how the post-Soviet ‘religious revival’ has impacted women’s status in Kazakh society.

This paper examines how religion changes the habitual social and cultural behavior of women. In particular, Kazakh women have appeared who consider themselves as ‘proper’ Muslims. The paper examines what stands behind their proclaimed Islamic identity. A new meaning of religiosity, which is more than just a customary self-described identity based on ethnic tradition is emerging. It assumes gender hierarchy and the ‘traditional’ division of labor in which a woman is ascribed a subordinate role. This approach is seen as a reversal of the ‘traditional’ Soviet-inspired notion of gender equality. At the same time, the rehabilitation of religion has carved new niches for women to express themselves in religious space and to feel empowered. Emerging Islamic education has created a need for female teachers of religion as well as the Arabic language for women’s classes. And, religious women create autonomous spaces for themselves to socialize with each other.

The research argues that the current ‘religious revival’ in Kazakhstan does not recreate pre-Soviet Islamic tradition which chronologically was too distant to reconstruct. One of the research findings is that the current impact of religion on Kazakh women has been limited and marginal as a whole. Social changes occurred during Soviet era contributed to the fact that in contemporary mainstream society gender roles are based on secular rather than on religious values.

Historical and cross-cultural analysis is applied in this research. In particular, this paper gives a historical overview of the relationship of Kazakh women and religion during the pre-Soviet and Soviet periods. The research is based on Kazakhstan’s Statistical Agency data, as well as on archival and ethnographical materials on Kazakh and Central Asian religious traditions. In particular, the author’s in-depth interviews with women the members of one of the Islamic movements provide the unique source for the study. Their social and economic status, age, education, etc., will be informative in defining the female participants of religious communities in Kazakhstan.

Key words: Kazakhstan, religious ‘revival’, gender, Islam, identity.
Short bibliography:


